



***Origin* Reshapes How We See Each Other. It's a Game Changer**

In telling its story of an author who aims to redefine racism, *Origin* itself redefines what filmmaking can achieve.



Why should I see *Origin*?

It mightn't have the buzz (or budget) of *Barbenheimer*, but no film in recent memory hits harder about what really connects us. If someone ever tells you movies don't matter, show them *Origin*.

What is the movie *Origin* about?

Origin explores social causes like [Racial Equity](#) and [Democracy & Society](#)

There's no shortage of powerful films that tackle the issue of racial discrimination with dignity and smarts. From the 1960s' *To Kill a Mockingbird*, to *Schindler's List* in the 90s and *Killers of the Flower Moon* today, **some of cinema's hardest-hitting stories** have been told about groups that were accused, tried and hung for no reason other than their name or their skin.

What those films have in common is a look *back* at the harms of the past: the racial prejudice of America's south during the Great Depression; the persecution of Jews during the Holocaust; or the plunder of Osage Nation land rights by white colonists a century ago. But *Origin* forges a new path by **totally reframing how racism looks and how it persists today**.

Unusually, *Origin* found its genesis in a non-fiction work. *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* is the second book from Isabel Wilkerson, who was the first African-American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize in journalism. Her thesis - **which redefines American racism** as a by-product of an innate caste system, like in Nazi Germany - was hailed in 2020 as a "groundbreaking" and "eye-opening" deconstruction of social hierarchies and the destruction they cause.

That doesn't make it an easy sell for a movie though. Even if it's helmed by **one of the most uninhibited voices in filmmaking today**. To get her adaptation onto the screen, acclaimed writer and director Ava DuVernay [bypassed the studio funding model, turning to philanthropic orgs](#) like the Ford Foundation and nonprofits funded by the likes of Melinda French Gates and Laurene Powell Jobs to pull together her (comparatively low) sub-\$40M budget. The result was worth the gamble.

If *Origin* is based on a non-fiction book, what's the story about?

There's no doubt *Caste* is an academic piece of writing. To translate such a complex idea onto the screen, DuVernay needed a core character audiences could relate to – **so she chose to centre the story around Wilkerson herself**. Her second great choice was casting Academy Award nominee Aunjanue Ellis-Taylor, who plays the author with immense empathy and strength. We're on Isabel's journey as she realises there's an unwritten book lying within her, like dots waiting to be connected, and her caste theory swims into focus.

“The book is intimidating... it's weighty subject matter. But within the pages that explore sociology, philosophy and history, I saw Isabel. Her story. Her voice. I knew that the way to share the concepts and information in the book was to enter her world: her motivations, her losses, her triumphs, her drive.”

~ Ava DuVernay

For Isabel, the first seeds are planted [with the murder of Trayvon Martin](#) – a black teen shot for “acting suspicious”. His crime? Walking down the street at night wearing a hoodie. DuVernay recreates the scene in a flashback that makes it obvious **Martin's death was a senseless tragedy**. But Isabel is surprised when, talking about his loss, her mother says he should've “acted safer” in a white community.

It's the first spicy conundrum of many in *Origin*. Shouldn't Trayvon have been safe regardless of what he wore? *Yes, he should have*, Isabel's mother replies, *but “should have” and real life are two different things*. This racial Catch-22 starts a fire in Isabel; the absurdity of **two rules for two skin tones in one place**.

Why was Trayvon *really* shot? Isn't it too easy, too *lazy* to call it “racism” and turn the page? *“We call everything racism,”* Isabel argues to her editor. *“What does it even mean anymore? It's the default. **Racism as the primary language to understand everything is insufficient.**”*

Isabel admits she can't fully explain what's in her head – but Ava DuVernay can. Her camera gives us every insight as she **follows Isabel's vivid journey of discovery**: searching for common threads across countries and cultures, and looking to the past to reshape our future.

Why are India and Germany in a movie about American racism?

