



13th Discussion Guide

Director: Ava DuVernay

Year: 2016

Time: 100 min

You might know this director from:

Selma (2014)

Venus vs. (2013)

Middle of Nowhere (2012)

I Will Follow (2010)

My Mic Sounds Nice: The Truth About Women in Hip Hop (2010)

This Is the Life (2008)

FILM SUMMARY

In the years prior to the release of 13TH, with the help of the Black Lives Matter movement and social media, there was significant rise in awareness around the amount of prejudice African Americans continue to face in the 21st century. The historical roots of this oppression run deep, as Ava DuVernay's documentary 13TH reveals. The film looks back to the ratification of Amendment XIII, which states, "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." DuVernay argues that a prison-industrial complex which statistically imprisons black men disproportionately and allows for their disciplinary servitude, has taken advantage of America's black population and brings into question if this system ultimately acts as a form of modern day slavery.

Featuring a wide range of interviewees including civil rights activist Angela Davis, "The New Jim Crow" author Michelle Alexander, regular New Yorker reporter and professor Jelani Cobb, social justice author and attorney Van Jones, and many more, 13TH moves from the media-induced criminalization of black persons to the corporate privatization of prisons with eloquence, poise, and a cavalcade of statistics to back up its thesis on the dehumanization of black people in America.

While sobering in its historical recontextualization of race in America, DuVernay's film remains hopeful in acknowledging her fellow African Americans' diligence and grace in their fight for equality under intolerable conditions. No one knows how bright or dark the future of America will be, but as Jones vigilantly states, "It will be."

FILM THEMES

Whose life do we recognize as being valuable? As one of the astute commentators within 13TH states, this is really what the Black Lives Matter movement has been about: the re-humanization of African Americans.

AFRICAN AMERICANS PORTRAYED AS CRIMINALS

Dating back to D.W. Griffith's 1915 BIRTH OF A NATION, African Americans have continually been portrayed as criminals in many forms of American media. Through this lens, the public at large has come to unconsciously believe that black people are more likely to become rapists, drug addicts, murderers or thieves purely because of the color of their skin. The more one sees images and hears stories of African Americans committing crimes, whether it is true or not, the more likely one is to believe that African Americans are indeed criminals.

MASS INCARCERATION AS REPLACEMENT FOR SLAVERY

As Amendment XIII states, "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." Yet, countless corporations have prisoners who have been put to work without pay as part of their sentencing. Since the abolishment of slavery, politicians have implemented policies that feed off of the media-generated fear of black criminals, disproportionately putting African Americans behind bars where they can be used as free labor.

CORPORATE INTERESTS SHAPE PRISON POPULATION

The American Legislative Exchange Council, better known as ALEC, a coalition of corporate interests like Walmart and Verizon, introduces federal policies which arguably result in putting African Americans and immigrants behind bars in the interest of profiteering from the success of private prisons, surveillance, and prison labor. One in four US legislators have ties to ALEC, some of whom have introduced bills and policies without even bothering to remove ALEC's branding from them before dispersing them to colleagues.

THE DEHUMANIZATION OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

By portraying black people as criminals, depriving their communities of financial resources that put them on a level playing field to their white compatriots, developing public policies that are more likely to see people of color placed behind bars, and creating prison systems that are meant to punish and break people rather than help them rehabilitate and re-enter society, America has consciously, or unconsciously, dehumanized its black population. Black lives do matter, and we can do better.

“Our justice system is a human rights catastrophe and one of the biggest moral crises of our time.”

Van Jones

“Please try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure does not testify to your inferiority but to their inhumanity.”

James Baldwin

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. What was your initial reaction after watching 13TH?
2. Have you ever been directly affected by any of the issues presented in the film? If so, how?
3. If you are American, do you remember any of the political policies being put into place that has led to a rise in the prison population? Who promoted these policies? If you live outside of the United States, what similarities and/or differences did you observe between the political policies of your country and what is happening in America as presented by 13TH?
4. Have you ever had to confront direct or systemic racism in your life? If so, how were you affected?
5. What are your thoughts on the film’s argument that people have been subconsciously conditioned to fear black men at the behest of the media?
6. How knowledgeable are you on the concept of social privilege? Do you ever reflect upon the systematic privileges you may or may not experience because of race, gender, age, class, sexual orientation, religion, physical/mental abilities, etc.?
7. Prior to seeing the film, were you aware of the corporate interest group ALEC? After having seen the film, how do you feel about ALEC?
8. What do you think about the present state of the American prison system? If you live elsewhere, what do you think of the prison system in your country in comparison?
9. The film argues that there is a direct link between American slavery and the modern American prison system. What is your take on this argument?
10. Do you see yourself making any personal changes in your life after having watched 13TH? If so, what kinds of changes?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- Ava DuVernay's 13TH became the first documentary feature film to open the New York Film Festival, then in its 54th iteration.
- Following its NYFF premiere and successful Netflix release, 13TH won a host of awards, including Best Documentary and Best Director at the Critics Choice Documentary Awards, Video Source Award at the IDA Documentary Awards, and the Courage in Filmmaking Award from the Women Film Critics Circle Awards.
- The 13th Amendment to the Constitution declared that "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."
- America is home to 5 percent of the world's population, but 25 percent of the world's prisoners—one out of four people in the world are locked up in the United States.
- President Richard Nixon's push for "Law & Order" and a "War on Drugs" in the 1970s marked the beginning of mass incarceration in the United States.
- As President Bill Clinton now admits, he wrongfully implemented legislation that demanded mandatory minimum sentencing and the "three-strikes" provision which put more African Americans behind bars than ever before.
- According to the Bureau of Justice, the lifetime likelihood of imprisonment for white men is 1 in 17. For African American males, the lifetime likelihood is 1 in 3. Just 6.5 percent of the American population is made up of African American men, but account for 40.2 percent of the prison population—more than were ever under the burden of slavery before it was abolished in 1863.
- The last significant changes to the US criminal justice system came in 2013 when US Attorney General Eric Holder dropped mandatory minimum sentences for non-violent drug offenders.
- According to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, the total cost of mass incarceration in the US in 2010 was a mind-boggling \$80 billion.
- 357,292 people were incarcerated in the United States in 1970. By 2014, that number had increased to a staggering 2,306,200.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Find** a [local chapter](#) of the Black Lives Matter movement and show your support at an event or with a monetary donation.
2. **Get involved** in [#cut50](#), an initiative that aims at "popularizing the idea that we can smartly and safely reduce the number of people in [American] prisons and jails by 50%" by pursuing transformative legislation.
3. **Show your support** of the [Equal Justice Initiative](#), which is committed to ending mass incarceration and excessive punishment in the United States, to challenging racial and economic injustice, and to protecting basic human rights for the most vulnerable people in American society.
4. **Educate** yourself on the concept of social privilege and reflect upon the privileges you may or may not experience because of race, gender, age, class, sexual orientation, religion, physical/mental abilities, etc. A good tool to get started is Peggy McIntosh's "[Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack](#)," which deals specifically with white privilege, although it invites readers to reflect upon many types of privilege.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.