

RACE AND REPRESENTATION IN *FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS*

by

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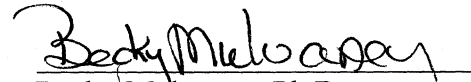
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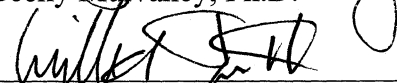
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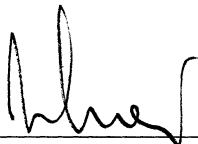
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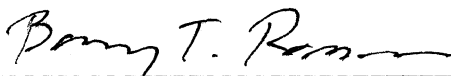
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## ABSTRACT

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This thesis will highlight the significance and representation of race in the film and television show *Friday Night Lights*. The core claim of my thesis will show that representation of race was different in the film as compared to the television show due to their varied settings, one historical (1980s) and the other contemporary (2000s). While both the film and the television show were produced in the 2000s, their use of two different historical periods allows for contrasting representations of race even though they both draw from the book *Friday Night Lights*. The film's representation of race is reflective of its late 1980s setting, therefore, viewers of the film will see a more explicit handling of racial issues. During that time period it was socially acceptable to talk about issues of race straightforwardly and directly. On the other hand, the television show's contemporary setting, by contrast, allows for the representation of race to be handled more suggestively, indirectly, and implicitly, reflecting new ways of thinking about race more prevalent to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. Development of the book

In July of 1988, H.G. Bissinger left his job with the *Philadelphia Inquirer* as a newspaper editor and moved to Odessa, Texas two weeks later. During his time in Odessa, he followed the local Permian Panther high school football team for a period of four months. He met all the players and staff and attended every practice, game, and meeting. Bissinger also became involved with the team outside of the football program. He accompanied them to school, their churches, and their homes. Then, in order to capture the true essence of the community, he involved himself with the people of the town. He explored how elements such as race, education, politics, and the economy had affected them. Bissinger gathered all of this information and wrote the book, *Friday Night Lights: A Town, A Team, and A Dream*.

The book was published in September of 1990. The people of Odessa were furious with the contents of the book. The book made reference to racism that still existed in the town. It highlighted how high school football players were given preferential treatment within the community. The book even seemed to criticize how the local school spent more money on rushing game film for coaches than it did on teaching materials for the English department. Odessans were so upset, that Bissinger had to



cancel a promotional visit for the book in town due to threats he was receiving from them.

Despite the unpleasant reception of the book from Odessans, people everywhere loved it. Media outlets such as *The New York Times* spoke fondly of the book. It was a best seller. In 2002, *Sports Illustrated* ranked it as number four on their list of “The Top 100 Sports Books of All Time.” In 2004, ESPN selected it as one of the best sports books of the last 25 years.

## **B. Development of the film**

Soon after the book was released, interest in a movie inspired by the book began to develop. In 1991, *The New York Times* reported that film director and producer, Alan Jay Pakula, was “in the process of trying to find a writer to adapt *Friday Night Lights* for the screen in time for him to produce and possibly direct it” (Gelder, 8). However, after that initial report, little was said about the makings of the movie for some time. In fact, it wasn’t until November of 2003, that the details of the movie resurfaced. On November 29<sup>th</sup>, *The Gazette*, in Montreal, reported that Peter Berg, actor-turned-director, had spent the last few months in Texas preparing to make *Friday Night Lights*, and that production was scheduled to begin in late January. According to the article, Berg had been campaigning to do the film for six years. However, it had been 13 years since producer Brian Grazer had acquired the project for Imagine Entertainment. During that time the project “had six directors, two of whom had died, and nearly as many writers” (Goldstein, D3). The article quoted Grazer as saying, “I’ve heard 100 speeches on what

directors were going to do with *Friday Night Lights* . . . It seems as if every director who ever played football wanted to make this movie” (D3).

*The Gazette* article gave a detailed explanation of the events that followed after the initial interest of making a movie developed. First, after Grazer got Universal to acquire the book, Pakula then teamed up with David Aaron Cohen, who wrote the original script. However, Pakula did not commit to the project, and after many years Grazer convinced him to get someone else to help out. Then, in 1994, producer Brian Levant jumped on board. Levant spent a year working on the script, but the studio began to lose interest with his version of the film. Next, in 1996 Jon Avnet, a director-producer, signed on to the project and teamed up with Billy Ray, who was hired to write a script. However, Ray only wrote one draft and was let go. Avnet was off the project not long after. Grazer explained, “We had casting issues and, more importantly, budget issues . . . But whenever a director would drop out, a new director would call, saying ‘I want to do it’” (D3). Eventually Grazer was approached by Richard Linklater in 1997. Linklater persuaded Grazer that he was the right filmmaker for the project. He was the director of the youth-culture films *Slacker* and *Dazed and Confused*, and “Linklater was considered a rising star and a magnet for young actors” (D3). Linklater began working on a new script with director David Frankel. Then, disappointingly, in 1999 the high-school football movie, *Varsity Blues*, was a surprise hit at MTV Films. Soon after, Grazer had another director pitching to him - Ted Demme. Demme, who had just worked on a project at Imagine, went off to do another project, but promised he would return to work on the film. However, he died suddenly in 2001, leaving the project high and dry again.

Then, Peter Berg entered in the picture. “He was Bissinger’s cousin . . . Just as important he was a darling of Universal executives . . . Berg also had a big supporter in Jim Whittaker, the Imagine executive who’s overseen Lights in recent years” (D3).

Although there were some problems with casting throughout the making of the film, they were able to get a few big names such as Billy Bob Thornton and Tim McGraw to act in the film. Berg kept the integrity of the book and tried to stay away from sports movie cliques. The film was well received by audiences. Several media outlets, such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, gave the film average to above average ratings.

### **C. Development of the television series**

Starting in 2005, word spread that *Friday Night Lights* was going to become a weekly drama series. NBC U Television Studio would produce a pilot. The show was scheduled to begin in the fall of 2006.

The show started in the fall of 2006 as promised. It received praise from many media outlets. However, as the season progressed it became noticeable very quickly that the viewership was lower than anticipated. Some attributed the low viewership to the competition the show dealt with during its time slot. One season *Friday Night Lights* was up against the show *Dancing with the Stars*. Another season, the show had to compete against *American Idol*.

*Friday Night Lights* aired on NBC for two seasons. Then, in 2008, NBC Universal began to approach several different networks to run the show’s third season. In April of 2008, it was reported that NBC had announced a deal with DirectTV. Season

three ran on DirectTV, and then the reruns of the episodes replayed on NBC in January of 2009. In March of 2009, it was reported that DirectTV had picked up the show for two more seasons. The fifth and last season began airing in April of 2011.

#### **D. Future of *Friday Night Lights***

Currently, it has been rumored that a sequel film is in the works. In July of 2011, it was reported that Peter Berg was making efforts to put a second movie together. Supposedly, the film would pick up where the television series left off at the end of its fifth season. In August of 2011, Berg confirmed that the script was being written, and the movie was on track for development (Haithman). Then, in February 2012, it was reported that Berg confirmed that Jason Katims was done with the script. Berg told MTV news that “they plan to involve some real life elements pegged to former Texas Tech football coach Mike Leach but that things will revolve around Coach and Tami Taylor from the TV series” (Warner).

#### **E. Interest in *Friday Night Lights***

Being a fan of high school, college, and professional football, I have always enjoyed entertainment inspired by the sport – movies, shows, documentaries, etc. However, *Friday Night Lights* particularly dazzled me. I watched the film when it was released in 2004 and watched the *Friday Night Lights* television series when it first came out. I lost touch with the series some time after, possibly due to the change of the networks. It was not until recently, a few months ago, that I realized the show was still airing on television. I missed a big chunk of the series, and decided to order the show on Netflix to watch it from the beginning. It was no surprise that I was hooked easily, just as

I had been before. When I finished watching the fifth season, I was left wanting more and was not sure where to get it from. At that point I started to give thought to my interest in *Friday Night Lights*. I was interested in *Friday Night Lights* because I thought it was unique. So the real question came to be, “Why is *Friday Night Lights* unique?” Although there can be many answers to the question, one answer in particular that I discovered dealt with the handling and representation of race. As I thought more about it, I decided that I wanted to research the topic further.