People say they could watch their favourite actor 'read the phone book', but watching an author actually *write* a book might be pushing it. DuVernay knew she had to elevate the drama of *Origin* by bringing its concepts to life. To do it, she stages historic recreations of the eras Isabel is researching, creating **parallel narratives between the present and the past.**

So when Isabel is inspired by "*Deep South*", [a landmark anthropological study about caste](#) that was conducted by two couples - one Black, one white - in Depression-era Mississippi, DuVernay takes us there. Through Isabel's eyes, we meet the Davises and Gardners, see their lives and research, and feel the indignity of how differently they were treated. Both couples were undercover: **"keeping" to their own caste, like a performance**, to undertake their anthropological work. For the Davises, that meant embedding themselves within the very same systems of racism they were there to expose.

When Isabel tells the story of a (real life) German man who refuses to give the Nazi salute because he's fallen in love with a Jewish woman, DuVernay brings a black & white photo of the man to life. August and Irma are young, vibrant, and deeply in love - they feel real. When their passion is juxtaposed against the terrifying Nazi book-burning that's staged in their town square, **that feels powerfully real to us too.** The very fabric of their society is being torn apart.

In present-day Berlin, Isabel walks through the very same square, landing the point that the past still echoes in our world today. This breakdown in humanity really happened here - not just in a photo, not just in a book, *but in reality. Right here.* Isabel finds another link in Germany, learning how Nazi senior figures planned the Holocaust: by studying US legislation which *inscribed into law* that **African slaves were an inferior race.** After all, "*Germans are already convinced that Jews are*

inferior,” says an SS officer around a boardroom table of top Nazi brass. “German laws should reflect that.”



Ava DuVernay directed the film’s pivotal book-burning scene in the centre of Berlin. “We felt like we had an ethical standard of trying to honour it in a way that when an audience watched, it feels real.”

As Isabel shares with her family, it’s a ‘Eureka’ moment: **the interconnectedness is her point.** She doubles down on her theory that oppression isn’t centralised on race. *It’s about caste.* That’s what takes Isabel to India, where an academic tells her, “the spectre of caste is still haunting us.” Blurring the lines between fiction and documentary, DuVernay cast lauded Harvard scholar and author Dr. Suraj Yengde to play himself on screen.

He describes the persecution of the Dalits – [a marginalised social group in Hindu caste society](#) who were once referred to as “untouchables”. Systematic discrimination that **branded one band of the population as the lowest of the low;** forced to clean excrement-caked sewers with their hands, and tie brooms around their waists because their shadows were supposedly “polluted”.

It's the final piece of connective tissue that Isabel needs to cement her thesis. Under similar caste systems, "untouchable" Dalits, tortured African slaves and shaven-headed Jews were all reduced to a single mass - not humans deserving empathy, but **dehumanised objects who could be controlled**. By connecting these scenes of the past to our present, DuVernay is urging us to consider the NOW. We may be living in a system we didn't create - but by acknowledging it and seeing our own position within it, we CAN work towards changing it.

How does *Origin* take an "idea" and make us feel something?

Cleverly, Ava DuVernay reverses this psychology by deeply humanising the ideas in *Origin*. One of the best aspects of the film is that at every stage, **there's a human touchpoint to connect with**: the Davises in Mississippi, August and Irma in Germany, Dr. Yengde in India, and of course, Isabel herself. By personalising theoretical concepts, they hit us in the feels.

When Isabel suddenly loses her husband, then two more treasured family members while researching her book, her grief is like a wave that threatens to swallow her whole. But DuVernay uses **authentic touches and simple metaphors** to keep the emotion connected to the bigger story. Isabel's been focused on oppressive, global systems that feed on division - now, she's forced to stop and grieve. *Origin* reminds us that this deeply human and universal experience, sad as it is, also unites us. "I just want to scream," she tells a friend, who patiently replies: "Then scream." For anyone who's experienced traumatic loss, it's such a real moment.

DuVernay introduces another effective metaphor with Isabel's mother's house, which has seen better days with its leaking basement, water damage and peeling paint. Tasked with fixing it up or selling it wholesale, Isabel sees the parallel between this house and the bigger "house" of **our society and its racial divisions**. We didn't build the system we're living in first-hand - but as Isabel points out, "We are the heirs to

whatever is right or wrong with it. The cracks won't fix themselves. Any more deterioration is on our watch."



