

“The university and its teachers have a responsibility toward history”

An interview with veteran French filmmaker Bertrand Tavernier about actress Lillian Gish and director D. W. Griffith

Bowling Green State University recently removed the famed actress’s name from its film theater

By David Walsh
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French filmmaker Bertrand Tavernier is one of the most admirable figures in cinema over the past 45 years. In 2003, we wrote that Tavernier belonged to a select group of contemporary directors whose best work was “characterized by a certain moral and emotional complexity, elements of social critique (and self-criticism) and a genuine aesthetic sensibility.”

I recently spoke to him by phone about the decision by Bowling Green State University in Ohio to remove legendary actress Lillian Gish’s name from its film theater because of her participation in *The Birth of a Nation*, D.W. Griffith’s deplorable racist film in 1915. Tavernier was one of the signatories on a petition protesting this act of censorship.

Tavernier is not only a distinguished director and writer of feature films, he is also a student of film history and the author of two books on the subject, the monumental *50 Years of American Cinema* and a remarkable collection of interviews with American filmmakers and screenwriters, *American Friends*.

Tavernier began in the film industry as an assistant director to Jean-Pierre Melville on *Léon Morin, Priest* (1961). He later worked as a publicist on Jean-Luc Godard’s *Contempt* (1963), along with various Italian, American and other French films.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, Tavernier directed a number of historical and psychological dramas with famed actor Philippe Noiret—*The Clockmaker* (1974), *Let Joy Reign Supreme* (1975), *The Judge and the Assassin* (1976) and perhaps the best known internationally, *Coup de Torchon* [*Clean Slate*] (1981), based on Jim Thompson’s novel *Pop. 1280* and set in colonial French West Africa in 1938. In these films Tavernier demonstrated his concern for the marginalized and, generally, with the “unofficial” side of life, including its quite extreme forms.

Death Watch (1980), a science fiction film shot in Scotland, with Romy Schneider, Harvey Keitel and Harry Dean Stanton, is set in the future when death by disease is uncommon. An unscrupulous television executive secretly organizes to film the last days in a woman’s life and broadcast it as a reality show, a theme well ahead of its time.

Tavernier directed one of the most remarkable films ever made about jazz and jazz musicians, *Round Midnight*, in 1986, with tenor saxophonist

Dexter Gordon. The fictional central character is based on various troubled figures, including jazz legends Lester Young and Bud Powell. The film was nominated for two Academy Awards, winning one, and numerous other honors.

Life and Nothing But (1989) is a difficult, painful film about the consequences of World War I. At the end of the war, hundreds of thousands of soldiers are still missing. Philippe Noiret’s character has the job of finding the identities of dead soldiers. *Captain Conan* (1996) is also concerned with war—a French squad made up of desperate characters is deployed during the First World War as part of the Allied intervention against the Russian Revolution.

Using both professionals and local residents with no acting experience, *It All Starts Today* (1999) is a fictional recreation of the experiences of a head teacher in a poverty-stricken mining town in northern France. For the WSWs, Susan Allan interviewed parents and teachers who appeared in this unusual film.

In a review on the WSWs, we explained that *Safe Conduct* (2002) was “a story of the French film industry during World War II, when Paris and northern and western France were directly occupied by German forces.” Its central characters were real figures. The film’s primary concern was “with those who demonstrated some integrity and courage under terribly difficult circumstances. Tavernier has said the film was done as ‘an act of friendship,’ as a tribute to those in the film industry who remained true to themselves. And a spirit of warmth and generosity (as well as a surprisingly comic touch) is evident.”

The fate of *In the Electric Mist* (2009) may help explain why Tavernier’s movies are not as well-known in the US as they should be. The film, based on a novel by mystery writer James Lee Burke and featuring Tommy Lee Jones and John Goodman, follows a murder investigation in Louisiana haunted (literally) by the Civil War and its consequences. Unfortunately, as the result of a dispute between Tavernier and the film’s producer, two versions of the film exist. The director’s cut, 117 minutes long, was released in Europe, while the shorter version, cut by 15 minutes, went straight to DVD in the US. Tavernier assured me the European version was preferable—about which I have no doubt—and that

“Tommy Lee Jones and John Goodman thought the same.” His version is available at French Amazon.

