



Two-minute review

LA92 on Netflix

Directors: Daniel Lindsay and T. J. Martin

Why you should watch it

You like documentaries that show but don't tell. History is sometimes brutal and there is no point in diverting your eyes.

With every race-related protest in the US, people tell you that racism is an issue that has never been properly addressed. This documentary demonstrates this continuity to the letter.

Racism can be incidental, but this footage shows how it is generally connected to structural economic inequalities.

Why you should not watch it

You do not like it when you have to think for yourself about what historical footage means. You prefer it when someone explains the past to you, preferably through a unidimensional story that features you and your ancestors as heroes.

Your political beliefs don't cope well with clear evidence of white racism.

Your political beliefs don't cope well with clear evidence of non-white racism.

What you should learn from the documentary

History relies on the sources that are available to us today. In some cases we only have paper documents. In other cases we have testimonies from eye witnesses. But in the case of the Los Angeles riots of 1992, we have a wealth of video material shot by local film crews. It makes for a documentary that highlights the power of visual history.

What this extremely rich material tells us, is the story of the riots that followed the arrest and beating of Rodney King by four LAPD policemen. The violence on the part of the police officers was the final straw that broke the tense relationship between the LAPD and the communities (of colour) it served. But what really led to an explosion of protests and violence, was the fact that the culprits, who had made explicitly racist comments after the beating and had taken pride in their show of force, were almost entirely cleared by the majority-white jury that tried them. When the policemen walked free, the racial tensions in Los Angeles boiled over, starting several days of protests, riots, looting and violence.

This sequence of events sounds familiar in 2020, watching what happened after the death of George Floyd. But the story told by Lindsay and Martin is so much more than an unanticipated commentary on our present. It is a visual exploration of the structures of racism in the US and the complexities that go with it. You could derive many powerful lessons from watching it: how police racism and violence can fundamentally undermine law and order (whatever that is supposed to mean); how lack of personal affinity can undermine the trial-by-jury system; how one injustice too many can beget both peaceful and violent protest; or simply how a public riot develops minute-to-minute.

Still, the most important lesson is how racial injustices interact with structural economic inequalities. Lindsay and Martin build a connection between the poverty of the protesters and the fact that they eventually start looting. Those who are well-off might not (want to) understand this connection, but plundering shops is a signal of the economic inequality that follows out of political inequality (just as political inequality follows out of economic inequality – it is a vicious circle). And the documentary makes it clear enough that the primary benefactors of that inequality were/are indeed white.

There is nothing better to illustrate this than the tensions between the black and Korean communities of LA in 1992. Although the riots were sparked by black and white tensions, much of the destruction and violence happened between these two communities of colour. The main reason, as far as Lindsay and Martin suggest, was that Korean families had opened business in or near historically black neighbourhoods. This led some black community members to accuse the Koreans of benefitting of their poverty, while the Koreans sometimes treated their neighbours as economic and racial inferiors. The looting and shooting between the two groups did little to affect white sentiment in the city, and much less to break the racist economic structure that caused the problems in the first place.

The best bit

Undoubtedly the reading of the verdict, when the jury declared all four officers non-guilty on the charge of assault and three of them non-guilty on the charge of use of excessive force. You only hear the voice of the judge reading the verdict, but the images show the reactions of the black community members glued to their televisions and radios. With every “not guilty”, you see the disappointment, pain, and anger grow, up to the point where many viewers of the documentary will say “I would have felt the same and perhaps even done the same”. The footage then becomes even more powerful, as the frustration gradually turns to violence. Seeing the death and destruction escalate is absolutely terrible, but due the verdict-reading segment you do feel some sympathy for the initial riots.

The most remarkable quotes

"This is America!" (*Just watch why this sentence matters so much*)

"This is a police department that has supported you, and each of you, and I'll just tell you this. If you don't speak out on behalf of the men and women of the Los Angeles Police Department [...], then I tell you, you're going to have a police department that is not going to be the kind of department you want." (*LAPD Chief Daryl Gates warns the City Council against not supporting his police force. A Council Member later asks if it was meant as a threat*)

"That's how Rodney King felt, white boy." (*One of the early rioters commenting on the beating of a passer-by*)

"It was right out of *Gorillas in the Mist*." (*Two of the involved policemen radioing about an earlier intervention involving domestic violence in a black American family*)

LA92 by Daniel Lindsay and T. J. Martin, National Geographic Channel, 2017. Review by Dr. Bram De Ridder, KU Leuven.