

Report from The Task Force on the Gish Film Theater

On February 26, 2019, President Rodney Rogers invited members of the Bowling Green State University community to serve on a task force to address the naming of the relocated Dorothy and Lillian Gish Film Theater. His charge to the Task Force on the Gish Film Theater was “to focus the conversation and find appropriate action” and “to provide guidance to the President and the Board of Trustees on the following areas:

- The naming of the Dorothy and Lillian Gish Film Theater given the historical context of Lillian Gish's participation in the D.W. Griffith film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and the Gish Theater's role in the development of a film culture at BGSU;
- The means by which alumni of Film Studies and Production might be recognized relative to the theater; and,
- The means by which the theater might enhance diversity and inclusion at BGSU to thoughtfully engage our students through programming and co-curricular experiences.”

Background

The Dorothy and Lillian Gish Film Theater was located, for 43 years, in Hanna Hall since June 1976, and became the heart of the developing film program at BGSU. Rededicated in 1990 and renovated later in the decade, film students, faculty, and community members embraced “The Gish” as an art-house-theater; it provided the home for film studies and film production majors on campus. Dr. Ralph Haven Wolfe was the driving force behind the theater and was a decades-long commitment to film and the theater.

With the renovation of Hanna Hall into the new Robert W. and Patricia A. Mauer Center, home for the College of Business, the Dorothy and Lillian Gish Film Theater was demolished and the theater space in the Bowen-Thompson Student Union was renovated with new technology and a new “marquee” display outside the theater. The new display was delayed until Winter session and featured large images of Dorothy and Lillian and a description of their roles in film history, including a reference to *The Birth of a Nation*.

As part of Black History Month celebrations, the Black Student Union (BSU) showed Ava DuVernay’s film *13th* in the theater in February 2019. Throughout the film’s exploration of the

relationship between slavery, Jim Crow, racism, and the prison-industrial complex, multiple clips from *The Birth of a Nation* are used to show the lasting impact of the stereotypes of black men in America.

On February 10, 2019, BSU noted the irony of showing *13th* in a theater named for the star of *The Birth of a Nation* and brought to the University's attention the problematic nature of the Gish name for BGSU's African American students. BSU leadership asked that the naming of the theater be reconsidered in light of Lillian Gish's strong association with *The Birth of a Nation*.

After conversation with members of BSU's Executive Board and the University's Board of Trustees, President Rogers formed the Task Force on the Gish Film Theater with the charge of exploring "how we foster a more diverse and inclusive learning community, how we are to express the values we hold as a University, and how we, as a public university, help create a just society." Task Force members were contacted on February 27, and those who agreed to serve met in the second week of March, 2019.

Relevant Policy

Bowling Green State University has an approved "Naming" policy that governs the naming of facilities, programs and spaces. In addition, BGSU also has a policy to address racial and ethnic harassment. The Task Force relied on these policies to determine appropriate actions.

University Policy 3341-9-2 Naming. Under this policy, naming and renaming rules are set out. Relevant to this issue, Section C.2.a considers the transfer of the name from a demolished facility that "will not be transferred to a new facility except in such cases when a useful facility is relocated to serve the greater interest of the university."

In addition, the Name Approval Criteria (Section C.1) sets out parameters for the naming of any facility. "The Name [must] not call into question the public respect of the university" (C.1.b).

The Task Force points out that the transfer of the name from the Hanna Hall facility in Fall 2018 was the appropriate moment to reassess the naming of the theater; the University did not consider the naming issue at that time. Reconsideration of the naming now must consider whether the name "calls into question the public respect of the university." Now located in a more prominent location and used by a broader representation of the BGSU student body, the matter required urgent action.

University Policy 3341-5-36 Racial & Ethnic Harassment. Under this policy, the university “will use its influence and encourage the community-at-large to treat its students, faculty and staff and affiliated visitors in a manner consistent with this policy”; specifically, “racial and ethnic harassment will not be condoned.”

We note that this policy is intended to prevent “an intimidating, hostile or offensive educational, employment, or living environment” (Section B.1) and extends to all “pictorial illustrations, graffiti or written documents or material” (Section B.1.b).