## **F. Purpose**

This thesis will highlight the significance and representation of race in the film and television show *Friday Night Lights*. It is first noteworthy to give attention to the role race plays in both. Race is significant because it is interrelated to the topics of sports, family, and socioeconomics. Race plays the role of connector, because it is difficult to examine these topics of importance without allowing race to be examined as well. When analyzing these three topics one will find that *Friday Night Lights* also uses the racial stereotypes that the media often emphasizes regarding race in sports, family, and socioeconomics. Although commonalities exist regarding the portrayal of race, the film and television show are different because their treatment of race is reflective of the time periods for each. The core claim of my thesis will show that representation of race is different in the film as compared to the television show as a result of their varied settings, one historical (1980s) and the other contemporary (2000s). While both the film and the television show were produced in the 2000s, their use of two different historical periods allows for contrasting representations of race in spite of the fact that they both

draw from the same course material (*Friday Night Lights*, the book). The film's representation of race is reflective of its late 1980s setting. Therefore, due to historical setting, viewers of the film will see a more explicit handling of racial issues. During that time period it was socially acceptable to talk about issues of race straightforwardly, and directly. On the other hand, the television show's contemporary setting, by contrast, allows for the representation of race to be handled more suggestively, indirectly, and implicitly, reflecting new ways of thinking about race more prevalent of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **G. Thesis**

This thesis will first examine the literature that has been produced by researchers in the past regarding race, sports, family, and socioeconomics. Then, this study will examine how media outlets have discussed the film and television series, paying particular attention to what the media chose to discuss and ignore. Next, I will examine how the film was used as a medium to comment on themes from the book. Finally, the paper will examine how the television series used a realistic aesthetic in filming while providing an analysis of key scenes. This paper will highlight two main observations. The first observation is that race is significant in the film and television pilot because it is interrelated to key topics. The second observation shows that race is reflective of the historical settings of the film and television show.

## I. LITERATURE REVIEW

This thesis presents the idea that *Friday Night Lights* uses the racial stereotypes that the media often emphasizes regarding race in sports, family, and socioeconomics. In order to conduct a valid analysis of how these themes are addressed in the *Friday Night Lights* franchise, it is wise for a researcher to become familiar with scholarly information pertaining to the subjects. This literature review will describe research regarding representation in the media. For the sake of this thesis, media will refer to television, cinema, and print news. The research presented will discuss representation regarding five categories: sports and race, teens and family, and socioeconomic class. These topics are especially important to the foundation of this thesis, because the above mentioned categories will be discussed thoroughly, and from different vantage points throughout the entirety of this paper.

### **A. Media Representation of Sports and Race**

Research on sports and race in the media seemed to have two overarching themes. First, there is an abundance of information that pointed to the idea that the representation of sports in the media causes audiences to believe that upward social mobility is possible through hard work and talent. This theme is deserving of attention because often times sports is the platform that people use to study their own individual achievement. By way of sports, people are given the opportunity to think about the discrepancies of individual success in American society.

In the book, *Sport in Contemporary Society*, D. Stanley Eitzen, explains that there are numerous examples of poor boys that skyrocket to fortune due to their success in sports. One such example is Tracy McGrady. He was a high school basketball star who bypassed college to go to the NBA. He ended up signing a \$12 million endorsement for 6 years with Adidas. Women also believe in the myth that sports can offer social mobility. According to Eitzen as of today “women receive about 35 percent of the money allotted for college athletic scholarships” (Eitzen, 261). Women who normally would not be able to afford going to college now have opportunities through sports. The truth is, however, that mobility for women in professional sports is a different matter. Women do not have as many opportunities as men do for team sports. Yet, woman can find more opportunities in individual sports. However, many of these individual sports are expensive. They often require individual coaching and access to private facilities. Eitzen also mentions that although the truth about success in becoming a professional athlete can be discouraging, for many boys, especially African American ones, “sport represents their only hope of escape from a life of crime, poverty, and despair. They latch on to the dream of athletic success partly because of the few opportunities of middle-class success” (260). One such movie that illustrates this point is *Hoop Dreams*. This film documents “the emphasis that young African American men place on sports as a way up and their ultimate disappointments from sport” (260).

Another article that discusses this topic is entitled, *The Social Construction of an Athlete: African American Boy’s Experience in Sport*. In this article, writers Tonmar S. Johnson and Todd A. Migliaccio argue that although it is unlikely that a boy will become



a professional athlete, the media and African American community continue to encourage the idea that sports can have a profound impact on their identity. In the article, the writers point out that sport is often identified as a way out of poverty for many Blacks. One reason for this is due to the media's representation of sports. Often times, the media emphasizes the success of African American athletes. The media portrays African American athletes as positive role models for the community. Since television viewership is higher among African American youth, they are "especially influenced by television advertisements featuring black athletes" (Johnson and Migliaccio, 100). Therefore, the result is that Black boys conclude that "professional athletes are the predominant if not only success stories of African Americans" (100). Young boys continue to draw conclusions of this type as the media presents examples of athletes that have "escaped the inner city to be successful, regardless if very few actually come from the inner city" (100). Young Black boys are not the only ones who are affected by the media portrayal of Black successful athletes, but family and the community often support these beliefs as well. When the family structure and the community push an athletic identity on young Black boys, the boys often feel that their choices in the future are limited. The reality of the situation is that the chances of these boys reaching professional rank are limited. According to Johnson and Migliaccio, for White males, the chances of making it into a professional sport are 4 in 100,000, and for Black males it is 2 in 100,000.

A third article written that comments on the theme of social mobility through sports is entitled, *Social Mobility, Ethnicity and Sport*. In this article, Bruce Carrington

argues that a growing number of Afro-Caribbeans in Britain place a high value on success in sports, and they also see a career in sports as means for an upward movement in social mobility. He mentions that reasons for this stem from influences such as “parent culture, school, peer group and mass media” (Carrington, 3). He mentions that this is not just a problem in Britain, but in many countries with a young working class. Young Blacks, in particular, are encouraged to “make it” through sports, rather than through other occupations. Black males are more likely to think that sport is a “potential avenue of upward social mobility,” and predictions were made “that by 1990 half of the England football team” would be Black (4). Sports such as football often attract middle class youth because the costs are low, in terms of training and equipment. When speaking in regards to the media’s portrayal of sports, Carrington uses quotes from Melvin Oliver, an American social scientist. Carrington quotes Oliver by stating, “Blue collar and black children may be picking up the media messages which lead them to see sports as a viable occupational pursuit. These messages, combined with other media impacts which communicate to these children limited occupational pursuits open to people of ‘their kind’, can produce strong attitudes towards sport as a mobility route that withstand negative parental evaluation and limited athletic potential” (7). Carrington also explains research that shows that media tends to personalize sports to lead viewers to identify with athletes. Viewers then feel that they are able to share their hopes, fears, and achievements with the sporting hero, or the sporting personality. Carrington also shares the reality of the sporting hero’s future. According to him, many times, when the “playing days are over” professional athletes “move out of sport altogether, experience

downward social mobility, face financial hardship, and sink into oblivion” (5).

Carrington explains that Blacks also have the burden of dealing with discrimination, so when they try to enter back into the work force they have a more difficult time than their White counterparts.

A second theme that emerges from a review of the literature stressed the disparity in the way that Black and White athletes are represented. For example, the media often portrays White athletes as intelligent and hard workers. Meanwhile, Black athletes are portrayed as naturally athletic. This theme is especially important, because the media has the ability to influence the thinking of a wide range of audiences. If the media continues to elaborate on ideas that Black and White athletes are not equal, it will only continue to perpetuate the racial bias in the sports world.

One researcher who wrote on this theme is Toni Bruce. In the article, *Marking the Boundaries of the 'Normal' in Televised Sports: The Play-by-Play of Race*, Bruce makes the argument that beliefs regarding racial differences can reveal themselves in subtle ways such as the commentary during sports programming. According to Bruce, sport commentators in North America often express that male White players are leaders and hard workers; however, they do not make these same references when speaking about male Black players. A situation that happened with Arthur Ashe, is one example of this. Ashe, a professional tennis player and later commentator for ABC sports, was “told by national network executives that we should stop attributing black athletes to brawn and white athletes’ success to brains and hard work” (Bruce, 872). One way that Bruce explains her argument is by way of patterns in naming. For example, in Bruce’s research,

she found that White men were often referred to in more “respectful forms of last name only and black men were often referred to by the least respectful forms of first name only” (866). Bruce does make the argument that there are several reasons that this could occur. One reason could simply be that personal experience influences naming choices. Another reason is that plays in sports often happen quickly, and the speed of the game impacts the commentator’s ability to monitor their patterns of speech. The commentators who were interviewed in Bruce’s research showed that many of them were unconscious of the ideologies present in their speech. However, many of these same commentators admitted that racial stereotypes often occur in the speech of other commentators. A third reason that racially differential speech may occur is that commentators are not prepared, and while under pressure they are “more likely to draw upon the culture’s stock of stereotypes to categorize athletes than those who are familiar with histories, playing styles and personalities of the athletes that they are covering” (874).

Another researcher who spoke about the differences in language used by the media regarding Black and White athletes is Andrew Billings. In Andrew Billings’ article, *Portraying Tiger Woods: Characterizations of a “Black” Athlete in a “White Sport*, he argues that when Tiger Woods was winning games he was not portrayed as Black, and when he was losing games, “he was more likely to be characterized using traditional stereotypes of Black athletes” (Billings, 29). To introduce his argument, Billings related previous research that stated that when past commentary in sports had been analyzed, many racial stereotypes had been described. For instance, one finding showed that White athletes are often measured by way of intelligence and work ethic.

