

BLACK DISSENT IN AMERICA:
EXPLORING AVA DUVERNAY'S *SELMA*
AND *13TH* AGAINST THE BACKGROUND
OF THE 2020 ANTI-RACIAL
DISCRIMINATION PROTESTS

*Dissidência negra nos Estados Unidos: um estudo
de Selma e 13th, de Ava DuVernay, no contexto dos
protestos contra a discriminação racial de 2020*

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ABSTRACT.

The 2020 protests on police brutality and racial discrimination in the United States constitute the most recent event of black dissent in what is a history marked by injustice, humiliation, exploitation and the denial of freedom, equality and self-representation of a specific group of people. Dissent can be exercised in many ways and in different areas of society. Over the past few years, Ava DuVernay has produced filmic works that are counter-narratives to the forms of representation imposed on African-Americans by the dominant white majority. This paper analyzes two of those works, *Selma* (2014) and *13th* (2016), and considers their potential as instruments of dissent within the context of black resistance, at a time when racial relations are once again under scrutiny.

Keywords: Black dissent; Protests; Racial discrimination; *Selma*; *13th*.

RESUMO.

Os protestos de 2020 contra a brutalidade policial e a discriminação racial nos Estados Unidos constituem o mais recente evento de dissidência negra numa história marcada por injustiça, humilhação, exploração e negação da liberdade, da igualdade de direitos e da autorrepresentação de um grupo específico de pessoas. A dissidência pode ser exercida de muitas maneiras e em diferentes áreas da sociedade. Nos últimos anos, Ava DuVernay produziu obras cinematográficas que constituem contra-narrativas às formas de representação impostas aos afro-americanos pela maioria branca dominante. Este ensaio analisa duas dessas obras, *Selma* (2014) e *13th* (2016), considerando as suas potencialidades como instrumentos de dissidência no contexto da resistência negra, num momento em que as relações raciais estão mais uma vez sob escrutínio.

Palavras-chave: Dissidência negra; Protestos; Discriminação racial; *Selma*; *13th*.

INTRODUCTION

On May 2020, African-American George Floyd died at the hands of the Minneapolis police. The moment was captured on video and images of Floyd on the floor, with officer Derek Chauvin's knee on his neck, slowly choking and saying "I can't breathe" made their way across the country and the world. A wave of protests followed, targeting police brutality towards African-Americans, an attitude apparently rooted in racial prejudices long embedded in society.

Episodes such as these are common in the United States. African-American history has been characterized by suffering and by the never-ending struggle for freedom and equality in a nation known as "The Land of the Free". The American Civil War ended the institution of slavery but African-Americans continued to be oppressed by white people, who enacted racial segregation and guaranteed the perpetuation of social injustice and institutionalized racism. The Civil Rights movement led to legislation protecting the rights of minorities in the United States and outlawing actions aimed at their exclusion as full citizens. Yet racism did not end. In the 21st century, after having elected the first Black President for two terms, Americans voted for Donald Trump to take over the White House and it has since become evident that racial discrimination is very much alive.

The death of George Floyd was the last straw for many people who, seeing little sign of change, took to the streets again to protest. However, there is something different about these 2020 demonstrations in comparison to previous ones. At the time of writing, not only are they still ongoing, in spite of a global pandemic, but they have also had considerable results. Specifically, the determination of the protesters and the violent treatment many of them have been experiencing exposed, once again, the difficult reality of being black in the United States and promoted a wide national dialogue on racism, its consequences and the need to approach the issue resolutely. Subsequently, brands, businesses and organizations have acknowledged the problem, vowed to tighten up their anti-discrimination policies, and some are even in the process of changing their name and logo, all in an effort to distance themselves from racial stereotypes (Gabbat, 2020).

The Trump administration has described the protests, whether peaceful or not, as an attack on the country itself and has condemned the protesters' dissent as anti-American (Dewan, 2020). Perhaps it was forgotten that the United States were precisely born out of an act of dissent, when shipments of tea from the *East India Company* were dumped into the water at Boston Harbor. The war that followed would result in the independence of today's world-superpower. As noted by Austin Sarat, "dissent plays a significant role in legitimating our politics. Whatever the realities on the ground, recognizing a right to speak truth to power is advertised as a peculiarly American achievement" (Sarat, 2004: 2).

