



FILM: **13th**

FDG RATING: 4.3 ☺☺☺☺○

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Ava DuVernay: *director, documentary*

DATE: December 13, 2020

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **13th**

13th is a timely, well-researched documentary by female filmmaker, Ava DuVernay. She explores the history of racial inequality in the United States, focusing on the fact that the nation's prisons are disproportionately filled with African-Americans, supporting her premise that mass incarceration is an extension of slavery. Beginning with an alarming statistic: One out of four African-American males will serve prison time at one point or another in their lives, the film continues to build its case using more shocking statistics, infuriating clips of horrible acts of mistreatment of blacks, outrageous racist speeches by Newt Gingrich, Grover Norquist, and Ku Klux Klan leaders, as well as interviews with liberal scholars and activists for the cause like Angela Davis, Henry Louis Gates and Van Jones. 13th covers a lot of ground as it works its way to the current days of Black Lives Matter and the terrifying videos of the endless list of African-Americans being shot by police or folks who "stood their ground."

When the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution was ratified in 1865, former slaves expected freedom for the rest of their lives, as it ruled slavery of any kind unlawful, unless, they were criminals, a loophole that opened the door for punishment of trumped up crimes. Hundreds of newly emancipated slaves were re-enlisted into free, legal servitude courtesy of minor or embellished charges.

One discussion participant described the film as a gruesome story that had to be told and DuVernay was the right person to tell it. Another noted that the film did an excellent job of presenting events up until 40 years ago but then devolved into less substance and more shock imagery to get the audience riled up. Starting with D.W. Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation", DuVernay traces the myth of the scary Black felon with supernatural levels of strength and deviant sexual potency, a myth designed to terrify the majority into believing that only White people were truly human and deserving of proper treatment. This dehumanization allowed for the acceptance of laws and ideas that were blatantly biased and racist. DuVernay examines the iterations of these laws and attitudes noting: When one falls out of favor, another takes its place. Lynching, Jim Crow, Nixon's presidential campaign, Reagan's War on Drugs, Bill Clinton's Three Strikes, mandatory sentencing laws, and the current cash-for-prisoners model that generates millions for private bail and incarceration firms are examples. As a published film critic noted, that last item is a major point of discussion in "13th", with an onscreen graphic keeping tally of the number of prisoners in the system as the years pass. Starting in the 1940's, the curve of the prisoner count graph begins rising slowly though steeply. A meteoric rise began during the Civil Rights movement and continued into the current day. As this statistic rises, so does the level of decimation of families of color. The stronger the protest for rights, the harder the system fights back against it with means of incarceration. Profit becomes the major by-product of this cycle, with an organization called ALEC providing a scary, sinister influence on building laws that make its corporate members richer.

A few discussion participants thought that in some parts style became more important than substance but we all agreed the film was well made and was meant to be persuasive. A very impactful segment focused on plea bargaining where the accused is vigorously pressured to admit guilt even if not guilty in exchange for a reduced sentence. Much of what we watched was very disturbing, even infuriating, however, the ending scenes are uplifting and joyful as we see children and adults of color enjoying themselves in a variety of activities. DuVernay said in an interview, "Black trauma is not our entire lives. There is also Black joy."

For some of us, the documentary failed to present a convincing argument or felt a bit like propaganda but others thought it was extremely compelling, educational, and covered a lot of history in 40 minutes. "Brilliantly brought together" are the words one discussion participant used. The final takeaway of "13th" is that change must come not from politicians, but from the hearts and minds of the American people. Several discussion participants rated 13th a 5, our highest score while others gave it a 4.5, combined with a few less enthusiastic scores resulted in a substantially supportive final tally of 4.3.

See you at the movies!

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