They are usually identified as born leaders. On the other hand, Black athletes are often described as born athletes, and their athleticism is presumed. One example that proved these ideas is that of an analysis done on the 2000 Sydney Summer Olympics. Here, researchers found that “White athletes were portrayed as succeeding because of commitment, whereas Black athletes succeeded because of innate athletic skills” (31). To prove his theory, Billings analyzed the depictions of Tiger Woods in four golf tournaments during the 2001 PGA season. His results lead to three major findings. First, Billings found that commentators expressed that Tiger Woods was more likely to have success due to his experience, while other golfers’ success was attributed to their perceived athletic skill. Secondly, Tiger Woods had a higher percentage of comments than other golfers regarding his lack of concentration, his lack of composure, and his emotional control. Finally, Billings’ third finding was that “there were significantly more comments about Woods’ composure and less comments about his size/parts of body” (34). Although some of Billings’ findings do point to past research regarding ethnic stereotypes, there were findings that seemed to contradict the same research. All in all, Billings’ study indicated that commentary about Tiger Woods showed stereotypes of both Black and White athletes. When Woods was successful, he was characterized using White stereotypes, and when he was losing, he was characterized using Black stereotypes.

A third article that commented on the depictions of Black and White athletes was written by J.R. Woodward. In his article, *Professional Football Scouts: An Investigation of Racial Stacking*, he argues that even when scouting football players on the college

level, “African American players are more likely to be described in physical terms (rather than mental terms) than are White players” (Woodward, 356). In the article, Woodward defines stacking as “the over- or underrepresentation of players of certain races in particular positions in team sports” (357). Based on previous research, it was found that in the sports of football and baseball, White players are more likely to hold central positions. This factor may be the reason why many Black athletes often self select themselves into peripheral positions. Young Black athletes often see their role models in the media in peripheral positions, which is influential when they are deciding on a sport to play, or a position to play within a sport. For example, a young Black athlete may see that his chances of playing quarterback in college are slim, so he may put his talents to use in a position that he sees many other Black athletes having success in – wide receiver, defensive back, or even tailback. As a result, Black athletes are more likely to be excluded from positions that have a direct impact on the game – positions such as baseball pitchers, quarterbacks, or place-kickers. Research on stacking has also noted that NFL scouts are more likely to describe Black athletes in “positive terms for their physical and athletic ability” than Whites. On the other hand, Black athletes “are less likely to be described with confidence in terms of their perceived mental or intellectual abilities than Whites” (360).

This thesis will add valuable discussion to the exchange that has already taken place in regards to representation of Black and White athletes. The ideas examined in this thesis will explain how *Friday Night Lights* sends a message regards sports, race, and the notion of upward mobility. The discussion that has already begun about this topic

usually looks at the rhetoric and representation used in live television. However, this study's addition to the conversation will take the vantage point of entertainment and fiction. *Friday Night Lights*, in terms of the film and the television show, are simply stories inspired by the events of real life. Therefore, *Friday Night Lights* has had the unique ability to speak boldly about issues due to its creators. The scenes, events, and characters highlighted throughout this thesis are fictional, invented, and fabricated. Their creators had the opportunity to decide how they wanted their scenes, events, and characters depicted and represented. This gives a unique vantage, because those involved in *Friday Night Lights* had the convenience of choosing to continue stereotypical representations in their works, or to ignore them and create something new.

## **B. Media Representation of Family and Teens**

The *Encyclopedia of Children, Adolescents, and the Media*, gives a general history of the portrayal of the family in the media. This entry in the encyclopedia shows that the media does not always portray the realities of family life accurately. The writers, Jennings Bryant and J. Alison Bryant, begin their history on the family in the media by first discussing that past Presidents have addressed concern about the way the family is depicted in television. They give the example of George H. W. Bush, who advised American families to be less like the Simpsons and more like the Waltons. The writers point out this example to prove that even politicians are concerned that families on television are presented much differently than they are in actual life. They express interest in the theory that "consumption of television fare in which families are depicted as engaging in antisocial behavior could create distorted perceptions of family life among

developmentally immature viewers and could even affect children's behavior in the family environment" (Bryant and Bryant). They begin their analysis by explaining that early television families depicted families of all types and were presented on primetime television as well as soap operas. In terms of social class, although all classes were represented, usually families were middle class. In terms of composition and configuration, on television families that have children have become increasingly prominent; however, this does not reflect the realities of society today. In fact, the typical household today is made of a single person with no children. Another disparity that the media portrays happens in regards to the "so-called empty nest family." The empty nest family, where children have grown up and moved away from home, has become quite common; however, "empty nesters represent less than 1% of television's families" (Bryant and Bryant). The media also misrepresents the idea of the single parent family. In reality, it is rare to find single-parent families headed by fathers; however, the media depicts father headed single parent families 17% to 25% of the time. When the media portrays minority families – African American, Latina/o, Asian American, and Native American, often times, these families are represented with stereotypical views.

Another article that discusses the portrayal of the family in the media is entitled, *The Public and Private Dialogue About the American Family on Television*. In this article, writer Kelly Fudge Albada discusses parents and children's responses to family portrayals. Leading up to her research findings, she presents research related to her study. First she explains that the media often provides viewers with many different family models to choose from. For example, the divorced couple did not appear on



television until the 1970s. However, in 1994, 32% of television characters were divorced. The various family models that are apparent in media form have led to varying opinions regarding how the media portrays the traditional nuclear family. Some feel that the traditional nuclear family is mocked in television formats. Others claim that “television endorses the non-conventional lifestyle of the non-intact family by portraying its positive aspects and ignoring its negative aspects” (Albada). Another opinion that she supports is the idea that family roles are still being stereotyped. For example, the in 1970s and 1980s married women were portrayed as not having a life outside of concerns for their family, working women often had problems with personal relationships, and mothers were seen as passive and expressive. In comparison, men were characterized as capable of balancing work and home, authoritative parents, and concerned with matters outside of the home. During the 1990s, the study was revisited, and although more women were depicted as working women, many of the stereotypes seen in decades before were still apparent. These stereotypes do have effects on viewers. For instance, children with high viewing habits usually held more traditional ideas of gender roles. One study in 1989 even found that “heavy television viewers scored higher on a ‘sexism scale.’”

The *Encyclopedia of Children, Adolescents, and the Media*, also gives a general history of the portrayal of the teens in the media. In an entry written by Timothy Shary entitled *Movie Portrayals of Adolescents*, he reviews the roles of adolescents from the early 1900s to the early 2000s. Shary talks about the portrayal of teens in chronological order. He explains that in the first few decades of cinema, “films largely showcased that plucky nature of youth, avoiding such realistic yet controversial teen topics such as sex,

alcohol and drug use, and crime” (Shary). However, after World War II, Hollywood began to address serious issues that youth faced. During the 1950s, film began “showcasing youth trying to discover themselves and declare their identity within the prosperous torments of the postwar world” (Shary). Beach movies later became popular, and soon after the adolescent horror genre took shape. In the early 1960s, Hollywood began to address problems of teen pregnancy and sexual repression. In the 1970s, more mature topics began to abound. Teen films addressed loss of virginity, homosexuality, pregnancy, abortion, religion, and class. In the 1980s, teen horror films re-emerged, and “films about adolescents using science also became popular for a short time” (Shary). During the 1980s, several notable factors occurred. First, the sex comedy became popular. This was especially interesting because “it depicted active adolescents in a reactionary mode that countered the Reagan era’s moral conservatism” (Shary). A second notable factor was that films “came to represent the classic white, middle-class experience of youth during the decade” (Shary). A third notable factor was that movies began to gain “popularity through home video rather than at the box office.” In the early 1990s, the film industry again became involved in social issues. Many films of this time dealt with “young African American characters fight for their lives in crime-ridden urban milieus” (Shary). In the late 90s, film returned to some of its 80s topics such as sexual orientation and gender oppression. Finally, in the early 2000s, film continues to tackle other important issues that teens face such as family conflict, homophobia, pedophilia, mental illness, and drug abuse.

Lesley Speed is another writer who discusses teens and the media. In her article entitled, *Tuesday's The Nostalgic Teen Film*. She explains that teen films often embrace the themes of rebellion and anti-authoritarianism, but they do so from an adult perspective. Teen films show the stress that goes on between youth and adulthood. Rites-of-passage teen films show “the protagonist’s experience of a trauma as the catalyst for his or her development” (Speed, 25). The development usually leads to the teen gaining greater understanding of past events. Rite-of-passage films have received positive reception from critics. This may be due to the fact that critics may feel sentimentality from the events. Although it is unknown if these films are intended to appeal to adults, the fact is the responses of adults usually reflect the emotional appeal of the films. For teen films, very little importance is granted to historical detail. In order to look back on the past, the several narrative devices may be employed to do this. These devices can be the nostalgic voice-over in first person narrative or the final cataloguing of characters’ achievements. Speed also explains that film spectatorship must be addressed when speaking about the teen film. She uses quotes from Vicky Lebeau’s book, *Lost Angels*, to explain that female spectatorship is low for teen films. Female spectators are often demanding, and do not identify with the often male protagonist.

