

Famed film actress Lillian Gish's name removed from Bowling Green State University theater: The issues raised

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On May 3, the Board of Trustees of Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio voted 7-0 to remove the name of actress Lillian Gish (1893-1993) from the university's film theater because of her role in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), the racist film directed by D.W. Griffith.

Lillian Gish was one of the most significant actresses in film history in a career that lasted from 1912 to 1987. She stands out in Griffith films such as *Broken Blossoms* (1919), *True Heart Susie* (1919), *Way Down East* (1920) and *Orphans of the Storm* (1921), as well as films for Victor Sjöström (*The Scarlet Letter*, 1926, and *The Wind*, 1928), King Vidor (*Duel in the Sun*, 1946), Charles Laughton (*The Night of the Hunter*, 1955) and Robert Altman (*A Wedding*, 1978).

The university's cowardly decision to remove her name from the theater she personally dedicated and visited is both insulting and disrespectful. It is a capitulation to the worst sort of ahistorical moralizing and the current obsession with race and gender politics within the affluent middle class. In addition, quite frankly, Bowling Green's administration is taking advantage of the fact that Lillian Gish died a quarter-century ago, hoping that no one will stand up for her.

Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* is a politically and socially detestable work, and it was certainly not to Gish's credit that she participated in it, but the attempt to obliterate her contribution to film and art history and generally "sanitize" the past in this fashion has censorious and reactionary implications. Who will be the next to disappear from public view?

A theater honoring the Gish sisters, Lillian and Dorothy (also a prominent performer), has existed at Bowling Green since 1976, when a professor of literature and film, Dr. Ralph Wolfe, proposed naming an existing auditorium after the Ohio natives. Lillian Gish began her acting career in a small town in Ohio 25 miles from Bowling Green in 1902.

The campaign to remove the Gish name was initiated by Bowling Green's Black Student Union in February 2019. The university's president, Rodney Rogers, thereupon set up a task force to study the matter. The latter's report recommended renaming the theater on the grounds that references to Lillian Gish "contribute to an intimidating, even hostile, educational environment." This assertion is traced to her role in *The Birth of a Nation*.

A few words about that film and its director.

Griffith (1875-1948) was a pioneer figure in American filmmaking. He was born in rural Kentucky, the son of a Confederate Army officer in the Civil War. An aspiring playwright, Griffith made his way to New York City and began working as an actor in the nascent film industry in 1907. He began directing shorts for the Biograph motion picture company in 1908.

Over the course of the next four years, he directed some 450 films, most of them "one-reelers" running between 10 and 15 minutes. While Griffith did not invent many of the techniques associated with filmmaking as an

art—the close-up, the long shot, cross-cutting and others—there is no question that he was the first director to put many of them to use in a systematic, deliberate manner.

Critic Gerald Mast (*World Film Directors*) argued that between 1908 and 1912 "movies evolved from crude, clumsy skeletons of theatrical and novelistic fictions to evocative, autonomous, *cinematic* versions of the same kinds of narratives. The person most responsible for that evolution was Griffith." In those Biograph films, Mast writes, "we see the simultaneous emergence of genres, character types, expressive interior and exterior décor, a lexicon of shots, empathic film acting, and powerful rhythms and resources of movement within the frame and between frames."

This development, as important as it was, did not occur in a social or historical void. Griffith, from an insecure and impoverished Southern background, was vulnerable to a toxic mix of populism and racism.

Sentimental, emotional, drawn toward melodrama, Griffith in his early films could inveigh against "the contaminating influence of city life" and big business "trusts." In *A Corner in Wheat* (1909), for example, inspired by the work of naturalist novelist Frank Norris, a rapacious tycoon attempts to dominate the world wheat market. The frenzied sequence set in the wheat speculation trading pits in Chicago has lost none of its force.

Griffith as well powerfully juxtaposes scenes of lavish parties held by the rich (the "gold" of wheat) with scenes of the poor (the "chaff" of wheat) unable to buy a loaf of bread. In one scene in *A Corner in Wheat*, policemen threaten the hungry with truncheons and revolvers. Just when the businessman achieves control over the world market, he receives his come-uppance, suffocating in a grain elevator.

Condemnation of the corrupt, decadent rich joined with romantic nostalgia for the innocence and "folkish virtue" of rural life was often the response of the ruined or economically threatened petty bourgeoisie and could—and did—lead in different directions, some of them distinctly right-wing.

The ruling class in America, as in Europe, was sensitive to the anger and turmoil provoked by vast social transformations and the mass suffering they produced. In the late 19th and early 20th century, in response to the rise of the industrial working class and the threat represented by the possibility of black and white solidarity and the growth of the socialist movement, the American elite incited every form of prejudice, including racism, anti-Semitism and national chauvinism, within the most backward and susceptible layers of the population.