Findings

1. ***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. The display, with its oversize images and text, are prominent in a well-used space and evoke the film and its racist legacy.***

The Birth of a Nation is widely recognized as the most offensively racist American film for its depictions of African Americans in the Civil War and Reconstruction. Director, producer, and script co-writer D.W. Griffith maintained in interviews and comments throughout his career a commitment to the film and defended it as a truthful representation of history. The film was based on the first two of Thomas Dixon Jr.’s Ku Klux Klan novels, which Dixon described as a “trilogy on Reconstruction,” and on stories told to Griffith by his father, a Confederate officer who fought in the Civil War.ⁱ In a 1916 interview, Griffith advances the idea that he is telling history, that “the motion picture can impress upon a people as much of the truth of history in an evening as many months of study.”ⁱⁱ

Lillian Gish wrote in a 1937 article in *Stage* magazine about the struggles Griffith had funding the ambitious project but went on to argue that “Mr. Griffith has his reward, however, when President Wilson saw it at the White House and said, ‘It is like writing history with lightning, and my only regret is that it is all so terribly true.’ When this news flashed through the country, and it was learned that a mere motion picture had the power to stir feelings so deeply, *The Birth of a Nation’s* reputation was made, and the motion pictures took their place as an important part of our daily life” (p.4). However, Wilson’s praise of the film is disputed; the showing was private and unpublicized, and Wilson’s private secretary and key adviser Joseph P. Tumulty released a statement in 1918 that condemned the film after the president received criticism for allowing the film

to be shown in the White House. Both Griffith and Lillian Gish across time, defended the film as the “truth of the Civil War” yet untold as the inspiration for the film.ⁱⁱⁱ

In the 104 years since the release of *The Birth of a Nation*, film historians and cultural critics have noted Lillian Gish’s articulation of the power of film but recognize that she never condemned *The Birth of a Nation* and its pernicious and lasting impact. Dick Lehr, a journalist who infiltrated a recruitment meeting of the KKK in the 1970s at which Grand Wizard David Duke showed the film, argues in his book that “the public record would always show that while the legendary movie director D.W. Griffith may have produced a technical marvel, he had also created a lasting artifact of anti-[black] propaganda.”^{iv} Tellingly, Lehr reports that Thomas Dixon, in a letter to Joseph Tumulty, confessed that the real purpose of the film was to foment racism and convert viewers against [black people].^v

Film historian Paul McEwan states that “*The Birth of a Nation* is, in the simplest terms, one of our culture’s greatest artistic achievements and one of its most racist artefacts. Our temptation has long been to try to combine these two ideas by arithmetic in an attempt to determine whether the net result is positive or negative, or whether one simply cancels out the other. For much of its history, the impossibility of reconciling these two conflicting ideals has led otherwise well-intentioned people to simply ignore the racism, to try to set it aside so that they can consider the film as art unencumbered.”^{vi} He strongly asserts that, “given what we know now” about the power of film, we cannot ignore the racism. McEwan also argued at a 2015 British Film Institute Conference that the impact of the film is further demonstrated by its longevity: more than 100 years after its release, *The Birth of a Nation* still figures prominently in popular and film culture.

2. **The stereotypes of African Americans in *The Birth of a Nation* are offensive, and the film presents a white supremacist vision.**

The Birth of a Nation showcases the very worst stereotypes of black people, and the central narrative focuses on the disruption of white society, playing on fears of race-mixing and loss of power. Major “black” characters are portrayed by white actors in blackface as lazy, unintelligent, and predatory.

The rights acquired by black Americans through emancipation, and the exercise of those rights, is at the core of the conflict in the film, which depicts black people as incapable of legislating, leading, or exercising power. This portrayal supports the segregationist practices of Reconstruction and the Jim Crow–era policies, practices, and attitudes that persist today.

3. ***Lillian Gish's role in the film is central, and thus her image evokes and embodies the racism explicit in The Birth of a Nation.***

We can point to any of the other 118 roles that Lillian Gish played, but her part in *The Birth of a Nation* is the role that defined—and continues to define—her career. Just as Sidney Poitier will always be Mr. Tibbs from *In the Heat of the Night*, and Julie Andrews forever Maria from *The Sound of Music*, there are some actors who cannot be separated from a role. The mark that actors make with certain roles stays with the public consciousness. This is not an indication of their depth of talent, versatility, or portfolio of work; it is simply the connection the audience draws between an actor and a character.