This research is important to the foundation of this thesis, because family and youth are central to *Friday Night Lights* in several different ways. First of all, much of the marketing for *Friday Night Lights* was geared towards attracting teens and family viewers. Second, a lot of the conflict in the film and series deals with the issues of family

and teen drama. Finally, family and youth are central to *Friday Night Lights* because those concepts are what make the film and series relatable to audiences.

### **C. Media Representation of the Poor and Wealthy**

Many writers support the idea that the media often misrepresents the poor. One such article that explains this idea is entitled, *Poverty as We Know It: Media Portrayals of the Poor*. In this article, writers Rosalee A. Clawson and Rakuya Trice analyze how the poor were portrayed during Clinton's reform on poverty and welfare. In one study they found that "poverty was disproportionately portrayed as a 'black' problem" (Clawson and Trice, 54). Media images would lead audiences to "to believe that two out of three poor people are black" (54). However, when the media needed to create sympathy for the poor, Blacks were absent from the media coverage. Also, American citizens often feel that the poor have undesirable traits such as a lack of effort or drunkenness. A majority also feel that "most of people who receive welfare benefits are taking advantage of the system" (54). Studies have also shown that the media describes the poor in behavioral terms such as "criminals, alcoholics, and drug addicts" (54). The *Washington Post* even did a series that showed that the media "perpetuates stereotypes of the poor as lazy, sexually irresponsible, and criminally deviant" (54). The findings of the study done by Clawson and Rakuya showed that magazine images "often portrayed an inaccurate picture of the demographic characteristics of poor people" (61). The images showed that Black, urban, and nonworking people were overrepresented. Blacks were featured in unpopular poverty topics, and Black women were depicted with the most

amounts of children. However, the media was “most accurate in mirroring the predominance of women among welfare recipients” (61).

A second resource that discusses the media’s representation of the poor and wealthy is a book entitled, *Framing Class: Media Representations of Wealth and Poverty in America*, written by Diana Kendall. In the academic journal, *Social Forces*, book reviewer Stephanie Moller, from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, summarizes the book nicely. Moller explains that Kendall’s argument is that “the media constructs reality and this construction determines the meaning of class” (Moller, 1347). To examine this, Kendall analyzes newspaper articles and television programs. In Kendall’s book, she explains that although the media does not explicitly discuss class, the media’s portrayals of class can influence audiences. One example of this occurs when the wealthy get in trouble, they are often depicted as criminals with good lives. On the other hand, the poor are often ignored in terms of the media. Members of society who are on welfare, or are homeless are “depicted as violating middle-class values” (1347). Children, the elderly, and the ill are usually given sympathy when issues are surrounding them. The working class is often mislabeled as being part of the middle class, and this concept is reinforced, because many working class members identify themselves as middle class. Moller praises Kendall’s book for considering “the entire class structure rather than segments of the class distribution, and it considers class-based framers over more than a century” (1348).

A third resource that discusses the representation of class in the media is a book entitled, *Battleground: The Media*. In the section entitled, *Representations of Class*, the

writers explain that the media often ignores the inequalities in classes. Often time's people believe that "anyone can rise above their socioeconomic origins if they just work hard enough" (Perlman, 441). Most characters on television are well educated professions. There is an abundance of media representation for people who are doctors, lawyers, and business executives. However, according to social critic Barbara Ehrenreich, "about 70 percent of people in United States can be considered working class, in that they perform monotonous forms of manual and service work, labor for wages instead of salaries, and often do not have college degrees" (441). The book points out that many media scholars have presented research that shows when the media does depict working class people they are "shown to be pursuing the American dream of upward mobility" (441). One example to support these statements is in the case of television. In the 1940s and 1950s, it was popular to broadcast "urban, ethnic, working class family sitcoms" (442). As time went, sponsors began to prefer "stories about well-to-do suburban families" (442). Soon, many of the previously popular shows were cancelled or "modified to meet the promotional demands of the consumer economy" (442). Characters that are poor or considered working class are sometimes "slotted into one-dimensional roles such as criminals or servant/helper" (443). These characters are often brought in for laughs. Just as the media misrepresents the poor or working class, the super rich are characterized as "dysfunctional, greedy, and out of control" (444). The movie *Wall Street*, and shows such as *The Simple Life* and *My Super Sweet Sixteen* can serve as examples of this fact.

This thesis will offer a unique view point to the above discussion. The media often gives focus to upper class characters. *Friday Night Lights*, on the other hand, represents a unique look at working class life. Many of the characters and stories depicted give insight into lower and middle class society. Even more specifically, it offers thought into how these classes exist in a rural setting. Although there are some upper class situations depicted, the majority of scenes highlight working class life.

#### **D. Summary**

Researching scholarly information provided several concepts to keep in mind while analyzing *Friday Night Lights*. Initially, it is important to remember that audiences will think highly of sports related media, because it gives them a chance to dream, and often athletes of different races are not always looked at on an even playing field. Second, the media gives examples of several different family structures, and stereotypes are still being depicted in regards to the roles of family members. Also, with teens comprising one of the biggest audiences for media markets, it is important to examine what they are interested in to gauge the success of a media outlet. Finally, the media often misrepresents the images of the poor and wealthy. These misrepresentations can lead audiences to believe that certain groups, such as Black women, disproportionately make up large amounts of the poor, and on the other hand, audiences may be lead to believe that it is easy to rise from their socioeconomic origins.

The research presented showed that it is impossible to analyze *Friday Night Lights* from a perspective of race, without allowing issues such as socioeconomic status, or athletes in sports to be part of the conversation. *Friday Night Lights* addresses several

different themes that are often interrelated, in creative ways. However, by looking at the all of the issues at hand, it gives researchers the ability to take all topics into consideration. If a researcher is knowledgeable regarding how several interrelated topics are associated, the researcher is able to keep an open mind about the issues at hand, and think creatively as to questions that are brought up. The goal of this literature review was not only to organize pertinent information that relates to the topic, but also to justify the reasoning for investigation into the thesis.



## II. CHAPTER ONE - MEDIA RESPONSE TO *FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS*

This chapter will highlight what topics mainstream media outlets focused on in regards to the film and the show and what aspects were overlooked. This chapter will show how the topics of sports, family, and socioeconomics are all interrelated by the theme of race. Sometimes, the media's discourse was meant to focus on one topic, however, issues of race were often interwoven into the media's response as well. This information will then lead to chapter two, where the purpose is to reflect on the film's interpretation of Bissinger's novel *Friday Night Lights*. In the film, race is connected to key topics and is discussed explicitly. By analyzing scenes, we will be able to interpret what Berg was "trying to say" through his use of creative license to reveal his message about the themes. Finally, in chapter three the pilot episode of the television series *Friday Night Light* will be examined as well as how Berg uses the characters, plot, and various cinematic elements to create a show that comments on race implicitly.

### **A. Discourse regarding the film**

In examining what the media had to say about the film *Friday Night Lights*, an emphasis was put forth to look for articles produced by reputable media outlets such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. Although most of the time put forth in researching was used for these two major outlets, smaller media outlets were not overlooked either.

## *Race*

One common theme that many of the outlets spoke about dealt with the issue of race. In Bissinger's novel, he spent a lot of time developing the idea that Odessa had a great deal of racism still present in the town. Even before the film was released, it was a topic that people expected to be present in the film. One article that commented on this was from *The Associated Press*. It was entitled, "Odessans hope movie, *Friday Night Lights*, won't be like book." The writer, Betsy Blaney, was able to interview the real James "Boobie" Miles. He mentioned that although the book's depiction of racism was realistic, the town had changed. He says, "At that point in town that's the way it was. Since then, this town has changed a lot because you live and learn. You hear what I'm saying? I'm talking everyone. Black, Hispanics, Whites" (Blaney ,E14). It is noteworthy that Blaney was able to get the statement straight from a reliable source. Not only was the source reliable, but since Boobie was Black himself, he most likely experienced the racism of the town firsthand. This gives credibility to the concept that racism was an issue, and by having Boobie address this personally in the article, it gives further attention to the topic of racism. Readers of this article and others like it would most likely keep the issues of racism in mind and therefore expect to see issues of race as a major topic while watching the film.