The Birth of a Nation was filmed in the final six months of 1914 and released in January 1915. Griffith based his movie (via Frank Woods' script) on two scurrilous works by novelist Thomas Dixon, *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905, which Dixon himself had adapted as a stage play) and, according to Mast, "an

even more luridly racist Dixon novel, *The Leopard's Spots*" (1902), the first of his Klan trilogy. Historian C. Vann Woodward described Dixon's literary and historical rubbish as "the perfect literary accompaniment of the white-supremacy and disenfranchisement campaign."

The film was shot and released at a time of immense social tension. While the Woodrow Wilson administration temporarily proclaimed a policy of neutrality in the First World War, many elements were beating the drums for American intervention amid bitter episodes in the class struggle in the years leading up to the outbreak of the imperialist war (Paterson and Lawrence textile strikes, West Virginia coal miners' strike, Ludlow Massacre, crushing of the Western Federation of Miners in Butte, Montana, etc.). Attacks on immigrants, socialist and radical trade unionists, including centrally the left-wing Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), gathered steam. The lynching of Leo Frank, victim of an anti-Semitic frame-up, occurred in August 1915 and the execution of IWW organizer Joe Hill took place in November of the same year.

The WSWS once noted that the "next largest number of lynchings [after the years 1890-95] occurred between 1915 and 1920, when over 500 blacks were murdered. This corresponded to the largest strike wave in US history (1916-1922), the Russian Revolution (1917), US mobilization for World War I (1917-1918), the Great Black Migration, anti-immigrant hysteria and the First Red Scare."

(Along these lines, it is worth noting that the dreadful Thomas Dixon also directed his venom at socialists and communists. In his "socialism trilogy," *The One Woman* (1903), *Comrades* (1909) and *The Root of Evil* (1911), he fleshed out the "uncompromising fury" with which he hated socialism, as he explained to an interviewer in 1907. Following the Russian Revolution, *Comrades* was made into a propaganda film, *Bolshevism on Trial* (1919). Its poster appears to include a caricatured Leon Trotsky and the tagline, "Shall Bolshevism spread its web over our industrial life?")

Griffith's two-part, three-hour film is a mythologized version of the Civil War and Reconstruction. It follows two families, the Northern Stonemans and the Southern Camerons, over the course of the tumultuous and bloody period.

Austin Stoneman, a Pennsylvania congressman (a slanderous portrait of Rep. Thaddeus Stevens), is the evil spirit of the work, encouraging blacks in the South after the war and the assassination of Abraham Lincoln to subjugate their former masters and the entire white population. Lillian Gish plays Stoneman's daughter, Elsie.

In one notorious segment, Gus, a former slave and Northern soldier, lustfully pursues the young Flora Cameron (Mae Marsh). At the top of a cliff, Flora cries out that she would rather die than give herself to Gus. As good as her word, when he continues to approach, she leaps to her death. Ben Cameron, her brother, and the local, underground Klan hunt Gus down and lynch him. Elsie too is later threatened, by Stoneman's right-hand man, a Northern "mulatto," the sinister and licentious Silas Lynch.

The families are eventually reunited "in harmony and matrimony," as Mast explains, "aided by the heroic Ku Klux Klan. In a brilliantly edited last-minute rescue ... the Klan preserves Stonemans and Camerons alike from death and rapine by rampaging black hordes."

Joel Williamson argues in *A Rage for Order* that Griffith's film makes the case that "somehow the Negro had caused the Civil War, and the failure of the North during Reconstruction to recognize the rising reversion of free blacks to bestiality had continued to divide the nation." In this preposterous perversion of history, the Klan becomes the force, which, by suppressing the black population and its Northern allies, unites and gives "birth" to "a nation"—the United States!

The celebration of the murderous Klan and depiction of African Americans as lazy, shiftless, incompetent and easily manipulated provoked the first "massive social protest against racist cinema propaganda" (Mast). While President Woodrow Wilson screened the film

at the White House (the first such screening of any film) and pronounced it to be "all so terribly true," the NAACP organized demonstrations against it.

Socialist Party leader Eugene V. Debs denounced the movie, writing in 1916, "If it be absolutely essential to present those harrowing rape-scenes, then why not round them out in their historic completeness, and show the dissolute son of the plantation owner ravishing the black daughter before her parents' eyes?" Debs pointed out that "for every white woman raped in the south by a black fiend, a thousand black women have been seduced and outraged by white gentlemen (?) but no hint of this is given in the series of pictures composing 'The Birth of a Nation.'"

