

13TH

Release Date: October 7, 2016

Genre: Documentary

Directed by: Ava DuVernay

Featured: Jelani Cobb, Angela Davis, Michelle Alexander, Malkia Cyril, Bryan Stevenson, Van Jones, Henry Louis Gates Jr., James Kilgore

Length: 1 hour and 40 minutes

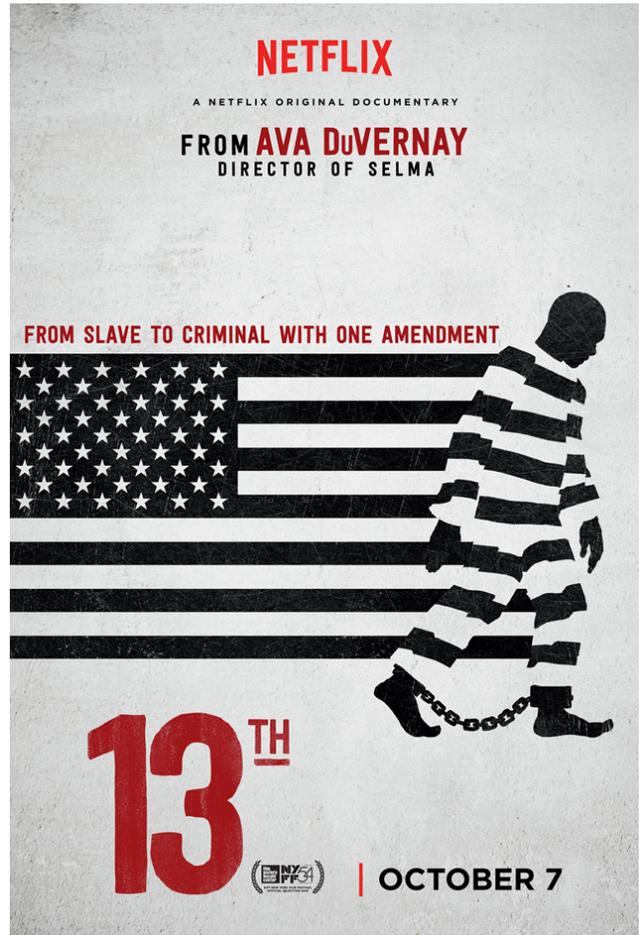
Rating: Not Rated (some graphic scenes and images of violence)

SYNOPSIS

Ava DuVernay's powerful documentary *13th* introduces the words of the thirteenth amendment of the United States Constitution: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, *except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted*, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction." *13th* argues that although slavery was ostensibly abolished in 1865, this clause of the thirteenth amendment legally embedded and allowed a pernicious form of enslavement into American institutions. This loophole has since been wielded as a devastating political tool in the form of mass incarceration and criminalization.

13th is a sweeping historical survey that directly links slavery to today's prison-industrial complex. The film unpacks how the amendment loophole was exploited immediately following the Civil War, as African Americans were arrested en masse for extremely minor crimes in order to ensure that the economic system of free labor in the South could, in effect, remain intact. Culturally, this era also saw the beginning of a "mythology of black criminality" that persists to this day.

The film thus traces a 150 year-old history of race, incarceration, and disempowerment of minority communities in America. By the end of the Jim Crow era and the Civil Rights movement, the United States saw an end to legal segregation and the introduction of the Voting Rights Act. What followed, however, was a more surreptitious form of racial control: open violence and discrimination were replaced by the racially-coded rhetoric of "law and order" and the "war on crime."



CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT THEMES IN THE FILM:

- Respect for life
- Dignity of the person
- Solidarity
- Participation in the common good
- Courage to stand up for what is right in the midst of attacks

OFFICIAL FILM TRAILER

<http://bit.ly/2g16EGg>



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DuVernay exposes Nixon's "Southern Strategy" as a thinly veiled effort to decimate black communities and appeal to white voters. The war on drugs, in particular, specifically targeted communities of color, as seen by the sentencing disparities for crack (which was concentrated in poorer, urban communities) and powder cocaine. Being "tough on crime" became a winning political strategy, fueled by racially-based fears of Black Americans as "super-predators." DuVernay holds both Democrats and Republicans accountable for adopting legislation such as "three strikes, you're out," mandatory minimum sentencing, and the 1994 crime bill which provided financial incentives to expand and fill prisons. She notes that these laws forced millions of people who would otherwise not be in prison today to be incarcerated, breaking apart numerous families and disappearing an entire generation of Black males.