Throughout the course of history, acts of dissent were often catalysts for events that shaped the world as we know it, for better and for worse. As for the protesters in today's United States, their goals are similar to those of activists from fifty years ago: the confirmation of minority groups as full citizens; the acknowledgement of their voices, their pain and their struggle for equality; and socio-political changes that may put an end to practices which degrade minority groups, promote prejudice and endanger lives. The very act of expressing discontent, of stating that the black experience in the United States is characterized by racism ingrained in American society, constitutes a form of dissent: black dissent. By going against official narratives and ideologies, by deconstructing prejudices and stereotypes, by challenging the attitudes and policies of authority figures, protesters are rebelling against a hegemonic order, imposed and maintained by a power center controlled by a social, political and economic elite. Which, it should be noted, is mostly a white elite, frightened by the growing presence of the Other, as African-American author Toni Morrison shrewdly noticed:

[...] in America today, [...] white people's conviction of their natural superiority is being lost. There are 'people of color' everywhere [...]. And what then? Another black President? A predominantly black Senate? Three black Supreme Court Justices? [...] So scary are the consequences of a collapse of white privilege that many Americans have flocked to a political platform that supports and translates violence against the

defenseless as strength. These people are not so much angry as terrified [...]. (Morrison, 2017: 128, 130)

So, it is all a matter of visibility – “There are ‘people of color’ everywhere”. Gradually, African-Americans have moved away from the margins of society to which they had been relegated and are now closer to the center, ceasing to be invisible and making themselves heard. Such a feat has been achieved due to a multiplicity of initiatives, such as protests and demonstrations, the dissemination of information and the work of activists. One should also add the matter of representation.

Representation, especially through visual channels, is a powerful tool through which one can convey certain perspectives and shape up the collective imaginary. When it comes to the African-American communities, the movie and television industry has played an instrumental role in how the United States views them. This industry can preserve and disseminate stereotypes and narratives that harm African-Americans or be a platform for those who want to deconstruct those pre-established images and ideas. In the latter case, movies and television-shows can become a form of dissent with the ability to reach the masses.

This paper will focus on two works by African-American director Ava DuVernay, the film *Selma* and the documentary *13th*, which premiered respectively in 2014 and 2016, in the middle of a decade marked by racial conflicts, by the creation of the Black Lives Matter movement, by the departure of Barack Obama from the White House and the arrival of Donald Trump, by the rise of white supremacy, and which culminated, in 2020, with many instances of black dissent. Both oeuvres address the issue of racial discrimination, socio-political injustice and the role of representation in the struggle for freedom and equality in the United States, while claiming control over African-American narratives. Through the analysis of the filmic strategies and the reception of both works, this paper intends to examine their potential as a form of black dissent against the official narratives emanating from the seat of American power and the racial prejudices embedded within “white America”.

SELMA

Selma (2014) is the filmic dramatization of the historic “Selma to Montgomery” protest marches organized by Civil Rights activists – including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. –, which led to the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Critics responded to the movie with outstanding acclaim and it was distinguished with several notable accolades, including four NAACP Image Awards, eight Black Reel Awards, and four honors from the African-American Film Critics Association, among others. Additionally, the American Film Institute named *Selma* in its list of “Top Ten Films of the Year”. Nonetheless, the general idea is that the movie was “snubbed” by renowned award-granting committees, namely the Academy Awards, the Golden Globes, and the Screen Actors Guild. The latter kept *Selma* completely off its list of nominees, while the former two nominated it for several categories, most of them related to direction and acting, but the final wins did not meet the expectations. In both cases, *Selma* received only the award for Best Original Song.

This apparent disregard may perhaps be linked to the controversy the film generated, especially where its portrayal of President Lyndon B. Johnson is concerned. *Selma* adopted a perspective not in accordance with white conventional narratives, and, as such, its historical accuracy was questioned and conjectures were made about its “black agenda” (Janik, 2015). However, this did not affect the film’s reputation in a negative way. Instead, debates ensued, allowing for its analysis and discussion to go beyond the first wave of reviews and, furthermore, guaranteeing that it continued to have a high approval rate amongst audiences (*IMDb*).