In 2004, *The New York Times* published an article that also gave evidence of emphasizing racial themes. However, this article hinted at the racial themes, rather than directly highlighting them. In the article, writer Barbara Novovitch explained that many people living in Odessa were upset about how Bissinger's book portrayed them. When it

came out that a film was in the works, director Peter Berg promised that he would give a “softer, gentler’ portrayal of Odessa, focusing on football rather than sociology” (Novovitch , A4). As Novovitch continues the article, she explains that the movie would focus on four main players. However, when she described them she uses the character’s race to construct an image for the readers:

James Miles (played by Derek Luke), the black running back known as Boobie who dreamed of a professional football career but quit the team after knee surgery; Mike Winchell (Lucas Black), the insecure white quarterback haunted by the death of his father; Brian Chavez (Jay Hernandez), the Mexican-American tight end who went from Odessa to Harvard; and Don Billingsley (Garrett Hedlund), the brash, hard-drinking white tailback who could not live up to his father's football exploits. (A4)

By highlighting the race of the four major characters with their descriptions, it only gives more emphasis to the fact that race was an issue, although she does not say so straightforwardly. In fact, right before she gives the descriptions of the players, she quotes a local businessman who claimed that Odessa was more sophisticated and more of an egalitarian. This statement placed right before the descriptions of the boys will make readers think about what would cause people to be treated *unequally*. Therefore, when they read about the boys’ race, that factor is further highlighted. This again is an example of how media outlets focused on the racial issues of the film.

A third example of an article that exposes the racial theme in the film is found in *The Globe and Mail*. Writer Rick Groen gives a review of the movie and explains that the film explores several “twisted” sociologies. He tells of one such example from the film, “For example, a dinner-party scene has a white matron turning to the coach and offering her thoughts on a winning strategy: ‘Play Boobie both ways. That big nigger

ain't gonna break" (R16). Groen's point in using this example was to explain how Berg addressed key themes from the book. Groen called the theme of racism "disturbing," but explained that it was an example of how racism had integrated into the society of that time. Although Groen addressed that there are other perturbing themes in the film, the issue of racism is the only one what that he chose to relate in such detail. By choosing to highlight this scene and explain it in detail, readers who have not seen the movie would receive double exposure to it when they did see the film. By reading about the scene beforehand, and then seeing it when they watch the film, it will only reinforce the idea of the importance of race relations in the movie. This is yet another example of how media outlets highlighted the matter of racism in the film.

While reading many of the media's responses regarding the film *Friday Night Lights*, there were numerous references to the theme of race in the film. This proves that even the media saw the significance of race in the film. Issues of race had to be highlighted because in order for the film to reflect the historical setting appropriately, race needed to be addressed straightforwardly.

#### *Community involvement due to economy*

A second common topic that was brought up in the media outlets' responses to the film *Friday Night Lights*, was the idea that the community was excessively passionate about the local football team. However, this passion had an origin. It was due to the fact that the local high school football team was their only avenue for hope in the area. Due to the struggling economy, Odessans were downtrodden and discouraged. Their future

seemed bleak and hopeless. But, the football team was the catalyst to keep them believing in something greater.

One such example of an article that touched on the joint interrelated concepts of economy and the community's passion for the game was published in the *St. Petersburg Times* in Florida, by writer Steve Persall. The article was written as a movie review for audiences. Persall explained that the film was outlined similarly to Bissinger's novel. He explained:

Odessa is like a lot of Texas towns, especially during tough economic times. The town is practically ghostly, filmed in dusty, desaturated colors that brighten when attention is turned to the only green oasis around, Ratliff Stadium where the Permian High School Panthers play football. Adults with nothing more exciting in their lives depend on the team for hope and identity. It's a heavy burden for high shoulders (6W).

It is notable that Persall mentioned the community's passion and the struggling economy as interrelated topics. This statement supports the concept that due to the bad economy, the people of Odessa viewed football as a beacon of hope. Based on this reasoning, it can be inferred that if the economy was better, the people of Odessa may not have been as interested in the Permian football team. Possibly, the families would have found other hobbies and activities to occupy their time and interests. It is also interesting to note that Persall mentions this parallel relationship in the beginning of his article. Just like Berg, who sets up the beginning scenes of the film to reflect the desolate town of Odessa, Persall sets up the desolation at the beginning of his article. This parallel structure in setting the scene for readers only reinforces the desolate scene for readers who will view, or may have already viewed the film.

Another such article that highlights the connection between the economy and the community's passion for the game is found in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. Steve Rea, movie critic, wrote an article entitled, "Where football is more than a game." The article is written as a movie review, therefore, its audience would be the average American citizen who is looking for information in regards to what movie to watch on the weekend. In the very first sentence, Rea describes Odessa as "an unpretty swath of mini-malls, trailer parks, and modest homes ringed by flat, scrubby desert" (Rea, W04). No doubt putting this sentence in the first line of the article is meant to create an image of a bleak town in a reader's mind. In the very next paragraph, he explains that the film "examines the ferocious subculture of high school athletics, and how a whole community is measured, and measures itself, on the performance of its beloved team of gridiron teens" (W04). By having this concept cited so early in the article, simply the second paragraph, this is a notable bridge between the two ideas that the desolate economy and the community are related. The language that he uses in the latter quote is worthy of attention. By describing the passion of the community as "ferocious" it implies that a barbaric and ruthless mindset is visible in the town. Rea elaborates on the town's commitment to the team by connecting the local businesses importance to the film. According to Rea, the film showed how businesses in the area would close when games were in play. Therefore, readers can infer that football was so important in the area that business owners knew to close down because no one would be shopping during game time. This idea suggests that it was more profitable to close during game time than stay open. Rea mentions the community's passion a third time when he describes how the

“town’s movers and shakers” suggest to Coach Gaines that he will no longer have a job, if he does not win the state championship. The “movers and shakers” that are spoken of refer to the wealthier members of town, many of whom are boosters for the football team. In the film it was meant to be an impactful scene to have the affluent members of the town approach Coach Gaines about his job. It was meant to imply that not only did football determine his employability, but people who were simply rich did. Rea’s article highlighted the relation between the economy and the community’s passion for the game three times to emphasize the importance of this theme in the film.

A final media outlet that also embodies the concept of the interrelationship between the desolate economy of Odessa and the community’s passion for the team is found in a movie review published on *Entertainment Weekly’s* website. The review, written by writer Lisa Schwarzbaum, directly gives Schwarzbaum’s opinion of the film, unlike some movie reviews that plainly give a synopsis of the movie. Like Rea, Schwarzbaum’s opening line addresses the passion of the community. She describes Odessa as “a stale West Texas town whose population sucks the breath of life from the success of its high school football team” (Schwarzbaum). By Schwarzbaum setting this scene from the opening line, just like Rea’s article, it is meant to create an image in the reader’s mind. By using the phrase, “sucks the breath of life” in her description, readers can imagine a type of parasitic community that exists only by taking from another – the football team. She explains that film is based on Bissinger’s book, and the story of the 1988 Permian Panthers includes “racial and class conflict, desperation and community resolve, dead-endedness and opportunity” (Schwarzbaum). Again, Schwarzbaum’s

language, using words and phrases such as “class conflict,” “desperation,” and “dead-endedness,” sets the tone for viewers to feel sympathy for the expected type of forlorn town that they will encounter when they watch the movie. Schwarbaum’s use of language to depict the town of Odessa bolsters an image in the reader’s mind of the interrelationship between the hurting Odessa economy, and the passion that the community has for the team.

This section of the discourse regarding the film highlights the fact that media outlets noted not just the concept of race, but also caught on to the recurring theme of the interrelationship between the desolate economy and the passion the community felt for the football team. In such a struggling economy, the people of Odessa had no hope. They looked all around them and saw a bleak town out in the middle of nowhere. All around, people were struggling to make ends meet and saw no opportunity for advancement. However, the football program was the only place that the town had success. It was the only activity that allowed them to keep dreaming. Football served as a beacon of hope for them. Their pride and passion kept them going despite the desperation all around them. By the media outlets frequently discussing this topic, it shows this was a major theme, not just a minor one.

#### *The importance of family*

In the literature review the representation of family was discussed. It was concluded that often times the media does not portray the image of the family accurately. In chapter two of this paper, discussion regarding how the family portrayed in the film *Friday Night Lights* will be addressed. The film highlighted the concept that there are



many varieties of family, beyond the traditional American structure. Media outlets as well gave attention to these varied family structures.

One such article that highlighted the nontraditional family represented in the film is found in *The Gazette*, in Montreal. The article, written by Jay Stone, gives an overview of the film. The article argues that the town of Odessa is obsessed with football and uses the examples of Mike Winchell and Don Billingsley's nontraditional families to emphasize the argument. Stone notes that from the beginning of the film it is obvious that Mike's mom is sick, perhaps even mentally ill, but she is just as dedicated as anyone else in the town to supporting the football program. Stone even points out that "the film opens with Mrs. Winchell drilling Mike on his formation plays" (Stone, D1). Stone does admit that the story of Mrs. Winchell is not a major premise for the plot; however, it is a major indication of the type of commitment the town has to the game. He then transitions to talk about the Don Billingsley. Stone explains, "Don has two problems: He fumbles a lot, and his father is an intrusive, abusive drunk, a former football star who alternately belittles and berates the boy. It's a riveting performance by county singer Tim McGraw, who stands for all the football (and hockey and soccer) parents who are not as much living their own lives through their children as ruining them that way" (D1). Stone mentions this example to highlight that often times parents live vicariously through their children, especially in the area of sports. However, by mentioning Don's situation with his father at all, it brings attention to the single parent family situation in the film that is also shared by Mike Winchell. Additionally, when Stone mentioned that celebrity Tim McGraw plays Don's dad, reader's who are fans of the county star will again have their

interest peaked to pay particular attention to scenes with Don and his father. Although this article does not claim that the nontraditional family is the most important part of the film, it does use family to highlight other aspects of the film.

