Artists, writers, film scholars protest Bowling Green State University decision to remove Lillian Gish's name

David Walsh
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More than 50 filmmakers, actors, writers, producers, academics and film scholars have signed a petition urging Bowling Green State University (BGSU) in Ohio to restore the names of famed actresses Lillian and Dorothy Gish to its film theater. The university's Board of Trustees removed the sisters' names in early May in response to complaints centered on Lillian Gish's appearance in D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). The film portrays white Southerners in the aftermath of the Civil War as the innocent victims of an alliance of Northern radicals and former slaves.

The Gish Film Theater was established in 1976. Lillian Gish (1893-1993) donated money, documents and memorabilia to the university.

The petition, "Lillian Gish: An Opportunity for Fairness and Justice," which was made public June 17, includes the names of filmmakers Martin Scorsese, Bertrand Tavernier, Joe Dante, Taylor Hackford, Mike Hodges, Alan Rudolph and Rod Lurie; actors Helen Mirren, James Earl Jones, Illeana Douglas, Lauren Hutton and Malcolm McDowell; screenwriters Jay Cocks, Douglas McGrath and David W. Rintels; and film scholars, critics and historians John Belton, David Ehrenstein, Harlan Jacobson, Steven Kovacs, Patrick McGilligan, Joseph McBride, James Naremore, Jonathan Rosenbaum and Tony Williams.

The introduction to the statement notes that representatives "of the Black Student Union and others argued that the university was condoning racism by keeping the name of the Gish Theater. The signers of the statement below strongly disagree with that decision."

The petition itself argues that Lillian Gish "set the standard for nuanced, eloquent film acting in her silent-era classics *Broken Blossoms, Way Down East, Orphans of the Storm, La Bohe?me, The Scarlet Letter*, and *The Wind*, and she played memorable roles in many talking pictures, most notably *The Night of the Hunter* and *The Whales of August.* Her nine-decade career also encompassed landmark successes in theater, including as Ophelia to John Gielgud's Hamlet, and television, such as in Horton Foote's *The Trip to Bountiful*, about which William S. Paley declared, "Television came of age last night."

Gish was a warm and caring human being who worked tirelessly to champion the causes of film preservation and film as a medium to promote universal harmony."

The Birth of a Nation "takes an indefensible, Griffith's approach to the history of the Civil War and Reconstruction," the statement continues. "But as even the university admits in its task force report on the theater's name, Lillian was no racist. Her work in many films, such as Griffith's own *Intoler ance* (1916), a dazzling four-part overview of world history in which she plays the symbolic mother figure rocking the cradle of humanity and tolerance; Griffith's deeply moving 1919 interracial drama *Broken Blossoms;* the 1955 masterpiece *The Night of the Hunter,* in which she plays a beatific protector of endangered children; and the 1967 film of Graham Greene's *The Comedians,* in which she challenges Haiti's dreaded secret police, demonstrates her outspoken belief in universal brotherhood among races and nations."

The petition argues that for "a university to dishonor her by singling out just one film, however offensive it is, is unfortunate and unjust. Doing so makes her a scapegoat in a broader political debate."

The statement observes that while Lillian Gish's "legacy as a film artist remains secure…removing her name and that of her sister from the university theater is a disservice to film history and to the university itself."

According to the local *Sentinel-Tribune*, Ralph Wolfe, distinguished professor emeritus of English and Gish professor of film studies at Bowling Green, and the individual who was instrumental in establishing the film theater more than 40 years ago, "said he welcomed the artists' and actors' attention. 'I'm pleased to know that this is getting national coverage and what has happened at Bowling Green State University,' he said. 'I'd be happy to see it [the Gish name] restored.'"

Bowling Green officials responded to the appeal by repeating their same unprincipled and self-contradictory arguments. Their statement, cited by *BG Independent Media*, claims that the removal of Gish's name assists them in carrying out the university's "obligation to create an inclusive learning environment." How so? By removing all controversy and complexity, by sanitizing the past, by surrendering to forces who, frankly, reveal little understanding of America's contradictory social development? The result will not be a more "inclusive" environment, it will be a more willfully ignorant and repressive one.

"The decision to remove the Gish name from the relocated film

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theater was made with the values and best interests of our community in mind, and we stand by it," write the neo-Babbitts of Bowling Green. What are these unnamed "values"? How does Lillian Gish's participation in a film released 104 years ago threaten those or *any* values? And, in any event, why were they discovered so late in the day?

