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The Power of the Documentary: Examining the Effectiveness of Ava DuVernay's 13th

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Film has been a powerful tool since its creation, continuously changing the way humans experience and think about life. In particular, documentary films have often called attention to social issues and problems. According to Bill Nichols, notable film critic and theorist, documentaries not only enhance our “aesthetic awareness,” but also our “social consciousness” (Nichols 104). By this enhancement, documentaries incite conversations around important topics and often act as a catalyst for social change. Documentaries succeed in bringing social change when they can successfully captivate audience attention and engage viewers in critical and emotional ways through creative processes that tell the film’s story in effort to present the truth. Three effective ways a film can persuade audiences is through logic for rational or philosophic inquiry, narrative and visual poetics for eliciting emotional responses, and rhetoric for building consensus on debated issues (Nichols 103-104). A film that incorporates all three methods is Ava DuVernay’s acclaimed 2016 documentary, *13th*. This documentary investigates the issue of mass incarceration in the United States in relation to the 13th Amendment, and the history of racism and of mistreating and criminalizing black folks, especially black men. Ava DuVernay’s approaches of interviewing prominent figures, recurrently using popular hip-hop songs as transitions to reiterate her points and use of powerful footage of real events make the film’s case.



Director Ava DuVernay in promotional material for 13th

In *13th*, DuVernay incorporates interviews with many notable experts, scholars, civil rights leaders, politicians, and activists, as well as prominent opponents. Having this diverse range of voices makes the film more engaging and adds a level of complexity. For example, a

particularly powerful voice that lends insight to the subjects of mass incarceration and the prison-industrial complex, on the use of the media to vilify civil rights activists, and on previous reform attempts leading to more repression, is Angela Davis. Davis herself was a highly influential figure during the civil rights era. Another strong voice that offers valuable information in *13th* is Van Jones, who is the founder of #cut50 and The Dream Corps, both initiatives aimed at reducing crime and the number of people that are incarcerated. In the film, he touches on the topics of Bill Clinton's policies, which harmed communities of color, the Jim Crow era, the government's persecution of Dr. King, Fred Hampton, Assata Shakur, and Angela Davis, and on the government using these tactics to control communities of color, but more specifically, the



black community. In addition, DuVernay also includes voices of major opponents, one of whom is Michael Hough, a Republican politician and member of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), which brings together

conservative politicians with corporations to create legislation that benefits both groups. When the claim is made that ALEC had a hand in the privatization of prisons, increasing the prison population for personal profit, Hough argues in defense of ALEC. This addition adds a layer of credibility because it does not ignore dissenting views. Other distinguished individuals in *13th* include Michelle Alexander, David Dinkins, Liza Jessie Peterson, and Newt Gingrich. In a *Film Comment* review for *13th*, one critic praised DuVernay for the diverse voices she included and wrote, "This patchwork of smart critical voices lends the film an absorbing, immersive quality"

(Clark 36). In having input from many well-known and respected people, as well as by acknowledging opposing sides, DuVernay's film is more credible and multidimensional.

Another technique DuVernay employs in *13th* that is uniquely compelling is the use of powerful songs by black artists with animations that highlight politically-charged lyrics. This method is used to transition between segments in the film and serves to reiterate the theme. One such song is "Reagan" by Killer Mike used as a transition from the topic of Richard Nixon's



Rapper Killer Mike who lends a track to the film.

"tough on crime" and "law and order" period that greatly impacted black communities. The song switches the focus to Ronald Reagan's "war on drugs," which many interviewees claim heavily targeted communities of color and poor folks, as well as increased incarceration numbers.

Some particularly potent lyrics used from the song are: "...the end of the Reagan era... They declared the war on drugs, like a war on terror, but what it really did was let the police terrorize whoever, but mostly Black boys...and lay us on our belly while they fingers on they triggers." These lyrics highlight the film's theme of America's history of abusing black folks and of police brutality.

Another particularly meaningful song that is used as a transition in *13th* is Dead Prez's "Behind Enemy Lines." This song moves the discussion into Bill Clinton's presidential campaign and election, and the federal crime bill he passed in 1994 that "massively expanded the prison system" by providing monetary incentives to do so. This bill ended up being one of the most harmful pieces of legislation to be passed regarding mass incarceration, as it

disproportionately affected communities of color and is the basis for much of the way our prison systems operate today. The lyrics DuVernay highlights are: “Lil’ Kadeija pops is locked...prison ain’t nothing but a private stock...Her father’s a political prisoner...Free Fred, son of a panther that the government shot dead...Most of the youths never escape the jail fate...” These political and profound lyrics highlight the idea of prisons being a business for profit and, again, of black folks being persecuted by the government and the police.