Another such article that references the nontraditional family unit is found in the *Daily Variety*. In the article, writer Todd McCarthy gives a brief overview of the film and highlights a few key elements. Closer to the end of the article, he mentions two family structures – that of Don and his father, as well as Boobie and his uncle. First, McCarthy describes the melancholy relationship between Don and his dad Charles. McCarthy does not attribute the strained relationship to Charles’ drunkenness, but he does point it out to address that there is an obvious problem in their relationship. He also explains that Charles, like many others in the community, has embraced the “win-at-all-costs” attitude. Just as in Stone’s article, McCarthy so too highlights Charles’ intensity in his son’s participation on the football team. He explains, “One of the many Odessa fathers who wear rings stemming from the team’s previous four state championships, Charles lords this over his son every day and doesn’t hesitate to charge onto the practice field to chew out his boy whenever he drops the ball” (McCarthy, 4). This quote helps to emphasize how Charles’ tries to relive his playing days through his son, has high expectations of him, and no doubt this stress causes a strain on their relationship. McCarthy’s article is one of the few that addresses the relationship between Boobie and his uncle. McCarthy transitions into mentioning this by acknowledging that the acting by Don and Charles’ characters to show the strained father-son relationship is well done. Then explains that although the scenes with Boobie and his uncle are not as dramatized

as the Don and Charles relationship, the actor, Grover Coulson who plays L.V., does just as good a job playing out the father-son relationship despite his limited moments in the film. McCarthy's mentioning of Boobie's relationship with his uncle gives an honest testimony to McCarthy's straightforwardness in writing. There were very few articles that spoke about the relationship between Boobie and L.V. It may be due to the star power in the Don and Charles relationship, by directors choosing to use a household name for Charles' character. However, the truth of the matter is, Boobie and L.V. are a prime example of a nontraditional family structure. It is also possible that the two did not get the recognition of being a "family" due to how different their family was. Most people think of even the most nontraditional family as at least having a mother or father in the picture. Although L.V. was a father figure to Boobie, in reality he was still only his uncle. Either way, this article highlights the importance of family in the film. Once again, race is interwoven into this concept. Although both Don and Boobie have nontraditional families, Boobie's is even more uncommon.

#### *Unmentioned topics*

One of the more notable topics that was not mentioned by the media has to do with teen drama. Throughout the film, there were notable scenes that dealt with the challenges of teen life that the media outlets did not mention. For example, in the beginning of the film there is a house party that many of the football players attended. At the party there were many different situations happening with each of players. One aspect of the party focused on Mike Winchell having sex with a girl in the bathroom in order to prove that he is not gay. Another situation involved Chris Comer trying to

explain to his girlfriend that he did not get more playing time since Boobie was a better player. After the party, there is another scene where Don brings a girl home, and his drunken father finds the two of them on the couch only half-clothed. Later on the film, there is a scene involving a few of the players discussing what they are going to do after graduation. The fact is, although the boys struggle with the pressure of dealing with the community's expectations for the football team, the boys are also dealing with the pressures of adolescence. Many of the media outlets only focus on how the boys' dealt with the community's pressure. Little time was spent discussing how the boys dealt with simply growing up and transitioning to the next phase of their lives. I think that many people who watch the film and read the articles will miss the importance of the film possibly being considered a "coming of age" film. Most people may simply interpret it as a film that reflects on a community's values and their passion in supporting their local high school football team.

## **B. Discourse regarding the television series**

### *Teen issues*

Although the discourse surrounding the film barely addressed teen issues, the discourse about the television show did more than its fair share highlighting the issues that teens deal with. In one such article entitled, "*Friday Night Lights* takes on taboos," writer Alex Strachan addresses an episode, "I can't," of *Friday Night Lights* that involved the abortion debate. In the episode, a 16-year-old girl, Becky Sproles, ponders what to do when faced with an unwanted pregnancy. The episode was an especially interesting one, because as Strachan explains, "In some mainstream TV dramas, a character faced with an

unwanted pregnancy often lets other people, particularly men, decide for her, and chooses against it in the end” (Strachan). However, in this episode, Becky decides to go ahead and choose to abort the fetus. The article compares the blunt honesty of how the situation was dealt with on the show, to that of ABC Family’s hit show *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*. On the ABC show, producers went out of their way to avoid controversy. However, the “I can’t” episode is described as “raw, plain-spoken honesty.” Not only was the show delving into the deeper challenges that teens face, but it was also addressing social issues – “the debate between an unborn fetus’ right to life and a woman’s right to choose.” The article even quotes a fan’s online posting as saying that the show was “a brilliant episode with the guts to go where no other shows will.” This episode highlights the uniqueness of the show. Not only are the writers willing to address sensitive topics, but they are willing to approach everyday situations in an authentic and genuine manner.

A second article that refers to the challenges of teenagers in the show was published in the *Daily News*. In an article written by David Hinckley entitled, “‘Lights’ an Inspiring Beacon of Teen’s Struggle,” he describes how Jason Street was portrayed as a paraplegic and still had to deal with the struggles many teens face. For example, he compares how Street started off as the star quarterback, had Notre Dame pursuing him, and how he was dating the prettiest girl in town. However, after his accident things are very different. According to Hinckley, “He’s a kid who spends a lot of time alone, getting dressed and watching other people do what he used to do – yet at the same time pushing obsessively to find out how much he still can do” (Hinckley, 66). Then on top of

his physical limitations he has problems with his best friend and girl friend. The two, Tim and Lyla, take Street out for a bonfire at the beach. When they drop him off at the hospital, he glances out the window to watch them leave. He then realizes “since his accident, they’d fallen into each other arms” (66). But according Hinckley, they are not the bad guys, “It’s a bad situation without bad guys, just kids who followed the wrong instinct, like all of us do at some point in high school” (66). Hinckley praises Berg’s portrayal of Street and his handicap. Hinckley explains that Street and physically disabled characters in such shows as “Facts of Life,” *Malcolm in the Middle*,” and “Birds of Prey” have always been treated with respect. However, Berg not only approaches the subject with respect, but he pokes deeply into Jason’s character. As Hinckley tells it, he “created a character who lingers after the show ends” (66).

A third article that speaks to the importance of the teen presence in the show is found in *The Observer*. Writer Sarah Hughes first gives her opinion of all the great things about *Friday Night Lights*. She gives examples such as “the relationship between the coach and his wife, the way in which this town’s racial tensions are addressed without turning the programme into a series of ‘very special episodes’, [and] the attention paid to each character” (Hughes, 16). However, she claims that the best thing about the show is the way that the teenagers speak. She explains that television has been inundated with smart-mouthed teenagers. However, on the show, the “teenagers are refreshingly inarticulate in exactly the way you imagine high school football-players in smalltown Texas are” (16). Hughes explains that this added bonus is particularly refreshing because it adds “yet another layer of realism to an already realistic show” (16). It is noteworthy

that Hughes uses the speech of the teenagers to explain that the show has a level of realism. Many of the other articles that spoke about the show being realistic used elements of filming to illustrate this. Hughes article is particularly interesting because even though her main focus was the topic of teenagers, once again the issue of the town's racial tensions are mentioned as well.

### *Religion*

One aspect that the media repeatedly mentions has to do with the small town's dedication to staying religious. In fact, one of the reasons that the episode dealing with abortion was particularly controversial was due to heavy religious ties that people from rural Texas are known for. One such article that touches on the idea of faith in the television series was published in the magazine, *The Daily Variety*. In the article, *Friday Night Lights* is described as "perhaps more organically religious than anything else in primetime." This phrase helps to relate that often times on prime time television the religion is not often addressed. Later on, the article reiterates this idea by saying, "The town's abiding religious faith, meanwhile, is casually incorporated into the narrative, from pre-game prayers to Sunday service – a trait that by itself distinguishes the series from most of television" (Lowry, 6). By making this statement, Lowry now suggests that using the element of religion in a show is what makes *Friday Night Lights* unique. In the article, Lowry addresses religion again by making the statement, "*Friday Night Lights* ultimately feels like one of those family programs middle America and conservatives pine for that too few of actually bother to watch – a portrait of decent, God-fearing folks wringing joy from America's game as an escape from their hardscrabble lives" (6). This

statement implies that people who like the show are good people. They are middle class, conservative, decent, religious, and hardworking – characteristics that most Americans would not find to be offensive. This statement seems to suggest to readers, “If you are a good American, then you should watch the show.”