Ava DuVernay was not remotely concerned about the discussion surrounding *Selma*. A former Public Relations, specialized in marketing and publicity within the film industry, she channeled the movie’s momentum to advance her career and new projects. *Selma* was followed by the documentary *13th* (2016), which attempts to unveil the path of the United States in race matters from the passing of the 13th Amendment until 2016. Another project, released in 2019, is a television mini-series about the group of Harlem teenagers coerced into confessing crimes of assault and rape at Central Park, NY, in 1989 by the American justice system and public pressure, despite a lack of

evidence (Lyne, 2016). It appears that DuVernay, like some other African-American directors (Roger Ross Williams, Raoul Peck, Ezra Edelman, among others), is determined to render the “American problem” through black eyes.

Anyone who has watched *Selma* has probably first come across one of the film’s posters, which have the figure of Dr. Martin Luther King as the centerpiece. A viewer immediately knows that the plot is somehow connected to the Civil Rights movement, and this leads to certain expectations: racial discrimination, black resistance, southern prejudice, northern support, and a happy ending in the form of triumphant justice. *Selma* delivers all of this, and yet audiences struggled to connect with the film. Curiously, the same expectations could be allotted to a highly popular and successful movie by director Steve McQueen, *Twelve Years a Slave* (2013), which won many awards (including three Oscars). So, what is different about *Selma*? The politics of representation.

Selma is an adaptation of an important historical event that took place in 1965 and had as protagonists two well-known figures in American history, Lyndon B. Johnson and Martin Luther King. Given the varying views and understandings regarding the episode, a clash of perspectives on the movie was very likely to occur. From the very beginning, the challenge faced by the direction and production of the film was to create something that would comply with most versions of the events, in this way guaranteeing the approval of the majority. But that did not happen, and in no time some very angry people were clamoring “historical inaccuracy”.

Robert Stam, who reflects on the ways adaptations are usually perceived, notes that the “faithful” ones are deemed uncreative and rarely inspire an emotional response, while the “unfaithful” ones are passionately considered abhorrent corruptions of the original materials, as if their very essence had been permanently compromised (Stam, 2005: 8). With regard to the latter reaction, Stam goes on to establish that it is at least in part supported by one’s belief that the adaptation “fails to capture what we see as the fundamental narrative” (Stam, 2005: 14). When it comes to *Selma*, this “fundamental narrative” seems to be the portrayal of Lyndon B. Johnson, the white president who supposedly worked side by side with Dr. King to bring

about the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Janik, 2015). But *Selma* puts forward a different version of Johnson, one that destroys the prevalent image of the Civil Rights movement as a joint effort between blacks and whites. And because black empowerment is commonly represented as the result of white benevolence, a film where African-Americans had to rely on themselves and force Johnson into supporting them is a counter-narrative that audiences would not accept without question. The absence of a white altruistic hero that delivers a persecuted group from their suffering might be at the heart of *Selma*'s apparent "snub".

Should this deviation from a traditional filmic formula be enough to brand *Selma* as inaccurate and subsequently disregard it? After all, a movie put together by black film-makers – direction, production, screenplay, actors, music – about a pivotal event in African-American history should, in theory, be held as a valid perspective, as stated by director Ava DuVernay when addressing claims of misrepresentation on social media (Janik, 2015). Moreover, John Lewis, the late US Representative for Georgia's 5th congressional district – featured on the film as a young man who idolizes King and leads the first march over the Edmund Pettus Bridge –, has commented on the issue as follows:

The role of art in our society is not to reenact history but to offer an interpretation of human experience as seen through the eyes of the artist. [...] [o]ne two-hour movie cannot tell all the stories encompassed in three years of history – the true scope of the *Selma* campaign. It does not portray every element of my story, Bloody Sunday, or even the life of Martin Luther King Jr. We do not demand completeness of other historical dramas, so why is it required of this film? (Lewis, 2015)

One answer to Lewis's question may be that, as Michael Boyce Gillespie notes, the general perception of black cinema is that it "must correspond to reality itself" (Gillespie, 2016: 4). However, the answer may lie within the nature of racial relations in the United States, within the power struggle between whites and blacks. Perhaps the demand for "faithfulness" is not

due to the film's genre, but rather to its suggestion that the "real story" is no more than an interpretation, thus upsetting the balance imposed and maintained by the dominant "white America".