Central to the film's narrative are the two young, white, females, Flora and Elsie, who receive unwanted proposals from Gus, a freed slave, and Silas Lynch, an educated, but devious, “mulatto.” Flora, played by Mae Marsh, flees Gus's advances and throws herself off a cliff to her death to escape being violated by a black man. The fair Elsie, played by Lillian Gish, is pursued by Lynch. But when she rejects him, her family must defend itself against the murderous, armed black militia, leaving Elsie alone to fight off Lynch’s advances.

Griffith uses Elsie as the primary unifying image of the film. His many closeups of her reactions to elements of the plot and her distress at the assault in the climatic scenes alternate with cutaways to the clansmen assembling and then riding to the rescue. She is the object of desire and the object of purity. She represents what must be protected. Her rescue is synonymous with the disenfranchisement of black people and the restoration of white power and security in the town of Piedmont, South Carolina, the setting for most of the film's narrative.

Many today have not seen the film, and therefore the image of Lillian Gish in it may not be context enough. However, the film is now routinely included in other films and

documentaries as a critically important expression of racism (e.g., *BlackKlansman*, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, *13th*, and PBS's *Reconstruction*). Clips from the 1915 film often feature Gish, which means she, along with the clansmen, are the primary association with Griffith's white supremacist argument.

4. ***In addition to the racist characterizations of African Americans, Griffith also presents Gish's Elsie as the ideal white Aryan woman, anticipating the white supremacists' "14 Words": "Because the beauty of the White Aryan woman must not perish from the earth."***

As the clansmen in Piedmont are organizing, an intertitle explains that white northerners and white southerners "are united again in common defense of their Aryan birthright." The notion of an "Aryan birthright" is repugnant today but likely helped inspire the KKK at the time.

William Drew, a silent film historian who responded to the Task Force's call for public comment, argued that the KKK and Klan activity occurred throughout the South (and mostly in small towns) well before the film was made, and so to attribute the growth of the Klan to the film would be a mistake. The Klan traces back to 1865 when it was limited regionally to the South and was a secret society primarily interested in "preserving southern culture." The Klan grew in numbers over the next five years and became a force of intimidation against black people throughout the South, until President Ulysses S. Grant cracked down on it in 1871 in an attempt to protect the rights of black people. At that point, "the KKK as an organization was wiped out," though there were still scattered outbreaks of violence attributed to the Klan prior to 1915.^{vii}

However, William Joseph Simmons, considered the founder of the modern, revived KKK, staged a cross-burning a week before *The Birth of a Nation* was shown in Atlanta in December 1915, nearly a year after the February premier in Los Angeles. Griffith deployed cross-burning (from the novel), and from that point on it became associated with the KKK. Simmons also placed an ad recruiting for the KKK in an Atlanta newspaper adjacent to an announcement for the film's opening. He then staged a Klan procession, with sheeted, hooded Klansmen on horseback, at the Atlanta opening night showing.^{viii} The KKK growth that followed the nationwide release of the film was more than coincidental; it was substantial. The Klan used the film as a recruiting tool. It adopted and celebrated the image of the rescued Elsie riding at the head of the triumphant column of Klansmen near the end of the film.

That Elsie is the face of Aryanism and *The Birth of a Nation* is not lost on those who see

the film or who see her image from the film in more recent films and documentaries.

5. ***Lillian Gish and Dorothy Gish do not appear to have been advocates for racist or exclusionary practices or perspectives.***

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. Her talent is evident in this film and others. 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.

6. ***Lillian Gish spoke in interviews about actors being accountable for the roles they choose. This may speak to her recognition of the social impact of this film and her role in it.***

In a 1983 interview with a BGSU publication, Lillian Gish talked about actors being accountable for the roles they choose: "I feel strongly that actors and actresses today need to take responsibility for what they say and do in film, even if they are only acting. They don't have to do the script. Look at the crime in our country. A little boy of nine holds up a bank. Where did he learn that? I'm not saying, but I have an idea . . . Film is the most powerful thing that has been invented in this century."^{ix}

7. ***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.***

Removing the Gish name from the theater in the Bowen-Thompson Student Union should not be perceived as an attempt to erase history. Nor should it be seen as being disrespectful to the Gish sisters or to Dr. Ralph Haven Wolfe, who founded, fund-raised for, and nurtured the original Dorothy and Lillian Gish Theater as well as film culture on the BGSU campus.