Civil rights leader and anti-lynching campaigner Ida B. Wells acknowledged Debs' role, asserting that "of all the millions of white men of this country, you are the only one I know that has had the courage to speak out against this diabolical production as it deserves." Debs observed that he had never previously experienced, in regard to the "Negro question," anything remotely resembling the outpouring of interest and support that he did over his attack on *The Birth of a Nation*.

Life and art are painfully contradictory. Griffith exhibited extraordinary compassion and sensitivity in many of his other films, including *Intolerance* (1916), which he made partly in response to the criticism of—although *not* as an apology for—*The Birth of a Nation*. *Broken Blossoms* (about the relationship between a young white woman, played by Lillian Gish, and a Chinese man), *Way Down East* and *Orphans of the Storm*, among others, remain powerful works. Critic Andrew Sarris asserted that the "debt all film-makers owe to D.W. Griffith defies calculation."

Soviet filmmakers such as Lev Kuleshov, Sergei Eisenstein and Vsevolod Pudovkin were strongly influenced by Griffith. Pudovkin reportedly applied to the State Institute of Cinematography in Moscow after viewing *Intolerance*. Kuleshov, "who helped create the first ever film school," according to one commentator, "often had his students re-edit D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* to learn how meaning was created."

Eisenstein, who met Griffith, published a subtle and thoughtful essay late in life, in 1944, titled "Dickens, Griffith and the Film Today." In the piece, he observed that for "the young Soviet filmmakers of the twenties" ... the "most thrilling figure was Griffith, for it was in his works that the cinema made itself felt as more than an entertainment or pastime."

At the same time, of course, Eisenstein argued that the spirit and content of Soviet cinema "would stride far ahead of Griffith's ideals as well as their reflection in artistic images." Even while paying sincere tribute to the American filmmaker, Eisenstein criticized the "the most repellent elements in his films." He observed that in *The Birth of a Nation*, "we see Griffith as an open apologist for racism, erecting a celluloid monument to the Ku Klux Klan and joining their attack on Negroes."

So where does this leave us in regard to Lillian Gish and Bowling Green State University?

Gish was associated with Griffith for years and never spoke out strongly against *The Birth of a Nation*. In an article on the Bowling Green controversy published in *Bright Lights Film Journal*, film historian and biographer Joseph McBride points out that for "all her brilliance as an actress, Gish never quite seemed to understand the social issues surrounding *Birth*. She made excuses for Griffith, claiming he was not really a racist and offering some of the same kinds of tone-deaf, patronizing apologies he also made."

However, as McBride also argues, her contribution to film and art far outweighs her tone-deafness. McBride wrote *The American Film Institute Salute to Lillian Gish* for CBS television aired in March 1984, with Douglas Fairbanks Jr. as the host.

He noted in his recent article that it "was a thrilling experience to study the pioneering work of the woman long regarded as the greatest actress of the silent screen. ... Her many great films range from *Broken Blossoms*,

The Scarlet Letter, and *The Wind* in the silent days to the 1955 masterpiece *The Night of the Hunter*. Her extensive work in the theater and television maintained her unrivaled standards of deep emotion, humor, intelligence, grace, and integrity. Gish's acting is a beacon to show us our humanity, and she was outspoken in the causes of universal brotherhood and the preservation of our arts, especially film."

McBride described his "disbelief and outrage" upon learning that the Bowling Green trustees had decided to remove her name from film theater. "Hypocritically," he notes, "the university has no plans to give away Gish's bequest for an endowment and scholarship program or her archival collection." A quick perusal of the record confirms that until recently Bowling Green was ready and eager to boast about its connection with Gish, feting and hosting her numerous times in the last decades of her life.

For instance, a 1983 article in a university publication, "Lillian Gish and her art are finding a home at BGSU," about a visit the actress paid the campus in the company of fellow actress Eva Marie Saint (an alumna of the school), obsequiously asked, "Can anything be written about a legend?" The article gushed, "An Ohio native, Miss Gish has been officially recognized several times by the university. She, in turn, has unofficially adopted Bowling Green as her favorite university—endowing a scholarship fund, presenting her lecture series, visiting campus four times since 1976 and delighting the University community with her spunky comments and vivid recollections of a long-ago era." The publication's cover announced, "Lillian Gish: The woman and her legend will live forever at Bowling Green."

Obsequious and uncritical then, rude and unforgiving now—the connecting threads are the changing moods and perceived needs of certain upper-middle-class layers that dominate the universities.

The Bowling Green task force report issued in April combines identity politics clichés, sophistry and transparent financial and public relations calculations.