As for the film's storyline, it covers a time frame of about five months, and can be divided in four parts. The first introduces the main issue – black voter suppression through intimidation –, characterizes the two powerful figures – King as an "undeterred hero for justice" and Johnson as more concerned with other issues –, and presents the background – terrorist attacks and extrajudicial killings of African-Americans in a white dominated South that resists integration. The second part focuses on the city of Selma and King's leadership. This small town in Alabama, fuming with white hostility, is deemed the ideal "battle zone" to stage a protest that will attract the world's attention and, most importantly, that of the White House. Dr. King's words at this stage describe how his organization works and what he intends to do:

What we do is negotiate, demonstrate, resist... And a big part of that is raising white consciousness. And in particular the white consciousness of whichever white man happens to be sitting in the Oval Office. Right now, Johnson has other fish to fry and he'll ignore us if he can. The only way to stop him doing that is by being on the front page of the national press every morning, by being on the TV news every night. And that requires... drama. (*Selma*: 29'35")

In the third part the plot thickens. At the center are the preparations for the Selma to Montgomery march and the first two attempts at crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge. It also displays the behind-the-scenes power struggle between King and Johnson. The final part depicts the march, King's speech at the state capitol, and Johnson's announcement of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Like many other black narratives that focus on racial injustice, *Selma* contains scenes designed to incite strong emotions. Two of them stand out: the brutal assault of Jimmie Lee Jackson and his family, followed by the killing of the former (*Selma*: 46'37"), and the Bloody Sunday attack on Edmund Pettus Bridge (*Selma*: 1h11'35"). The pace of the first scene is quick, and

the alternate shots from different angles, combined with the screams, give it a sense of chaos and wildness that amplifies the violence of the attack. As technical opposition and variation, the second scene has many slow-motion shots, and that enhances the horror and despair of the moment. Every visual and audio detail is impossible to miss; one can see the blows before they come and hear the dry sound as they hit the targets, most of them already on the ground. Shots of white people from the northern states reacting to the attack with anguished tears are displayed throughout and clash with reactions of southern incitation to violence. Both scenes are powerful representations of an unchecked white rage directed at blacks, and a shocking indifference towards their lives. In addition, *Selma* shows how this anger can be extended beyond the African-American community: a third scene, with a quick start and a slow end, depicts the murder of a white supporter of the march (a priest nonetheless) at the hands of a southern man (*Selma*: 1h30'33").

The first and the third of these incidents are private, in the sense that they take place away from cameras and reporters. Bloody Sunday, though, is a public event. Thus, in a combination of techniques which adds to the drama of the tragedy, the scene on the bridge is shown to viewers and narrated through voice-over with an adaptation of an article by Roy Reed, the reporter of the *New York Times* on site:

The first ten or twenty Negroes were swept to the ground, screaming, arms and legs flying, packs and bags went skittering across the grassy divider... Those still on their feet retreated. A cheer went up from the white spectators lining the south side of the highway. The troopers continued pushing, using both the force of their bodies and the prodding of their nightsticks. Suddenly there was a sharp sound, like a gunshot, and a great cloud spewed over the troopers and the Negroes, but before the cloud hid it all, there were several seconds of unobstructed view. Fifteen or twenty nightsticks could be seen through the gas, flailing at the heads of the marchers. The Negroes cried out as they gathered together for protection, and the whites on the sidelines whooped and cheered. From the hospital came reports of victims' sufferings: fractures of ribs, head, arms, legs. (*Selma*: 1h11'52")

Almost all of the pivotal scenes in *Selma* feature Martin Luther King, the African-American martyred hero and international symbol of courage and hope. The film begins with one of his speeches and ends with another. Upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, he says: "We believe that what the illusion of supremacy has destroyed, the truth of equality can nourish". While standing victorious at Montgomery he declares:

