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WHEN THE HIDDEN INJUSTICES ARE BROUGHT TO LIGHT: A REVIEW OF *13TH*

Vincent Stierman

In our current society, uncomfortable issues are often overlooked in favor of less awkward ones. This can be harmful to society because the most important issues we face are frequently those that are the hardest to talk about. One of the most difficult issues for people to talk about in the United States today is race, the effects of slavery, and the modern forms of oppression that still take place. The documentary *13th* by Ava Duvernay takes on these issues in this intense and emotional film. This film forces the audience to challenge their own feelings regarding race, imprisonment, and politics by providing the often-overlooked facts that affect the lives of so many.

This film exposes the ugly truth in how the law has been established and enforced in this country. In the time since slavery was abolished, we have entered an era in mass incarceration of black Americans. In effect, acting as the re-enslavement of the black population. The film details key pieces of legislation (starting with the 13th Amendment itself) as well as a handful of unique historical events that have left black Americans vulnerable and more likely to be placed in prison. The 13th Amendment takes its place at the center of the piece because it outlaws slavery for everyone except for those who are convicted of a crime. In turn, a prison sentence for black Americans is often also a return to slavery.

At the end of this experience I felt dazed. It took me a few days in order to process everything I had seen in the film. I have read about many of the issues that were discussed in this film, but I feel that this is a much more powerful experience because it is a visual medium. Upon seeing the brutality of prison and the violence and vulnerability brought on by oppression, it is hard not to feel out of sorts. The graphic imagery really made me pause and collect myself. The film is an onslaught of

information, each fact more shocking and surprising than the one before.

One of the strongest aspects of the film is how it is seamlessly connected. At times, other documentaries I have seen have a tendency to become disjointed or temporarily lose focus. In contrast, *13th* flows together with a unique blend of statistics, historical news clips, and expert commentary. Nothing feels out of sync and each aspect compliments one another perfectly. This results in an impressive build-up leading to a persuasive and potent culmination. Also, the film makes use of a unique style in order to give the project a distinct atmosphere. Many dark images and graphics are used, giving the film as a whole a mysterious and ominous tone. This evokes a feeling of being surrounded by injustices that we cannot see. It is only as the film continues that those are brought to light.

In order to deliver this powerful message, Duvernay uses a wide array of different experts on the subject, giving the project a well-rounded feeling. Perhaps the most convincing speaker in the show is Dr. Jelani Cobb. He introduces the idea that black people have oftentimes been viewed not as human beings but as economic resources. This idea really helps to pull the whole film together. He explains very eloquently why oppression is profitable for big businesses, and leads the audience to the conclusion that they are willing to defend that oppression for personal gain.

Another very thought provoking guest is Angela Davis. A major point of the movie is that the leadership of the black community has been targeted in order to make the population more vulnerable. The filmmaker's choice in interviewing her was a very smart one because it gives real weight to this argument. Her story makes the viewer understand the legal pressure and censorship faced by black leadership and why today many black

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Americans find it difficult to defend themselves.

The locations of the interviews also added significant weight to its message. Most of those interviewed were filmed in what appeared to be an abandoned warehouse. It seemed to me nothing more than a stylistic choice until I saw the interviewees that were contesting the points made by the film (Republicans and a lobbyist). They in contrast were interviewed in offices. Upon further inspection, I realized that this was done intentionally to give the two groups a very different feeling. The group that was filmed in the warehouse seemed much more intimately knowledgeable and involved with the struggle for equality. On the other hand, those filmed in their offices seemed much more out of touch with the issues.

I would highly recommend this film to anyone. Regardless of the views they may hold going into the experience, I feel that it will lead to productive reflection on how we've arrived at this current juncture in history. It is an excellent reminder of how heavily the actions and policies of our government are motivated by money and how this often leads to the oppression of the disenfranchised. This documentary is more important now than at the time of its release because of our nation's current tumultuous political atmosphere, especially regarding race. The average American is woefully ignorant of what has happened in the past, and to how much still goes on behind the scenes today. This film is a step in the right direction, and in order for us to work towards a brighter future for all people, we need to be educated on the uncomfortable issues of our nation so we are equipped to address them.