Another powerful song employed as a transition is “Chains” by Usher. The lyrics used include: “You act like the change. Tryna put me in chains. Don’t act like you saving us. It’s still the same. Man don’t act like I made it up. You blaming us...you gave the name to us. We still in chains. We still in chains. You put the shame on us.” This song is used as a transition between

the conversation of reintegration into society being difficult for convicted individuals, to discussing present-day politicians now suddenly championing a reform of the criminal justice system, and how previous reform attempts by the government have often lead to more suppression. The loaded words



Singer Usher Raymond IV, also known as Usher.

of this transitional song are effective because they underscore the theme of African Americans being subjugated by those in power and emphasize the relevancy to today’s politics. This creative integration of rap and hip-hop songs in *13th* is significant because rap music has historically portrayed the struggles of African Americans’ plight in America. As transitions, these songs also make the film more engaging and the argument more memorable because the

lyrics invariably bring the discussion back to the theme, and the words are more likely to stick in one's mind.

Finally, another effective method Ava DuVernay utilizes in *13th* is the inclusion of actual footage of instances where African Americans are being mistreated, or of police brutality cases, as evidence to support the film's argument. Throughout the film, she includes archival footage from past and recent events as they relate to the conversation. Many of the clips are heart-



wrenching, upsetting, intense and difficult to watch, and can evoke strong responses from viewers. For example, there is a chilling montage of archival clips near the beginning of the film that show black folks being mistreated during the civil rights era. The montage

includes images of black protesters, black students, or just black individuals being yelled at, shoved around, brutally attacked, or arrested by the police or by groups of white people, for peacefully protesting, passing through, or for trying to attend the same schools and beaches as white folks. This moment in the film is haunting, especially with Dr. King's voice in the background as he says, "For years now, I have heard the word 'wait.' It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This wait has almost always meant never...justice too long delayed is justice denied."

Another gripping montage of actuality footage occurs near the end of the film, with clips from recent times. There is footage of peaceful black protesters at Donald Trump rallies being shoved around, verbally harassed, and even being spit on by the crowd around them, which happens to be mostly white men. The film juxtaposes these clips with the black and white

footages used earlier of a black man being pushed around by a group of white men during the civil rights period and with other older clips of African American protesters being harassed. This visual comparison draws a strong connection between the treatment of black individuals in the past and of the treatment of these individuals today.

One last compelling use of archival footage in *13th* is near the end, with a sequence that includes raw clips of numerous recent police brutality cases. These sequences show police officers abusing their power over black men through excessive force, including guns, all of which resulted in the death of these black individuals. This footage includes Eric Garner being subdued by many police officers as he repeatedly says he can't breathe, Sam DuBose sitting in his car as a worked-up police officer shoots him from the window, as well as Laquan McDonald, Eric Courtney Harris, and many others being shot and mistreated by police officers. While all of the footage included in this section is difficult to watch, one clip that particularly stands out is the video of Philando Castile in his car after he has been shot by a police officer. Bloodied and in pain, he breathes quietly as his girlfriend records the situation, explains that they were pulled over for a simple broken tail light, and says to Philando, "Stay with me." This section ends with a list of countless more black individuals who have unjustly died at the hands of police officers. These chilling images burn in viewers' minds and force us to confront the reality of the situation for many black folks in America. The film clearly evoked strong responses from many. One critic for *The New York Times* wrote, "Powerful, infuriating, and at times overwhelming... *13th* will get your blood boiling and tear ducts leaking...but it also challenges your ideas about the intersection of race, justice and mass incarceration..." (Dargis). DuVernay uses this footage not to sensationalize these tragic events but to shed light on this problem and make viewers think

critically about the way America has time and again disenfranchised, persecuted, abused, and criminalized the black community.

Though *13th* can be emotionally taxing to watch, the film has received much praise, garnering 42 award nominations and 29 wins, including an Oscar nomination and multiple Emmy awards (IMDb). Ava DuVernay's meticulous approach of interviewing a mix of well-known individuals, to using politically-relevant rap-songs as transitions, and incorporating powerful archival footage makes *13th* a more engaging and emotionally-captivating film. This is important because it gives audiences a starting point from which to engage in necessary and perhaps even uncomfortable conversations about the ways African Americans are heavily criminalized in the U.S. and the issue of mass incarceration, especially as it disproportionately targets black communities. For these reasons, *13th* eloquently exemplifies how documentaries can be influential for enacting social change. It is through open dialogue and awareness that a demand for justice and reform can occur, and riveting documentaries provide a platform to do just that.

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