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Review of 13th: A Beautiful and Powerful Wake Up Call

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REVIEW: *13TH* SLAVERY IN THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

Abigail Crispin

"Get 'em outta here," Donald Trump's voice echoes through a microphone, accompanied by a montage of African American protesters being shoved and spat on at his rally. Meanwhile, footage of Civil Rights protesters undergoing similar harassment flashes across the screen. "...In the good old days, law enforcement acted a lot quicker than this."

History repeats itself in slightly different forms. Released in October of 2016, Ava DuVernay's three Critic's Choice Award winning documentary *13th*, draws these parallels between the past and present. *13th* narrates many of the difficulties contingent upon being Black in America, but primarily focuses on the skyrocketing incarceration rate for African Americans since 1865, after the addition of the 13th amendment.

The film starts with an introduction to the historical and sociological construction of the "Black criminal" by Jelani Cobb, professor of journalism at Columbia University and staff writer for *The New Yorker*. DuVernay proceeds to cover *Birth of a Nation*, Nixon and Reagan's Wars on Drugs, the suppression and elimination of Black Civil Rights activists, and Bill Clinton's adaptation to a "law and order" constituency. Voices of prominent leaders, Black and White, ranging from Angela Davis to Newt Gingrich, comment on the resulting mythology of the Black criminal and its function as a political tool.

Individual scenes are artistically divided. After each "chapter," graphics display the rise in prison population, illustrating the far-reaching consequences of the amendment that disallowed slavery "except as punishment for a crime." The film moves through events quickly; subsequently, the prison statistic rapidly rises.

African American songs addressing the role of prison accompany each set of statistics. Most are rap, although Lawrence Brownlee's operatic version of *There's a Man Going 'Round* plays last. Brownlee recorded this song in the crypt below the historic Church of the Intercession in Harlem as a tribute to young African American men like Freddie Gray, Michael Brown, and Trayvon Martin.

During the second half of the documentary, DuVernay paints a portrait of the present and the future. DuVernay spends time unpacking corporate companies' role in shaping government policies that

impact prisons through ALEC. The information is shocking. Then, the film pulls the audience into the horrifying story of young Kalief Browder, who was wrongfully accused and incarcerated for stealing. Browder was only offered plea bargains. But what happened to George Zimmerman? As Bryan Stevenson, lawyer and founder of the Equal Justice Initiative succinctly puts it, "we have a criminal justice system that treats you better if you're rich and guilty, than if you're poor and innocent."

One particularly important point DuVernay makes throughout the film is how slavery and senseless incarcerations have decimated entire communities and generations. Nearly all prominent African American social justice leaders have been jailed, deported, or killed, and one in three Black men are likely to spend their life in prison. People are shuffled from slavery to convict leasing to Jim Crow to mass incarceration. Who then, is left to repair the damage? Who can lead the US towards change?

13th is important. Only when a cause is seen can it be heard. DuVernay's documentary displays a broken system in all its horrific glory. Sure to shock you, inform you, and inspire you, *13th* is a must-watch for all those who are able to participate in our society and all those who are not.