Our society has distorted who we are. From slavery to the Reconstruction, to the precipice at which we now stand, we have seen powerful white men rule the world while offering poor white men a vicious lie as placation. And when the poor white men's children wail with a hunger that cannot be satisfied, he feeds them that same vicious lie. A lie whispering to them that, regardless of their lot in life, they can at least be triumphant in the knowledge that their whiteness makes them superior to blacks. But we know the truth. (*Selma*: 1h51'28")

Neither speech advocates violence, but rather an acknowledgement of the truth, of the fabrication that is white supremacy. Both carry a message of black resistance against white domination, and *Selma*, by representing that effort as self-reliant and in a way that diverges from the hegemonic perspective, is in itself a form of black opposition to a subjugating system. In other words, it is an act of dissent. In 1965 Martin Luther King demanded a black voice within the existing American voting system. Now *Selma* is a claim for a black voice within the field of representation in contemporary United States.

When the movie is considered against the background of the 2020 anti-discrimination protests, similarities and parallels become apparent. The murder of *Selma*'s Jimmie Lee Jackson by policemen evokes the death of numerous African-Americans at the hands of law enforcement officers, over the past decades. Dr. King's strategy of combining peaceful protesting and drama to capture the attention of "white America" is a perfect description of what has transpired in 2020: until the moment of writing, an estimated 93% of protests that have taken place were peaceful (Kishi; Jones, 2020),

nonetheless many demonstrators have faced the same harsh treatment from law enforcement units usually reserved for looters, thus creating the sort of drama that grasps the nation's attention, keeps the cameras rolling and inspires a strong emotional reaction. The police brutality aimed at the African-Americans of *Selma* is mirrored in the videos and pictures of 2020 protesters getting shot with rubber bullets and claspng their bleeding faces. The killing of the priest in *Selma* brings to mind the actions of Kyle Rittenhouse, a white teenager who crossed state borders with a rifle in order to stand against the protesters in Kenosha, Wisconsin, and ended up murdering two and wounding another (Karimi, 2020). Dr. King's exchange with the SNCC, early in the movie, discloses the urge in taking dramatic action: grassroots long-term work is important but it does not raise white consciousness fast enough (*Selma*: 29'19"). The same can be said about public stances such as Colin Kaepernick's "take a knee": he managed to get the public's attention and exposed the problem of racial discrimination but little action has since been taken to solve it. The indifference of President Johnson towards the African-American struggle, as described in *Selma*, can be allotted to 2020 "white America" as well: it is finally paying attention because it can no longer afford to ignore the issue.

The speeches of Dr. King, in which he conveys his perspective on "white America", still apply today; as Toni Morrison explained, white people are terrified of losing any power whatsoever to a group once seen as innately inferior. *Selma* tells the audience an important narrative through the African-American perspective, thus making people aware of something they have a hand in maintaining and which they can help to resolve. That is also what the 2020 protests are aiming for: the awakening and engagement of the nation's consciousness through dissent.

13TH

13th (2016) is a documentary movie that explores the issue of mass incarceration of African-Americans, from the passing of the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution (1865) until the early twenty-first century. It was

critically acclaimed, and Ava DuVernay was distinguished with a Critic's Choice Documentary Award and a Primetime Emmy Award, amongst others. The movie itself won multiple accolades from organizations such as the African-American Film Critics Association, the British Academy Film Awards, the Primetime Emmy Awards. It was also well received by audiences, earning approval rates of over 80% in online platforms such as IMDb (*IMDb*).

However, when compared to *Selma*, the documentary has generated considerably less discussion, both on mass media channels and online social media, despite the fact that it addresses the same themes pertaining to racial discrimination. This can be explained by a number of factors, starting with its distribution platform, Netflix. This television streaming service is available only to paying users and has diverse configurations across the globe, which means people in different countries do not have access to the same products. Moreover, it uses a coding logarithm that makes suggestions to users based on their preferences, thus making it difficult for them to find products that do not fit in with their habits of consumption. Additionally, Netflix is responsible for the marketing of its own products and most of the advertising is done on the platform itself or online social media, whose capability to reach the masses is, again, restricted by each individual's previous product choices. So, unless someone with access to Netflix is particularly interested in Ava DuVernay or racial discrimination and goes looking for related products, they might never be aware that *13th* is available. The documentary has now been released for free viewing on YouTube and, at the moment of writing, has over five million views. However, the moment of reception has passed and with no publicity it can easily lose further momentum.