Another article that hints at the religious themes in the show appeared in *The New York Times*. Writer Virginia Heffernan does not address religion directly. However, she uses language to hint at religious references. For example, as she relates the scene where Jason Street is sent to the hospital she mentions the phrase, “We will all fall.” Her reference to this phrase serves to describe what she calls “the vaguely biblical voice-over” used in the show. Later on in her article, she speaks of the character Tim Riggins, and a scene where he “wakes up on a bachelor sofa where he’s passed out” (Heffernan, E1). She describes his ability to sleep on the leather sofa, sheetless, as “yet another act of stoicism or sacrifice.” By using the words “stoicism” and “sacrifice” it denotes the idea of spiritual practice, or religious tradition, which again emphasizes the religious undertones in the show. She later describes Jason Street as a “pious quarterback.” In some occasions, pious simply means devout. However, in this situation, based on the previous religious references, readers would have to wonder if Heffernan means that Street is devoted to football, or devoted in a reverent godly way. However, a few paragraphs later, any readers who were confused about Heffernan’s reference would soon get clarification. When describing Smash Williams, she explains that he is even more religious than Jason. In this short article, Heffernan makes religious references in regards to the show four times.



A third article that points to the religious references in the television series was written in *The Jerusalem Post*. In the article, writer Aryeh Dean Cohen makes several references to the fact that religion plays a part in the show. One way that Cohen does this in the article is by making reference to Smash's rap in the pilot episode. Cohen describes his character as "the flashy Smash the black star running back with the Ali-like mouth who tells adoring fans that the Panthers 'are going to diabolical/like Tom Cruise gets Scientological'" (Cohen, 31). Cohen could have used any of Smash's phrases from the show; however, he chose to quote the stanza from Smash's rap that addressed Scientology. It is particularly interesting that Cohen chooses to compare Smash to Muhammad Ali, who was known for his strong religious beliefs – such as changing his name after joining the Nation of Islam, and his refusal to join the military due to his religious beliefs. Making the effort to connect Smash to religion and then compare him to an icon that is known for his religious ties only highlights the obvious effort that the writer is putting forth to emphasize the show's religious tone. A second way that the writer highlights religion deals with how he describes the town's devotion to the games. He says, "the entire town eschews kiddush for its own religious rite: closing early and heading to the Panthers' game the veritable heartbeat of this otherwise typical small town" (31). In the Jewish faith, kiddush is the blessing that is made over the wine that is made on the Sabbath and other holidays. When Cohen makes this reference he implies that the "religion" of football is so important that the town was willing to sacrifice in other areas, such as closing their business early, when in fact they could be making money. A third point that Cohen makes that highlights religion in the show is when he

describes the show's ability to make the town seem lively. Cohen says, "the script acting and sense of place offered by little gems like the prayers for the team on the side of the local church make the town come alive before us" (31). Again, there are many different aspects that Cohen could have used to describe the town as lively. However, by choosing a small detail such as the prayers by the side of the church, it again addresses the religious elements that are scattered throughout the television series. Although Cohen's article references religion, it is noteworthy to notice how race is interwoven into the topics as well.

While reading news articles that dealt with the television series, I was surprised to see how many times articles made reference to religious aspects from the show. The film did not have an emphasis on religion, and the book's references were few and far between. Berg could have possibly wanted to include a strong religious presence to promote the southern mood in the show. It is interesting to see that media outlets picked up on these elements although they were not a major theme for the show.

### *Race*

Just as much of the discourse about the film *Friday Night Lights* dealt with race, much of the discourse regarding the television series did the same. One such article entitled, "Gridiron Dynamics in Black and White," was published in *The New York Times* and too spoke about how the show dealt with the theme. Writer Edward Wyatt explains:

The premiere episode . . . contains one scene that illustrates the difference between being "based on" a work of nonfiction and "inspired by" one. That scene portrays a team rally at a car dealership where a black football player takes the microphone and raps a series of rhymes while his mostly white teammates, fellow students and town citizens groove along and shout encouragement. To say that the vignette

does not fully reflect the tenor of race relationships in 1988 in Odessa is an understatement. (Wyatt)

Wyatt incorporates this information to explain that the show is inspired by the movie.

The show would not directly express the intensity of the race relations of Odessa in 1988.

However, the consciousness of important themes would still be recognized. In this particular case, the theme of racial tensions would still be present in the television show.

Although there is a scene in the film where at a private dinner a White woman turns to the head coach and uses a racial slur to describe a player, Berg does not plan to address racial so directly. However, in the article Berg explains, “racism is definitely a subject that we address aggressively, right out of the gate, in the first three or four episodes . . . racism is something that more often can be unspoken.” Wyatt continues to show how the

show alludes to racial tension. He explains, “There are hints of discord in the first two episodes, as two football players, one white and one black, sneer at each other and display a mutual dislike. But the viewer sees only descriptions of alleged racism, as when a television interviewer asks the black player: ‘There’s been talk of racism around this squad. Have you experienced anything like that?’” Wyatt’s article gives several other examples of how the show portrays racial tension in just the first few episodes.

However, it is notable that Wyatt’s article is written only a few weeks after the pilot episode aired, and already he has picked up on the shows’ intension of keeping the theme of race apparent throughout the series.

Another article that addresses race in an interesting twist is found in *USA Today*.

Writer Robert Bianco praises the show in the beginning. Although he feels that the show is predictable in some ways, it is still heartfelt and beautifully shot. He draws attention to

some of the smaller moments that the show picks up on such “artfully rendered snippets of real life” and “nattering voices on radio.” However, this transitions into the fact that show still addresses racism and class divide. Bianco specifically mentions the character of Smash in regards to the racial portrayal in the show. He says, “And while the portraits of the self-centered black star Smash and his sassy mama are not necessarily inaccurate or offensive, they are awfully familiar. It would be nice to see a few more characters, black and white, who surprise us.” (Bianco, 6D). Although the point that Bianco delved into was the fact that there are aspects of the show that are not original, it was surprising to read the language he used to speak of Smash and his mother’s character. Many of the articles that address race in *Friday Night Lights* did so using a tone to suggest that any racial conflict was truly being used in the show to reflect the racial conflicts that were introduced from the film. However, Bianco’s description of Smash being the “self-centered black star” and his mother being “sassy,” seems to address the stereotypes of African Americans in the community. This is actually the only article that came up in research that used stereotypically biased language to talk about the Black characters in show. Although these depictions are accurate, the language used did not follow the language patterns that other media outlets used to describe Black characters.

In February of 2007, Robert Bianco tackled the issue of race again in an article published in *USA Today* entitled “‘Friday Night’ shines a light on racism; NBC series tackles the bigger issues in two-part episode’s conclusion.” In the article, Bianco summarizes a two part episode that tackled the issue of race. In the show, an assistant coach makes a racist comment that causes a walkout by all the Black players on the team

led by Smash Williams. To describe that driving force behind the issue, Bianco explains, “But the show gives equal weight to the mix of anger, pride and fear that is driving Smash. As is often the case with the more subtle forms of racism, the problem isn’t the way Smash and his friends are treated; it’s the limiting assumptions they face about what they can and should do.” (Bianco) Although Smash’s mother “is not one of those moms who battles in silence,” she does try to convince him that he should not throw away his future “just so he can ‘teach a lesson to a bunch of fools.’” Apparently, if the team loses their next game, the boys on the team who were eligible for scholarships will lose them. Bianco praises the way the show deals with race. He says, “Still, at least Lights is dealing with race, and doing so in a way overall that respects our intelligence.”

These three articles highlight the way that race is dealt with in the show. The reiteration of racial issues over and over again would therefore emphasize the role and significance of race in the show. Although the scenes mentioned reflected racial stereotypes indirectly, the fact that the media chose to highlight them in article brings light to the substance that race carries in the series.

#### *Unmentioned Topics*

One notable topic that the media did not give attention to was that of the importance of family in the television series. Some attention was given to the ups and down of Coach Taylor’s marriage, but the attention that was given to the variety of family structures in the discourse about the film was not seen in the discourse about the show. This was particularly disappointing, because there could have been many interesting topics brought up in that regard. Take for example the later episodes where

Mrs. Taylor ends up getting pregnant. The dynamics of the family completely changes when the baby is born. Julie seems to be jealous of the attention that the baby gets, and she seems to miss being the sole recipient of her parents' attention. Mrs. Taylor seems to have difficulty adjusting to how she has had to put her career on hold to give more attention to the baby, but her husband's career continues to flourish. Coach Taylor must adjust to the idea that it will now be another 18 years before he and his wife are back to having an empty house. This is just one example of a family situation that occurred in the show that the media did not address. The issues that came forth from the baby's birth would have brought forth unique discussion. It would have been interesting to see the different points of view on this matter. Particularly due to the fact that many families are choosing to have baby's further along in their age and careers.