Richard Phillips did a lengthy, in-depth interview with Tavernier for the WSWS in 1999, which I would strongly recommend to readers. In a second interview with Phillips in 2009, Tavernier mentioned that he had “admired what Trotsky wrote” and that he been briefly associated with the OCI, the former French section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, between 1973 and 1975.

As noted above, Tavernier is well-informed about American film and, moreover, in a number of his works, including *Round Midnight*, *In the Electric Mist* and *Mississippi Blues* (1983), a documentary in which he travels around Mississippi in the company of fellow director Robert Parrish, has demonstrated both a knowledge of American history and a great sensitivity to the conditions of African Americans and the scourge of racism.

Tavernier told the WSWS in 1999 about the difficulties he had in finding financing for his films: “Although *Round Midnight* was not turned down by the producer he could not find a studio. They did not want to do a story about jazz, about a black guy and particularly about an old black guy.”

In that same conversation, Tavernier discussed the challenges and pleasures of working with veteran jazz musician Dexter Gordon on *Round Midnight*, whose life had burdened him with an alcohol problem: “When he was drunk we could not work with him, we just stopped filming. Despite these problems he had an incredible relationship with the camera. It was as if he felt the thing and we never did more than three takes for the dramatic scenes. He was always right and had a quality that sometimes takes some actors 20 years to achieve. When the film was released in America, Marlon Brando sent a letter to Dexter in which he said that for the first time in 15 years he learnt something about acting. Dexter read me the letter over the phone and said, ‘After that who needs an Oscar?’”

Tavernier is certainly someone with whom one would want to discuss the issue of Bowling Green State University’s reprehensible decision to suppress Lillian Gish’s name, while holding on to her memorabilia, documents and the money she left for a scholarship. Tavernier is well-versed in her career and the career of her mentor-director D. W. Griffith.

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David Walsh: What was your reaction to the decision to remove Lillian Gish’s name from the film theater at Bowling Green State University?

Bertrand Tavernier: I was really, really shocked to learn what had happened, because it seems to me it’s a capitulation. By this the university is no longer a university. Teachers are no longer teachers. They are there to give us the facts whether those are comfortable or not, to give us the complexity of the period, and not the period as seen, re-shaped by people many decades afterward, according to what they or we think today.

So I think universities should deal with writers, for example, who are complicated, debatable, important, but who sometimes write questionable books or worse. They have to explain why and not just silence the work. It’s like the old saying, when the news is bad, you kill the messenger. You don’t try to learn what the news is, what really happened and who is responsible, you just kill the messenger. So you will never have any problems that way. But no life or learning either.

But suppressing the names of Lillian and Dorothy Gish—and poor Dorothy Gish, she had nothing do with *The Birth of a Nation*!

D. W. Griffith’s work is a complicated film, we have to deal with its complexity. No doubt it’s a racist film, the viewpoint it presents is completely distorted and untrue and, frankly, terrible. There’s no doubt about that. But it’s not by removing the names of actors who played in it that you will understand or get closer to the period and the film in a useful way.

According to the university, Lillian Gish was responsible for the film.

But she was only an actress. They must know that actors and actresses do not write screenplays, with a few exceptions, they do not contribute much to the dialogue. Films are a director’s medium. The only person responsible for the film is D. W. Griffith.

Lillian Gish was not well-known, she had a relatively small part in *The Birth of a Nation*, she was not responsible for the content of the film. This is stupid and outrageous.

You might as well say that Stanley Kubrick’s *Paths of Glory* is a right-wing film because [anti-communist actor] Adolphe Menjou performed in it.