Whether people watch *13th* on Netflix or YouTube, they are first exposed to the paratextual elements contained in the poster for the documentary, which is shown in both platforms. The gaze is immediately drawn to the image: the figure of a black man walks in front of a black and white American flag, against a white background, his feet chained and the stripes of his clothes merging with the stripes of the flag. The clothing and the chains leave no doubt at this figure being a prisoner. The American flag and the juxtaposition of its stripes with the man's clothing suggest some sort of connivance from the United States in

the prisoner's circumstances. The white background may be a subtle hint at the dominant "white America". The other eye-catching element is the title "13th", in bold red letters and almost as tall as the figure of the man. Within the context of a black prisoner in chains, it clearly refers to the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, which abolished slavery in the country, therefore identifying the central theme of the documentary. The subtitle, "From slave to criminal with one amendment", provides further information on how the central theme will be developed, inferring a certain interpretation of the amendment in question. Finally, the sentence "From Ava DuVernay, Director of *Selma*" – with the director's name in bold red letters –, establishes the connection to the much-debated movie of 2014. Viewers are hence given an idea of what to expect.

Yet *13th* and *Selma* can never be too similar, as they belong to different genres. The latter is a filmic dramatization of a real-life event that took place half a century ago and, although it was based on factual data such as personal letters, video footage, photographs, Government files, testimonies, and official biographies, it required the use of fiction and specific cinematographic strategies in order to construct a compelling story for a wide audience. The former is a non-fictional movie, which documents a certain reality pertaining particular events and issues, aiming at informing the audience. In this case, the argument of the documentary is predominantly formulated and conveyed by experts on the subject of analysis, real-life pictures and video footage, official data like statistics and news articles, and statements from credible witnesses. Jonathan Walley, writing for the *American Society of Aesthetics*, notes that though documentaries are perceived as a "form that claims to represent reality 'truthfully'" they are still a cinematic model and, as such, "inherently illusionistic" (2011). Indeed, although documentaries are produced from a certain point-of-view, some illusion of neutrality and accuracy must be present. The audience must be aware of an emotional distance with regards to the information being disclosed, so they can assess it as "reality" and not as "story-telling". *Selma* tells a story about racial discrimination that strongly arouses the viewers' emotions. In a way, *13th* also tells a story about racial discrimination but does so by enumerating facts in a specific order, and presenting reliable evidence that engages rationality over emotion.

Nevertheless, there is a thematic similarity between the two filmic products: *13th* also challenges a “fundamental narrative”, this time pertaining to the widespread idea of black criminality. DuVernay’s argument is that slavery did not end with the passing of the 13th Amendment but rather took on the form of criminalized behavior, specifically targeted at African-Americans. This transformation compelled them into imprisonment and forced labor, often disenfranchising them for life, namely by stripping them of their right to vote. Film critic Manohla Dargis observed the following: “The United States did not just criminalize a select group of black people. It criminalized black people as a whole, a process that, in addition to destroying untold lives, effectively transferred the guilty of slavery from the people who perpetuated it to the very people who suffered through it” (2016).

What *13th* does, is present a counter-narrative that sheds some light into the historical relationship between “white America” and “black America”, namely the ongoing power struggle, and the possible reasons as to why racial discrimination remains so imbedded in American society. Once more, representation is a major factor.

The documentary covers a time frame of one-hundred and fifty years, and can be divided into four parts, each comprising the most prominent occurrences that contributed to the present situation – one where “the United States has the highest level of incarceration in the world” (*13th*: 56”). This main theme is introduced by a voice-over of Barack Obama: “So let’s look at the statistics. The United States is home to 5% of the world’s population but 25% of the world’s prisoners.” (*13th*: 11”). The wording of the 13th Amendment, according to the documentary, is at the center of this reality: “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.” (Transcript of the 13th Amendment 1865). As the argument goes, the clause establishing an exception in the case of criminal behavior has been exploited so as to serve certain goals, namely the limitation of the freedom and civil rights of African-Americans.

