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13th Rhetorical Analysis

Imagine sitting in a classroom and having to watch a documentary that explains how racism is still very real and present. Sadly, this was done. A classroom of students had to watch a 1 hour and 40-minute documentary talking about how the 13th amendment has enslaved criminals. *13th* discusses and displays examples of this crime and punishment. It debuted on Netflix in 2016, and it has won many awards. It was well executed. It utilizes pathos, ethos, and logos, which are used to persuade an audience. Each is persuasive in its own way. The reasons the documentary was persuasive are because of its use of pathos, ethos, and logos, its ability to inform and sell their idea, and its use of a controversial topic.

13th is a documentary that discusses not only mass incarceration but also the underlying racism in lawmaking. It begins with the history of the Civil War and civil rights. Then it tells about the 13th amendment. Slavery is illegal unless you are a criminal (DuVernay). Once they begin talking about the 70s and 80s, they bring up the ordeal with drugs and racial bias. The connections between legal decisions and making more money off of prisons are prevalent. The documentary continues through the years and even talks about issues in the 21st century such as police brutality and prison population increasing. *13th* shows real news clips and also presidential speeches. It's fascinating and sad to look at the country this way. It's an eye-opener.

The documentary begins with a heavy use of logos. Logos is a way of persuasion using facts and statistics. *13th* uses a lot of logos, which works very well. It opens with Obama saying, “The United States is home to 5% of the world’s population but 25% of the world’s prisoner” (DuVernay). Once again, they use logos to explain the truth behind the 13th amendment. Kevin Gannon explains, “The 13th amendment makes it unconstitutional for someone to be held as a slave. There are exceptions, including criminals” (DuVernay). With this information, it shows the connection between the loss of freedom for criminals and mass incarceration. They also include a lot of information on the civil war. As they begin to transition into the 70s & 80s, they discuss the new laws that were made and mandatory sentences. With these mandatory sentences, they end up imprisoning a lot of African-Americans. As they explain, “40.2% of the prison population consists of black men.” (DuVernay). This statistic is very sad but very persuasive.

13th persuades the audience very well with their use of pathos as well. Pathos uses content that will persuade the audience’s feelings. While discussing the civil rights era, they use many photos and videos from that time. Some are very disturbing as they show the lynchings of African-Americans. While there is also a video of a black man being bullied by a crowd of white people. They also add melancholy music to these images, which adds a very sorrow mood. There are also transitions between each era where they use a rap song with powerful lyrics. Then when they begin to talk about *The Birth of a Nation*, they show images of the KKK and show how badly people of color were treated. A lot of the pathos in this documentary is in the disturbing images and intense music. However, the hardest part to watch is the part where they show disturbing images of the past while using a Donald Trump voiceover. This part was overwhelming, but it worked very well with their purpose.

Lastly, *13th* ties everything together with their use of ethos. Ethos is the credibility and reliability of the documentary. Ethos is used when they introduce the speakers and use real-life clips. For example, the speakers include Harvard professors, activists, mayors, and even people who have real-life experience with the topic. Some of the speakers include Angela Davis, Cory Booker, and Michelle Alexander who are all very intelligent and experienced people. When watching the documentary, it is easy to trust their words. Some of them have even specialized in the issues discussed.

While this documentary was informative and enlightening, it did have its flaws and cons. In the beginning, they failed to display the interviewees' names and took away from the ethos. If someone turns this documentary on, they won't know who's speaking until 10 minutes in. Someone who is opposed to the opinions in the documentary, won't stay that long when they feel the speakers are random people. This documentary is also very biased. It fails to show the opinions of the opposing side. While they do have people whose opinions differ, such as Grover Norquist, he stumbles over his words and struggles to make a solid point. Then they use men who have deeper voices and can express their thoughts better. Along with the bias and lack of reliability, this documentary also uses a lot of graphic and disturbing images. Some people may even feel it is too much. The use of pathos can be seen as too heavy by some viewers. If the documentary is too heavy for some to watch, then they're not doing a good job of persuading.

13th persuaded many people and did so easily. It taught many people about lawmaking and the prison system. *13th* showed different points of view and showed the "true" side of presidents. Not many documentaries have dared to touch on such a controversial topic that *13th*

has. The use of pathos, ethos, and logos was nicely done, and the ratings prove it. While it did have its flaws as any documentary does, it was enlightening and needed.

Works Cited:

DuVernay, Ava, director. *13th*. Kandoo Films, 2016.