"We have lulled ourselves into this slumber regarding how we talk about social division," says lead actress Aunjanue Ellis-Taylor. "I hope that folks will come to this and hear these concepts and this invitation to a new language, and be excited."

How do the filmmaking choices of *Origin* deepen its emotion?

There's a bunch of skilful techniques that DuVernay utilises in camera and post to get those emotions soaring. Some are more poetic, like the metaphor she uses of Isabel lying in a blanket of **slowly falling autumn leaves as a visualisation of grief**. Again here, Ava is drawing a parallel between personal and global traumas - at different times, she switches out who Isabel lies next to, from her husband (who happens to be a white man), to a young Black boy in the 1950s (who she assures "it's all gonna be okay").

Origin is highly non-linear, too, using intercutting for effect in different ways. Sometimes, it's a flashback to reinforce Isabel's emotions to the audience, like how we're shown a quick, tender scene with her husband when she's feeling unmoored. Others are more thought-provoking, like the way DuVernay places Isabel's meet-cute with her husband AFTER his death in the film. Interestingly, this flashback comes in Germany, as Isabel is quietly observing the very spare and stark Jewish history museum. **It's a sophisticated contrast; a warm memory in a cold, white place.**



"I'm not seeking agreement with Isabel's book," says director Ava DuVernay. "I'm seeking engagement. I hope it instigates conversation. That is one of the goals of the film."

Lastly, the film uses slow-motion as a highly effective tool. In one scene, Isabel walks toward the doors of the first social event she's attended since becoming a widow and literally puts on her "game face", her expression slowly shifting to a public-facing

smile that she hasn't felt like using in months. **Anyone who's been bereaved will relate to this moment.**

Then, there's slow motion as a symbol of catharsis - like when Isabel finally publishes her book and "meets" the characters whose stories we've gotten to know. As the camera settles on the last face, we see it belongs to Trayvon Martin, the boy who was shot for wearing a hoodie. He's smiling as Isabel voices a final thought: **that the inverse of caste is freedom.**

What are critics saying about *Origin*?

"Plenty of movies are important, shining a light on underrepresented people and stories, but few are as revolutionary in scope, form, and purpose as Origin."

- Laura Babiak, Observer

"How do you make a movie about an intellectual argument? By putting a human face on it. This stunning provocation about race and class is something rare: a movie that matters."

- Peter Travers, ABC

"With an unconventional structure, Origin is alarmingly effective... a riveting and haunting journey to a kind of enlightenment."

- Lindsey Bahr, Associated Press

Seen the film? What's your take - fully on board, or disagree big time? We'd love to hear it. [Leave a review](#) to share your thoughts with the good.film community!

So what's the takeaway from *Origin*?

With its heavy themes and academic DNA, we know that *Origin* might sound like one of those "eat your veggies" films. But for her beautifully performed and highly mature fifth feature, **Ava DuVernay has pulled out every stop.** *Origin* has a warm and human heartbeat - taking what could've been a guilt-inducing TED Talk, and

elevating it with wrenching flashbacks, authentic period scenes and passionate discussion between characters you'll actually care about.

DuVernay is a deeply thoughtful filmmaker, and it's clear that in tackling *Origin*, she is delivering a thesis of her own. Just as Wilkerson describes caste as being "*everywhere, yet invisible*," DuVernay is determined to use her artistic medium to make these entrenched patterns in our social order **as jagged and visible as possible**.

By connecting the ongoing prejudice that African-Americans face today with the historical plight of Germany's Jews and India's Dalits, *Origin* illustrates the immense tragedy of caste: these hierarchies of oppression dehumanise and divide us. The power of *Origin* is that it makes visible the structures and systems that hold up these hierarchies - **and seeing them gives us the power to change them**. As Isabel points out in a key scene, "*You don't escape trauma by ignoring it - you escape trauma by confronting it*." With *Origin*, Ava and Aunjanue gift us with a confrontation that's too meaningful to ignore.