The first part of the documentary focuses on the “why” of mass incarceration: slavery was a profitable economic system, one which needed to be

rebuilt after the American Civil War; if the newly freed slaves were convicted as criminals, they could be forced back into servitude. What followed was the creation of a “mythology of black criminality” that actively portrayed black people as innately violent and dangerous (13th: 4’17”). Pamphlets, newspaper illustrations and cartoons of the Reconstruction period are used as evidence, as well as footage from the infamous movie *Birth of a Nation* (1915), which martyrizes the South and glorifies the KKK. Once this idea of criminality was disseminated, African-Americans had yet to face “another wave of terrorism” in the form of thousands of lynchings “under the idea they had done something criminal” (13th: 7’28”), and then came segregation and Jim Crow laws. Footage of Civil Rights activism and recordings of Martin Luther King’s speeches are employed to render the struggle for equality, countered by footage and speeches from members of the KKK and their supporters. Today the efforts of the Civil Rights activists are seen as courageous and they are acclaimed as heroes; however, the documentary affirms, at that time they were “portrayed in the media and among many politicians as criminals. People who were deliberately violating the law” (13th: 11’). All this considered, the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act are described as “the promise of equal justice [becoming] at least a possibility” for the first time in American history (13th: 13’5”).

In the second part of the documentary, the plot thickens as the “era of incarceration” comes under scrutiny, beginning in the 1970s and going through the Nixon, Reagan, Bush and Clinton administrations and their respective policies of “war on crime” and “war on drugs”. Throughout the next three decades, the circumstances which led to the increasing imprisonment of black people, only worsened: drug addiction was made a criminal issue rather than a health issue; drugs commonly used amongst African-American communities were given harsher penalties than the ones preferred by whites; black leaders were imprisoned, exiled and killed, leaving the communities weak against the actions of the power center; the media and prominent politicians over-represented African-Americans as criminals, as inhuman “super-predators” (13th: 28’34”); “black criminality” was weaponized in presidential campaigns, playing on the fears and anxieties of white voters;

the police force was militarized; the prison system was massively expanded. The end result is a current judiciary system, predominantly run by whites, responsible for the incarceration of over two million people and the disruption of families and entire communities. As pointed out by the documentary, one in three African-American men are likely to be imprisoned during his lifetime (*13th*: 1h23'10").

In this segment, besides statistics, video footage and testimonies, DuVernay introduces rap songs with telling lyrics as a divider between the different presidential administrations and decades. For instance, artist and activist Killer Mike sings "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, but they would call us 'niggas'/ And lay us on our belly, while they finger on they triggers" (*13th*: 18'55").

The third part of the documentary focuses on the particulars of prisons in the United States, how they are run for profit, making money out of the inmates and their families and requiring a constant flow of convicts to do manual labor. Presented as a "multibillion-dollar industry" (*13th*: 1h7'50") for corporations, which profit from "punishment" (*13th*: 1h8'39"), the prison industrial complex is characterized as "a beast: it eats black and Latino people for breakfast, lunch and dinner" (*13th*: 1h14'2"). Footage of brutal beatings in jails and inhuman abuse are shown throughout this segment. Moreover, when a prison sentence is over and people are allowed back into society, the system makes sure that they carry the brand "convicted" for the rest of their days. Not only it is extremely difficult for them to integrate and to have access to things such as food stamps, business licenses, and life insurance, but they may also permanently lose the right to vote. "So many aspects of the old Jim Crow are suddenly legal, once you've been branded a felon" (*13th*: 1h17'36").