The university and its teachers have a responsibility toward history! There are so many people that could be banned according to this logic, including all the fellow travelers of Stalinism at the time when Stalin was murdering people in the gulag. Or what about those who support America’s wars?

The decision makes me very, very angry.

I’m not questioning the fact that *The Birth of a Nation* is racist, but as soon as you say that, you must also admit that the film has some moments that are visually incredibly impressive. It’s a work of art, but artists are not always saints or even very good people.

God never told Moses that all the artists had to behave impeccably. It’s not one of the Ten Commandments. You have great writers and painters in the past who behaved terribly sometimes, in their relations with women, politically, other ways. One could, first of all, clean out a lot of museums using that approach. Take out the paintings of people who were horrible.

Griffith is a very important filmmaker, and, again, as soon as you say that, you have to say that *The Birth of a Nation* is disgusting—impressive and stunning, but disgusting. But after that, Griffith made *Intolerance* [1916], which has moments that are among the most moving ever made. It is a plea for tolerance. People also tend to forget that he made *Abraham Lincoln* [1930] with Walter Huston. In that film, you have an opening reel, which was recently discovered, which shows the slave trade in a very realistic and violent way, as something abominable. So he was changing in a way. He had opened up a little bit.

Do they know that at the university in Ohio? Do they know what Griffith did after *The Birth of a Nation*? *Broken Blossoms* [1919], *Way Down East* [1920], *Orphans of the Storm* [1921], which are incredible films, including the first interracial romance on screen.

DW: How do you feel about Lillian Gish as an actress?

BT: I think she was tremendous, first of all, of course in Griffith’s films. She is also remarkable in *The Wind* [1928], the great, great film by Victor Sjöström, the Swedish director. She did so many films ... I remember her in John Huston’s *The Unforgiven* [1960]. She plays the grandmother and she plays the piano during the attack by Indians. She had such a wide range. She was great in comedy, in drama, in period films, in contemporary films. She could play a farmer, an aristocrat, a lover.

You have some talented actresses, like Greta Garbo, who have one note. Gish could be rough, or motherly, or warm, or dry. She was unforgettable in *The Night of the Hunter* [1955, Charles Laughton], where she is fighting against someone who is more or less a sexual predator. So perhaps the university is tolerant toward sexual predators, which is why they removed her name! [Laughs.] And she’s a woman too—how untimely of the university!

In *The Night of a Hunter*, Lillian Gish is trying to protect children who are going to be murdered or raped by someone disguised as a priest, a preacher. If only because of that film, she should have a cinema with her name on it.

DW: What do you think are the wider implications of removing her name?

BT: I think ignorance and prejudice are spreading everywhere. Instead of dealing with facts, we deal in rumors and gossip, secondary matters.

Facts and events can be complex. They certainly need to be re-interpreted, re-examined, but you must not distort historical facts.

Alas, I never met Lillian Gish. People say she remained very faithful to Griffith, she owed her career to him, he made her a film star, gave her great and different parts. Deep, funny, moving parts. Of course, she remained loyal to him. But she never said anything racially objectionable.

You have to accept that people who are conservative politically can also have talent and can contribute to the history of art and film. Some great American filmmakers were very conservative in their outlook. But some of their films, with the years, have become less conservative and more of a testimony about the time and the period.

Directors such as Clarence Brown and Henry King were conservative, but they also had great talent and their films are more open and more interesting, more alive than many other films of the same period. They are very interesting works of art about a certain epoch, a certain class, a certain way of thinking.

Many of Griffith's films are like that. His relationship with the French Revolution in *Orphans of the Storm* is fascinating. For him the hero of the Revolution is Danton, and it's very interesting.

I think that talent gives you some rights, although not infinitely. If the name of the theater had been "Griffith," I think that would have been more of a problem, but it was not.

For me, the first rule of education is to teach complexity to the students. This particular story seems to me like a farce out of a Philip Roth novel. I find it so absurd.

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