Throughout the film, viewers are shocked into consciousness by jarring statistics and gut-wrenching footage of brutality against Black Americans. *13th* moves us to the present day, highlighting the stories of police brutality against Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Kalief Browder, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, Sandra Bland, Jordan Davis, and many others; it examines the troubling prison-industrial complex and the close, financially-motivated ties between corporations and lawmakers; and it depicts growing outrage over institutionalized racism and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement in response to years of state violence and impunity.

Though historical in its analysis, DuVernay's *13th* could not be more timely. The United States currently imprisons over 25% of the world's incarcerated population; a staggering one in three Black men is expected to spend time in prison or jail in his lifetime; the prison population has grown from 357,292 in 1970 to 2.3 million in 2016; and more Black men are imprisoned today than were enslaved in 1850. DuVernay's film urgently challenges us to move beyond simple calls for reform that will only redesign a system of oppression that has existed in various iterations since the end of the Civil War. It is a call to humanize, a call to view mass incarceration as a profound moral crisis and change the way the United States views human dignity, and, above all, a call to take an active stand for racial justice. The film ends with Bryan Stevenson's haunting words: "People say all the time, 'I don't understand how people could have tolerated slavery... How could people have gone to a lynching and participated in that?... If I was living at that time, I would have never tolerated anything like that.' And the truth is, we are living at this time. And we are tolerating it."

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How did you feel after viewing *13th*? Did you feel helpless, inspired, stirred to action, or a combination of all three? Do you think the message of the film was ultimately hopeful? Why or why not?
2. This documentary emphasizes that the current crisis of mass incarceration is directly tied to our country's legacy and history of slavery. By showing how slavery shifted to convict leasing, to Jim Crow segregation, to the war on drugs, *13th* argues that "systems of oppression are durable and they often reinvent themselves." As Angela Davis stated in the film, "Historically, when one looks at efforts to create reforms, they inevitably lead to more repression." What are ways you can end this cycle? What do you think are some of the factors that allowed this system of racial control to simply evolve and replicate itself for the past 150 years? How can you be more vigilant against institutional racism?



DISCUSSION GUIDE

3. How does *13th* characterize our criminal justice system and political institutions? How did this film shape your understanding of the prison system? Was there a particular case or series of facts that altered or challenged any of your pre-existing views? Explain.

4. How much did you know about the war on drugs and war on crime before watching the film? Were you surprised to learn about the racial underpinnings of these legislative policies, and the active role of the state in criminalizing and targeting communities of color? What was your reaction after hearing the following quote from John Ehrlichman, one of Richard Nixon's aides?:

“The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. You understand what I'm saying? We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.”



5. How do you think media and popular culture representations of Black Americans, particularly of Black men, have contributed to a dangerous climate of white fear and anxiety? (Think back to the way George Zimmerman was heard describing Trayvon Martin, or the media frenzy around the Central Park Five that resulted in their wrongful imprisonment.) How can we challenge these instances of racism and dehumanization?

6. Many politicians, including the Clintons, Newt Gingrich, and Charles Rangel in this film, have apologized for their role in promoting devastating “tough on crime” legislation. Considering the billions of dollars made off the imprisonment of people, the ongoing practice of prison labor, and the cases of unjust imprisonment (as in the tragic case of Kalief Browder), is an apology enough? Is our country compelled to repay these communities and families in a more material, restorative way? Why or why not?

Resources for Discernment and Faith in Action

- Black Lives Matter: <http://bit.ly/2fGemTc>
- Equal Justice Initiative: <http://bit.ly/2fGfOoL>
- *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander: <http://bit.ly/2fWa8aL>
- *The House I Live In* (2012) directed by Eugene Jarecki: <http://bit.ly/2dBUWAH>
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) Resources on Racism and Human Dignity: <http://bit.ly/2fG5jQ>
- Resources from The Episcopal Church for Racial Reconciliation and Justice: <http://bit.ly/2eGTH4t>
- Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ): <http://bit.ly/2fGhZZi>



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