The fourth and final part of the documentary focuses on the intentions of the political elite in reforming the prison and justice systems, at a time "when it feels right politically" (*13th*: 1h19'29"). Based on past experiences, some of the experts interviewed are not convinced that the elites will "do the sort of change we need to see as a country" as "they are certainly not going to go backwards and fix the mess that they've made because they're

not ready to make that admission” (13th: 1h19’44”). One of the interviewees remarks that “as a country, I don’t think we’ve ever been ready to make the admission that we have steam-rolled through entire communities and multiple generations” (13th: 1h19’58”), which suggests that in order for the problems pertaining racial discrimination to be resolved, first “white America” has to fully understand and acknowledge its role in maintaining the said problem and its systems of oppression. This is something which the election of Donald Trump has made more unlikely. At this point, DuVernay adds voice-overs of Trump’s campaign rallies and juxtaposes footage of black people in 2020 and during the Civil Rights era being manhandled and beaten by a white mob (13th: 1h20’38”). An interviewee observes:

They called the end of slavery “jubilee”. We thought we were done then. And then you have a hundred years of Jim Crow, terror and lynching. Dr. King, these guys come to the scene [...], we get the bills passed to vote and then they bring out the handcuffs. Label you felon, you can’t vote or get a job. So, we don’t know what the next iteration of this will be, but it will be. [...] And we will have to be vigilant. (13th: 1h22’11”)

The documentary 13th provides a much needed African-American context to understand black dissent and why there is such resistance from “white America” to the prospect of change. In the context of the 2020 protests, it becomes obvious that they are a response to decades of injustice, humiliation, frustration, shame, brutalization, apathy, and rage from whites. People are fighting against sociopolitical discrimination and cultural stereotypes aware of the fact that everyone in the United States who is identified as non-white can become a victim, a target of the power center. Ava DuVernay’s documentary goes as far as pointing towards a possible solution: the opposite of criminalizing minority groups is to humanize them, to recognize their hopes and pains, to be angry when they are killed for no reason (13th: 1h30’48”). In the words of one of the interviewees, “It’s not even just about black lives. It’s about changing the way this country understands human dignity” (13th: 1h34’4”). 13th is a voice of black representation within American history.

CONCLUSION

On March 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson addressed the Congress on the occasion of the passing of the Voting Rights Act:

I speak tonight for the dignity of man and the destiny of democracy. I urge every member of both parties, Americans of all religions and of all colors, from every section of this country, to join me in that cause. [...] Our mission is at once the oldest and the most basic of the country: to right wrong, to do justice, to serve man. [...] There is no Negro problem. There is no Southern problem. There is no Northern problem. There is only an American problem. [...] A century has passed, more than a hundred years, since equality was promised. And the Negro is not equal. A century has passed since the day of promise. And the promise is unkept. (*LBJ Presidential Library*)

The United States is a nation born of dissent and built upon the revolutionary ideals of freedom, equality and democracy. It is also a country that systematically denies those same ideals to a portion of its population. Being so, people engage in acts of dissent as a means to protest their situation and demand solutions and change. Sometimes these demonstrations are peaceful. Sometimes they escalate into violence. The wave of protests taking place in 2020 is one such occasion, proof that “the American problem” persists and, what is more, the circumstances have not really changed that much.

The early twenty-first century has had many episodes of black dissent under multiple distinctive forms. Going to the streets to create dramatic scenarios and demand the attention of the country is one. The dissemination of counter-narratives is another. Ava DuVernay specializes in the latter. *Selma* and *13th* are, respectively, renderings of historical events and a sociopolitical phenomenon from a black point-of-view, which explore the long-standing issue of racial discrimination in the United States. *Selma* reclaims the figure of Martin Luther King Jr., once considered the most dangerous man in America by the FBI and whose particular formula of black dissent has been appropriated by the official discourse, normalized and stripped of its trans-

formative potential. *13th* enumerates the events that led to a system of black mass incarceration and sanctioned brutality against black bodies, which is at the center of the 2020 protests. In doing so, it contextualizes black dissent from an African-American perspective, thus undermining the hegemony of the official “white America” account, just like *Selma* did.

For centuries black perspectives were marginalized and African-American communities could do little more than resist the white-made and white-controlled stereotypes and narratives imposed on them by the white majority, often ignorant of the history and circumstances of black people. DuVernay has produced works that give African-Americans a voice, that reconfigure the pre-established cultural images, that educate the audiences and inspire public discussion about race, racial relations and their consequences. Within the field of cultural representation, *Selma* and *13th* are forms of black dissent with the potential to encourage the subversion of the oppressive systems that keep entire communities subjugated.

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