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### 13th: Ava Duvernay's Stark Exploration of the Mass Incarceration Crisis Facing Black Men

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# 13TH: AVA DUVERNAY'S STARK EXPLORATION OF THE MASS INCARCERATION CRISIS FACING BLACK MEN

Theodore Twidwell

Currently, the United States, which has five percent of the world's population, has twenty-five percent of the world's prisoners. Black individuals make up 13.2% of the population in the United States, but 37% of the imprisoned population; a blatantly obvious disparity. This is indicative of what is the largest wrong done to African-American people in the contemporary United States: mass incarceration. Ava DuVernay, the prolific director behind "Selma", takes it upon herself to examine mass incarceration in her new documentary, *13th*. Here, she examines its causes, justifications, and historical precedents. The film does not shy away from heavy topics, meeting head-on issues like police brutality and political corruption. Named after the amendment which outlawed slavery "except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted", *13th* explores the criminalization of the black body, providing the viewer with an in-depth look at the chilling and sobering reality of the United States' criminal justice system.

Ava DuVernay's unique and brooding directorial style becomes very important in creating the very message of the documentary. Her palette is stark and bare, filled with earthy browns, reds, and greys. She shoots the interviewees in plain and striped locations, reminiscent of warehouses and dying industrial cities. These backdrops locate the documentary within the contemporary, both by their modern bareness and their connection to industrial failure; mass incarceration isn't happening in backwoods rural towns in the early 1900's South, but is happening in modern cities across the US today. These minimalist backdrops and the palette also serve to center the voices of the interviewees, while still allowing DuVernay to create a visually

stunning, as well as politically important, documentary. The backgrounds leave little to distract from the speaker, who acts as the focal point in the rooms in which they are interviewed. At times, the backdrops can get over-the-top in their attempts to be natural and bare, like wherein an interviewee talks from his clearly uncomfortable seat on a radiator, which can distract from their voices. However, this is a rare occurrence, and is simply the result of DuVernay's ability to keep a documentary about a dark and serious topic varied and cinematographically beautiful.

DuVernay's true directorial prowess shines in one scene in particular. Here, she stitches together clips from Trump's rallies with video footage of black individuals being attacked during the Civil Rights Movement. The viewer hears Trump say that, "in the old days", the protesters at his rallies "would be carried out in stretchers" as we watch black and white footage of a black woman carried to an ambulance on a stretcher during a Civil Rights Protest. DuVernay weaves together these disparate pieces in a masterful manner, leaving the viewer shocked and engrossed. By sewing together these clips, DuVernay forces the viewer to tie the contemporary and the historical to one another. One cannot see this and deny the connections between the rhetoric and actions of today and the rhetoric and actions of the past.

Ava DuVernay, in the creation of this documentary, picks up the helm of anti-lynching advocates of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as Ida B. Wells. In fact, the connections between DuVernay and Wells are clear and tangible. Wells drew attention to the waves of lynching that were ripping through the South (leaving thousands of black individuals dead

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and an entire community terrified) by publishing the lynchings in her newspaper and allowing the general public to learn about them. At the time, it was newspapers, the printing press, that was the most technologically advanced way to disseminate information. DuVernay follows in this vein, releasing her documentary on Netflix's streaming service, likely the most technologically advanced way to now release a movie for immediate digestion. DuVernay and her team made the very conscious decision to release the movie directly on Netflix as well as in theatres, because releasing it on Netflix allowed the movie to have access to a whole base of viewers who might not have paid to go see it. It gained traction on social media because of its immediate internet presence. This very directly mirrors of tactics of Wells. When DuVernay discusses the lives of black men lost to police shootings in recent years and months, she harkens back to Wells publishing the lynchings in her newspaper. In this way, DuVernay replicates centuries of strategic and often-overlooked black female resistance to the exploitation and murders of their communities and community members.

In regards to black female resistance, I do believe the documentary and Ava Duvernay herself fail to completely encompass and account for the prison industrial complex's effect on the whole of the black community. Throughout the movie, in the discussions of black men torn from their families and placed in prison, and in the final moments of the movie, wherein the murders of several black men at the hands of the police are replayed (with the permission of their families), one is left wondering: Where are the women? The black women who are disproportionately incarcerated and disproportionately killed by police. The African American Policy Forum found that black women are incarcerated at three times the rate of their white peers and at a significantly higher rate than Latina women. Black women are furthermore victims

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of police violence at a higher rate than white and Latina women (Ani). So, to Ava DuVernay, I think it's important we ask: Where is Sandra Bland? Where is Rekia Boyd? Where is Aiyana Jones? Eleanor Bumpers? Natasha Mckenna? The countless other black women killed by police? Where is the discussion of trans lives of color, a demographic three times as likely to experience police violence than white cisgender folk (Ani)? Trans women of color started the mainstream LGBTQ rights movement when they resisted police abuse and violence and sparked the Stonewall Riots, and their legacy of fighting this violence, the legacy of people like Marsha P. Johnson, goes undiscussed in this movie. I think Duvernay created a masterful documentary, but I also think that if meaningful and lasting change is going to occur, activists need to be willing to embrace the discussion of nuanced issues, to discuss the importance of the lives of black women, of black trans women, or the movement's rhetoric will remain rhetoric, as it doesn't truly embrace the importance of all black lives.

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