As for the "best interests of our community," if by that phrase university officials mean their course of action will curry the most favor with the upper-middle class and with the corrupt academic world, obsessed with race and gender, they may well be right. But it is a pyrrhic victory to say the least.

As we pointed out previously, Bowling Green was only too willing to be associated with Lillian Gish for decades. The university accepted her financial contribution and her papers in 1976 and beyond. She donated $10,000 in 1986-1987, in 1988, in 1989 and in 1990 to the Gish Film Theater endowment. She died in 1993, but even after her death, Gish's friends and colleagues continued to donate memorabilia.

On the university's website, it is still not difficult to locate the "Gish Film Theater Collection: Lillian Gish Papers," which lists the extensive holdings. The Collection's page details the history of BGSU's decision to create a theater "dedicated to Dorothy and Lillian Gish" and explains that "Lillian supported the effort wholeheartedly. She donated documents and memorabilia to Bowling Green State University. … After her initial visit to campus in 1976 for the theater dedication and to receive an honorary doctoral degree, Lillian returned to campus several more times in the 1980s providing financial support for the theater and the creation of a scholarship in both sisters' names to annually recognize an outstanding film studies student."

The papers and memorabilia are contained in 12 regular boxes and 14 "oversized" boxes, and also comprise numerous "oversized items." The remarkable collection includes "correspondence, books, articles, news clippings, photographs [personal and professional], scrapbooks, awards and honors, videos, artwork, dress and costume pieces and various artifacts. … These documents and artifacts shed light on Lillian's film and stage career, her relationship with her family, fans, and Bowling Green State University." In fact, they shed light on 20th-century American cultural history generally.

And Bowling Green doesn't plan to give them up. This is the significance of their observation, cynical in the circumstance, that the "artistry and accomplishments of the Gish sisters are not lost on the University. The honorary degree the University awarded Lillian Gish, the scholarship in her name, and our archival collections of Gish memorabilia remain in place."

The artistry and accomplishments of the Gish sisters are not lost on Bowling Green, it simply "misplaces" them when it addresses certain constituencies.

D.W. Griffith was no Leni Riefenstahl, the Nazi propagandist filmmaker. He was a gifted filmmaker, the son of a Confederate officer, cursed with a bitter and malignant view of American history. Torn out of its context, *The Birth of a Nation* simply becomes an incomprehensible bogeyman. In fact, the essential reactionary argument that underpinned the film, leaving aside its lurid and prurient racism, conformed to the so-called Dunning School of historical thought, which blamed radical Republicans for advancing the rights of blacks during Reconstruction and defended Southern segregationists. The Dunning School (named for Columbia University Professor William Archibald Dunning) largely dominated American historical studies from around 1900 into the 1930s.

Historian Eric Foner told an interviewer in 2015, "The traditional or Dunning School of Reconstruction was not just an interpretation of history. It was part of the edifice of the Jim Crow system. It was an explanation for and justification of taking the right to vote away from black people on the grounds that they completely abused it during Reconstruction. It was a justification for the white South resisting outside efforts in changing race relations because of the worry of having another Reconstruction."

It took the combined impact of the Russian Revolution and the Great Depression, and a mass popular radicalization, to thoroughly discredit and shatter this false approach to America's past.

To explain Griffith's views is not to condone them. But it is foolish and misguided to imagine that moral platitudes and excising this or that offensive piece of culture or history will set things right. Having eliminated Lillian Gish's name, what have the complaints against its presence actually accomplished? Is anyone the wiser about the history of Reconstruction or the social processes at work during that period? Is anyone more attuned to the intense and sometimes destructive social contradictions that work on artists, including contemporary artists? Is anyone more prepared for the explosions to come in our day, not over race, but over social inequality?

Lillian Gish is only the latest in a series of artistic and political figures, past and present, to come under fire for alleged breaches of contemporary gender or racial and ethnic norms. Have the attacks on Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, Jack London and Philip Roth, much less Thomas Jefferson and George Washington and countless others, with all the accompanying hand-wringing and sensationalism, contributed in any way to social awareness or progress? Or have they served primarily to bury the *immense, objectively significant contributions* of these men and women—and buttress the demands for special privileges by the affluent sections of the striving petty bourgeoisie launching them?

The university's decision was disgraceful and should be reversed.

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