Instead, the Gish sisters' contributions to film artistry should also be recognized in a new context—one that acknowledges Lillian Gish's role in *The Birth of a Nation* and her support of the film, that commends BSU's involvement in advocating for positive and inclusive change, and that respects the work of faculty, alumni, and friends of film culture at BGSU.

The Task Force fielded comments from many individuals and groups during our deliberation, and we were challenged by the range of opinions and positions. We found particularly

compelling the action by the Directors' Guild of America (DGA) in 1999 when it retired the D.W. Griffith Award and created in its place the DGA Lifetime Achievement Award for Distinguished Achievement in Motion Picture Directing. "As we approach a new millennium, the time is right to create a new ultimate honor for film directors that better reflects the sensibilities of our society at this time in our national history. There is no question that D.W. Griffith was a brilliant pioneer filmmaker whose innovations as a visionary film artist led the way for generations of directors. However, it is also true that he helped foster intolerable racial stereotypes. Film historians of the 20th century will record that from 1953 through 1998, the twenty-eight recipients of the D.W. Griffith Award represented the ultimate in film artistry. In the 21st century, the new DGA career award will likewise become the highest triumph a director can achieve."^x

The move by the DGA was not an attempt to undermine or erase Griffith's innovations in film. Neither is renaming the theater at BGSU an attempt to minimize/dull Lillian Gish's accomplishments. Changing the name of the award acknowledges that film is powerful and that the content can have an enduring impact. It also underscores the importance of accountability for artistic product. Just as the new DGA award "better reflects the sensibilities of our society at this time in our national history," so must the theater, which is now located in one of the most visible and highly used spaces on BGSU's campus, reflect the sensibilities of *this* time and place and be sensitive to the students who are attending and will attend BGSU.

To disregard the power of the Gish name and image and its undeniable, strong association with *The Birth of a Nation* would be to ignore the impact of the film and how it has advanced racist and exclusionary practices.

The Task Force acknowledges that the recommendations will meet with dissent against "political correctness"; however, our society is beginning to reckon with the damage that has been caused to marginalized communities throughout history, political correctness shows meticulous consideration of how our words, actions, and (in some cases) inaction ultimately affect our own (and other's) actions and attitudes towards certain groups.

At issue, then, is whether the artistic legacy of Lillian and Dorothy Gish outweighs the importance of creating an inclusive environment for BGSU students, present and future.

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.

Recommendations

- The Gish Film Theater should be renamed to support the University’s mission and values, as it embraces the importance of the theater not only to film students but to all academic units and student organizations.
- Educational materials should be integrated into the theater display area that provide
 - a history of the Gish Theater from its original location in Hanna Hall, to the renaming of the Union Theater, to the reaction of the BGSU students initiated by BSU after the new display was revealed;
 - the reasons for renaming the theater, including Lillian Gish’s association with *The Birth of a Nation*, the power of her likeness in evoking both the film and its racist and exclusionary messaging, and the contribution the film has made to the construct of race in America;
 - an acknowledgment of the Gish sisters’ contributions to film history and culture, to be included in a display in the lobby or inside the theater and designed in collaboration with a film historian, the University archivist, and the Office of Marketing and Communication.
- There should be coordinated use of and support for the theater for existing film programming and for the development of additional programming that focuses on cinema of social change, silent film, and classic Hollywood film.
- Secondly, the review process grounded in establishing a sound historical context for any naming should be considered for future namings and renamings of BGSU facilities and programs, and University archivists should be engaged in naming and renaming reviews.

Process

At its initial meeting, the Task Force discussed the charge. To begin, members reviewed Natalia Fernández’s *When Building Namesakes Have Ties to White Supremacy: A Case Study of Oregon State University’s Building Names Evaluation Process* and Brasher, Alderman, and Inwood’s *Applying Critical Race and Memory Studies to University Place Naming Controversies: Toward a Responsible Landscape Policy*.^{xi} Using Fernández’s recommendations for renaming consideration, we began examining the historical context of Lillian Gish’s role in *The Birth of a Nation*, the film’s role in the articulation and further expression of racist ideology in the Jim Crow era, and Lillian Gish’s statements about the film. We also considered the Gish sisters’ significant careers and contributions to film.