In its first finding, the task force complains that the "reference to *The Birth of a Nation* and the images of Lillian Gish in the display area outside the theater contribute to an intimidating, even hostile, educational environment." Why? How?

The danger that challenging, troubling or even painful matters will generate an "intimidating, even hostile educational environment" to the apparently all-too-delicate souls who attend America's colleges and universities is the patronizing excuse at present for countless acts of censorship and intellectual repression. We suspect that the students would survive the experience if the display material dedicated to the Gish sisters explained their enormous contributions as well as their failings.

The report's assertion that Gish's "part in *The Birth of a Nation* is the role that defined—and continues to define—her career" is simply false and self-serving. She is much better known, and more deservedly known, for *Broken Blossoms*, *Way Down East* and *Orphans of the Storm*. The image probably most associated with Gish is that of her floating on an ice floe toward a waterfall with hand and hair trailing in the freezing river in *Way Down East*.

No one would deny that the "stereotypes of African Americans in *The Birth of a Nation* are offensive, and the film presents a white supremacist vision," as the BGSU task force report suggests, but that is not the totality of Gish's career, nor was the film her creation. The report acknowledges that "Lillian Gish and Dorothy Gish do not appear to have been advocates for racist or exclusionary practices or perspectives," but harps on the notion that Griffith uses Gish's character in *The Birth of a Nation* "as the primary unifying image of the film." As we have noted, the film represents a significant stain on Griffith's legacy and does no credit to Gish.

McBride suggests reasonably that "rather than behave like ostriches and pretend *The Birth of a Nation* doesn't exist, or symbolically banish one of

its leading actresses, why can't we study the film and face its implications squarely and intelligently? Should an actor, however illustrious, be permanently marked anathema for a major, deeply misguided career choice? Should we expect artists to be perfect human beings or their bodies of work always to live up to our contemporary standards?"

He continues: "Those who affect a superior attitude toward a great artist such as Lillian Gish are not only ignorant of our cultural heritage but stubbornly unaware that art usually comes from deeply imperfect people. If we are to strip the names of every flawed artist from public buildings, stop watching their films, reading their books, viewing their paintings, or listening to their music, we will have little art remaining."

The task force wants to have its cake and eat it too. With an obvious eye to the university's image and its relationships with potential donors or other "celebrities," its report makes certain concessions. "Lillian Gish was a young working actress who took a role to advance her career. Her career and contributions to film history should be judged based on the entirety of her career." If that is so, and *it is so*, it speaks eloquently and decisively against the university's own decision!

Gish's name and image, we were told, create a supposedly "intimidating, even hostile, educational environment," but the report would have us know that the "artistry of both Gish sisters throughout their careers is not lost on the Task Force, which recognizes that other honors bestowed on Lillian Gish by BGSU, including an honorary degree, a scholarship in her name, and the archival collections, should remain unchanged."

In other words, 'We know the removal of her name has no intellectual or artistic justification and is being done for purely opportunist political reasons—as proof of that, we'll continue to make use of the money and items she donated.'

As if the shamefaced recognition of Gish's artistry weren't enough, the task force report's concluding argument is that Bowling Green's action doesn't mean much anyway!

The report informs us, modestly, that "Changing the name of the theater at BGSU will not erase film history, US cultural history, 'Hollywood history,' or the legacy of the Gish sisters." But if that "legacy" is *not* a matter of genuine concern, why is Bowling Green going to such lengths? The report continues, "Removing the Gish name from the theater in the Bowen-Thompson Student Union should not be perceived as an attempt to erase history." It is precisely that, and the task force's defensive comments are an admission of guilt.

"The Task Force finds that the University's mission, intent, and responsibility to create an inclusive and diverse learning environment far outweighs the value of retaining the name simply to preserve BGSU's limited part in preserving the Gish sisters' place in film history. We feel strongly that their place in and contributions to US cultural history are not dependent on a naming at Bowling Green State University."

Translated from doubletalk, this means, once again: 'The connection to Lillian Gish was useful to us in a different era, now the cultural and political winds have shifted and we're throwing her to the wolves.'

There is nothing progressive about such shabby operations. It is illusory and self-deluding to imagine the renaming of the Gish Film Theater represents some "victory" over past injustice. It is a fantasy victory. The self-satisfied petty-bourgeois layers who pursue these issues are seeking, among other things, to divert themselves and others from the burning questions of social inequality, poverty and war. They are also hostile to the complexities that art inevitably presents and represents.

Shielding students from historical difficulties and contradictions contributes to the prevailing retrograde intellectual and cultural climate. In the end, such maneuvers only protect the status quo.



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