2017

Review of 13th: Narratives of the Current United States

Eloise Terry
Macalester College, eterry@macalester.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/tapestries

Review of *13th*: Narratives of the Current United States

Eloise Terry

Ava DuVernay's 13th is likely to capture the hearts and attention of its viewers with an intentional, fact-based narrative of the United States' path to mass incarceration. Powerful imagery, historical footage, and insight from notable speakers join to construct an accessible and heart-wrenching American timeline that leaves viewers at an empowering loss for words. Through this timeline, DuVernay exposes the active role of the white race in legalizing slavery through the Thirteenth Amendment, in criminalizing economic inequality, and in propagating this inequality through legislation such as minimum sentencing laws. By calling out white America's historic complacency in remedying racism, DuVernay creates a powerfully validating film for Black Americans in the face of increasingly publicized police brutality, the growth of Black Lives Matter, and the presidential election.

The film is built on the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which was ratified in 1864 and marked the beginning of the Reconstruction period. Hidden behind a false precedence of ending slavery, the amendment created a new era of economized involuntary servitude by legalizing freedom "except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted."

DuVernay opens by setting the stage for viewers who may not be familiar with how the expansive United States prison system has been perpetually influenced by the Thirteenth Amendment. President Barack Obama observes the overwhelming imbalance between the United States population – which is just 5% of the world population – and 25% share of the world prison population that is held on our soil. Prominent figures spoke alongside President Obama in the film including author Michelle Alexander and activist Angela Davis, set the stage for a lengthy list of articulate testimonies. These speakers cover a massive range of American history including the release of Birth of a Nation in 1915,

the murder of Emmett Till, ALEC, and modern-day police brutality.

After its release at The New York Film Festival, *13th* became available to a wide audience through Netflix on October 7, 2016. Writers Ava DuVernay and Spencer Averick employ traditional documentary techniques, but combine media forms at a surprisingly engaging pace that matches many modern action films. Previously known for her work on *Selma*, DuVernay doesn't disappoint in continuing this racial conversation that forces the viewers into confrontation with ancestral ghosts. Her craft is easy to follow, relatable on many levels, but respectfully challenging to viewers.

Testimonies from initially unnamed activists, historians, politicians, and scholars are juxtaposed with evidential imagery, film footage, and statistics that validate the speakers and build a sense of trust for the viewer. DuVernay carries a sense of storytelling throughout the film by capturing the speakers from different angles, in many of which the speaker isn't looking at the camera, which is a subtle reminder of a continuing conversation that the viewer may not be a part of.

Even with the film's accessibility to viewers with the good sense to add *13th* to their Netflix queue, the film falls short in reaching to viewers who don't have existing interest in the nation's history with mass incarceration or with the many social justice initiatives surrounding racism. For those who disagree with the mostly one-sided voices, DuVernay's all-so-important historical chronicle may put viewers on the defensive and her essential message may be lost. Perhaps including speakers other than the ineloquent and continuously disproven Michael Hough would offer a more balanced narrative that would interest viewers from the other side.

DuVernay also assumes a level of familiarity with social justice issues, historical events, and national figures that may be unrealistic for a truly

wide audience. She employs the words of past presidents to frame present problems; although extremely powerful to those who have lived through or are familiar with these presidencies, younger, foreign, or uninformed viewers may be left feeling lost.

Despite these shortcomings, DuVernay is most impressive in her subtle prediction of the persistence of white supremacy before the outcome of the election. She juxtaposes a Trump rally in which supporters unjustifiably push a Black woman out with footage of white men pushing a Black man around a neighborhood, seemingly equally unprompted. She locates fear as a primary motivator throughout history for many legislative moves. This fear starts with Reagan's War on Drugs that sets unequal sentences for similar crimes, Clinton's 1994 Crime Bill that increased funding for law enforcement and prisons, and the Stand Your Ground laws. This fear is, she argues, normalized and perpetuated through popular culture – like the TV show *Cops* – and used to justify police brutality, Black arrests, and segregation.

After creating turmoil in the minds of her viewers, DuVernay offers reassurance that there is hope for reforming society's approach to human dignity in the form of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Without a central leader, BLM cannot be targeted in the same way American politicians have targeted Black leaders and their movements in the past. It is this organization that she holds out hope for in turning the criminalization of the Black race into humanization.

Regardless of its deficiencies, Ava DuVernay's *13th* remains as an unrivaled account of America's journey from a land of enslaved to a land of imprisoned. Politicians, historians, police enforcement, students, and lawmakers alike would be remiss to forgo such an exhilaratingly emotional trip through American history.