The Task Force called for public comment and posted both President Rogers's letter to the community and his charge on the Gish Film Theater website. Gathering more than one hundred artifacts—including emails and letters (65), news articles and editorials (7), videos (12), magazine articles, archived letters, statements from the Gish Foundation, student groups (4), academic departments (2), plus videotaped interviews with Lillian Gish (6)—we have read or viewed all of these materials, in addition to scholarly work related to the film's reception and impact. Some of us also viewed *The Birth of a Nation*, *13th*, *Birth of a Movement*, and other filmic content relevant to the impact of D.W. Griffith and the Gish sisters. We reviewed materials provided by alumni, current students, BGSU donors (both alumni and friends), BGSU community members across the nation, and comments submitted by interested film historians. Comment was also solicited from Mary Carrig, an alumna who is active in the Los Angeles film community, and James Frasher, Lillian Gish's manager of forty years. We met with representatives from BSU's Executive Board, and some of us attended the BSU townhalls.

This document is a result of an extensive effort to consider systematically, within the brief time allotted for our work, the historical context, breadth of perspectives, and impact on our community of the theater name or renaming. This document has the support of each member of the Task Force.

It should be noted that the Task Force took particular care around the legacy of Lillian Gish. Her work is expansive and her technical achievement great; in no way is our intent to minimize her accomplishments or contributions to film culture and history. However, as an educational institution, BGSU has a primary responsibility to its students and an overriding obligation to create an inclusive learning environment.

Task Force Membership

- Sacarra Bridgeforth, Undergraduate Student
- Ana Brown, Interim Director, Office of Multicultural Affairs, Coordinator for Diversity and Retention Initiatives
- Charis Hoard, Undergraduate Student, Black Student Union
- Lesa Lockford, Professor and Chair, Theatre and Film
- Laura Moore, Director of Stewardship (Ex-Officio)
- Daniel Ricken, Graduate Student
- Isaiah Smith, Undergraduate Student, Black Student Union

- Sadi Angel Troche, Undergraduate Student
- Cali Vaughn, Undergraduate Student
- Daniel Williams, Associate Professor, Theatre and Film
- Michelle Sweetser, Head, Archival Collections
- Raymond Craig (Chair), Dean, Arts & Sciences

Notes

ⁱ Thomas Dixon Jr., *Leopard's Spots* (1902) and *The Clansman* (1905).

ⁱⁱ Gordon, Henry Stephen. From *Photoplay*, October 1916, 90-94. Rpt. "The Story of David Wark Griffith: Part Five," in Anthony Slide, *D.W. Griffith: Interviews*, 2012, 61.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lillian Gish. "The Birth of an Era," *Stage*, [no month]:1937.

^{iv} Dick Lehr, *The Birth of a Nation: How a Legendary Filmmaker and a Crusading Editor Reignited America's Civil War* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2014).

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Paul McEwan, *The Birth of a Nation*, BFI Film Classics (New York: Palgrave, 2015).

^{vii} Michael S. Rosenwald, "The Ku Klux Klan Was Dead: The First Hollywood Blockbuster Revived It," *Washington Post*, Aug. 12, 2017.

^{viii} Maxim Simcovitch, "The Impact of Griffith's 'Birth of a Nation' on the Modern Ku Klux Klan," *Journal of Popular Film* 1 (Winter 1972): 46.

^{ix} *At Bowling Green*, Spring 1983.

^x See <https://www.dga.org/News/PressReleases/1999/1214-DGA-Retires-DW-Griffith-Award-Guild-to-Crete-a-New-Career-Achievement-Award.aspx><https://www.dga.org/News/PressReleases/1999/1214-DGA-Retires-DW-Griffith-Award-Guild-to-Crete-a-New-Career-Achievement-Award.aspx><https://www.dga.org/News/PressReleases/1999/1214-DGA-Retires-DW-Griffith-Award-Guild-to-Crete-a-New-Career-Achievement-Award.aspx>

^{xi} Fernandez, Natalia M. "When Building Namesakes Have Ties to White Supremacy: A Case Study of Oregon State University's Building Names Evaluation Process" *Journal of Western Archives* 10.1 (2019); and Jordan P. Brasher, Derek H. Alderman & Joshua F. J. Inwood (2017) Applying Critical Race and Memory Studies to University Place Naming Controversies: Toward a Responsible Landscape Policy," *Papers in Applied Geography*, 3:3-4, 292-307