### **C. Summary**

By reviewing the media's discourse about *Friday Night Lights*, there are a couple main ideas that were found. First, in regards to the film, the media chose to focus on topics such as race, family, and community. They steered away from talking about the teen issues in the film. Second, in regards to the television series, the media chose to focus on topics such as teen issues, religion, and race. They did not give much attention to family issues in the series. One purpose of this thesis was to highlight the significance of race in *Friday Night Lights*. It is therefore noteworthy that in the media's discourse on both the film and the television show, race was a focused topic. The topics of sports, family, and socioeconomics were mentioned; however they were secondary to the importance of race. Examining the media's discourse emphasizes the role of race in

*Friday Night Lights.* Race connects the key topics because it is difficult to examine them without having to give attention to race as well.

#### IV. CHAPTER TWO - *FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS* THE FILM

The purpose of this chapter is highlight how the film *Friday Night Lights* provides explicit commentary about the major issues of representation, particularly race, as discussed in the literature review. This chapter serves to explain how the film gave an interpretation of the events that happened, as well as the historical context of that time. Although this film was produced in the 2000s, the historical setting is that of the late 1980s. Therefore, due to the historical setting, viewers will a more explicit handling of race. During that time period it was socially acceptable to talk about issues of race straightforwardly. The film's interpretation suggests an awareness of representation that must be examined. Therefore, by examining the film's message, an understanding of representation will be deepened. The analysis will discuss the scenes of this film in the order that they took place. Scenes will be discussed by examining how the situations taking place reflect representation. A visual analysis, involving the film's narrative and style, is used to interpret the message of the film.

##### **A. Background**

The movie, *Friday Night Lights*, was released in 2004. It was produced by Peter Berg and was based on the bestselling novel entitled *Friday Night Lights: A Town, A Team, and A Dream*. The novel was written by H.G. "Buzz" Bissinger, who is actually Berg's cousin. There was a large amount of effort put forth to ensure that the film's



direction was exactly what Berg wanted. According to the article “'Friday' doesn't sideline the truth,” written in the *San Francisco Chronicle's* online news, "there were six directors at one time or another for '*Friday Night Lights*'" (Hartlaub).

There has been some work previously written regarding Berg's direction with the film. For example, in *Aethlon: The Journal of Sport Literature*, writer David Vanderwerken wrote heavily regarding the film. In his writings, he explains that Berg's film captures the essence of Bissinger's book. As in any film that is inspired by a novel, the director has to make the decision of what themes to emphasize. However, in Berg's case, he solves this "by suggesting just about everything in the book through image and cinematography, but selecting central elements as the core structure for the film" (Vanderwerken). Berg even "consulted the technical experts at NFL Films" in order to get some of the best choreography and game sequences for the film. As has already been mentioned, the situations and circumstances in the film are not particularly original; however, "Berg transforms the alleged clichés into poignant and complex human dramas that have no simple resolutions, easy redemptions, or unexpected, sentimental triumphs" (Vanderwerken).

In order to create and establish atmosphere and tone, Berg employs several cinematic aspects. Verderwerken explains this by stating, "To establish mood and location, Berg's opening panorama of the stark, desolate land surrounding Odessa, pancake flat, dotted with oil rigs, resonates time and again throughout in partial short of derricks silhouetted against the horizon" (Verderwerken). He even arranged to have the background music reflect the mood of the film. Verderwerken mentions, "The

understated and haunting guitar soundtrack, played by a local Odessa band called Explosion in the Sky, strikes just the right bittersweet notes for the film." To emphasize the idea that Odessans are completely obsessed with the town's football program, "Berg uses a radio sports talk show voiceover that apparently runs 24/7 on one topic, Permian football" (Verderwerken).

This chapter looks at elements such as these in specific scenes to examine how Berg expresses his interpretation of the novel in film, and how they are connected to the historical context of the time.

### **B. Summary of film**

The movie follows the 1988 Permian Panther football season. The film begins with the players getting ready for their first preseason practice. Senior quarterback, Mike Winchell, review plays with his mother. Senior running back, James "Boobie" Miles, jogs to practice. The other star players, Brian Chavez, Donnie Billingsley, and Ivory Christian have cars so they drive to practice. As they get ready in the locker room, Boobie teases sophomore running back, Chris Comer about his white Adidas, and advises him that he should have black Nikes. Boobie's cocky attitude is apparently disliked, as expressed by Billingsley who says, "His mouth keeps getting bigger and bigger."

The boys leave the locker room and head out to practice. The stadium already filled with fans ready to watch practice, and college recruiters are writing notes. Boobie's uncle, L.V., is in the stands loudly talking about Boobie to the college recruiters. The media is also at the practice with cameras ready to conduct interviews with Comer, Boobie, Christian, and head coach, Coach Gaines. During practice,

Billingsley's dad makes a scene. When Billingsley drops a ball, his dad comes down from the stands. He begins to push Donnie around, and his dad's girlfriend and players have to separate the two. Practice continues, but in the huddle, Boobie begins to antagonize Billingsley about his father, which starts a fight between the two.

Practice ends, but Coach gives a speech to the boys about the importance of perfection on the team. After practice the boys head to a popular eatery that serves burgers. The boys are invited to a party, but Mike is reluctant to go. After a stranger explains the importance of enjoying your youth, Christian and Mike decide to go to the party. Meanwhile, Coach Gaines and his wife are having dinner with boosters. Coach seems bored as the host talks about oil, and the woman sitting next to him talks to him about defense. At the party, Mike is cornered by a girl who questions his sexuality. He has sex with her to prove himself to her. On the other hand, Donny takes a girl home. She is obviously drunk. As they are kissing and pulling each other's clothes off, Donny's dad watches. When he finally decides to speak, he addresses Donny's inconsistency with holding on to the football during practices. He becomes violent, and ends up taping a football to Donny's hands.

Another scene shows the team in the weight room, working out. Boobie is reading offer letters from different schools. Boobie, who is not a very good reader, has to have Brian help him. Boobie begins teasing Mike about the fact that he never smiles. Boobie makes jokes, and even imitates Bill Cosby in an attempt to make Mike smile. The next scenes show Coach Gaines getting ready in the morning, and the boys walking through the hallways at school. Coach Gaines is in his office when a booster brings

guests to talk to Coach. They want to talk about the way he runs his defense, and he seems annoyed by the conversation.

A college, Kansas Wesleyan University, makes a visit to Mike's house. Mike is interested in knowing how far away the school is from his house; however, his mom wants to him to sign with the school on the spot. The coaches seem uncomfortable, and have to tell his mom that they are only there to express their interest – not to make an offer. Meanwhile, Coach Gaines is having dinner with Boobie, L.V., and his wife Sharon. He toasts to Boobie having a successful season.

It is finally game day. There is no one in town. The lights to the stadium begin to turn on, and the empty locker room shows the team's equipment set up perfectly for them to get dressed. In the next scene, the boys are dressed and kneeling on one knee. Coach Gaines gives them a pregame speech. After the speech the game begins, and Boobie is a highlight. Fans are cheering, cheerleaders are thrown in the air, college recruiters are making notes, and announcers are heard in the background – everyone is enthusiastic. During the game, Boobie not only runs the ball, but throws, and kicks. The Panthers have run the score up on the other team, so Coach Gaines decides to take Boobie out, and put Comer in. However, Comer cannot find his helmet, so Boobie goes back in. During the next play, Mike passes the ball to Boobie, who is hit hard, and yells out in pain as he rolls on the ground. Trainers run out to the field, players kneel on one knee, and everyone looks worried. The score is 42-7. The game is over and Coach Gaines talks to a trainer who is worried about Boobie's knee. Coach Gaines addresses the team after the game to ease their fears about Boobie; he tells them that Boobie will be fine. As

Coach Gaines drives home, he listens to the radio. People call in and complain about his decision to put Boobie in the game. In the next scene, Boobie and his uncle are at the local clinic. They ask the doctor if Boobie can play on Friday. The doctor suggests that they get an MRI in Midland.

The next scene shows the media interviewing Coach Gaines at practice. At their next game they lose, 49-6. The players seem clearly discouraged. Coach Gaines drives home and finds his yard filled with For Sale signs. Coach Gaines visits Boobie and his uncle, who assure him that he is ok to play. At the next practice, Mike gets a lot of media attention, but has a difficult time playing. After practice, there is a scene where Mike is in a phone booth talking to someone about getting help with his mother. He tells them, “She’s your mother too.” Later on, Coach Gaines visits Mike to see if he “can get the job done.” Mike does not seem sure, and tells Coach, “my mind’s not right.”

In their next game, it is the middle of the second quarter, and the other team has a 14-0 lead. Coach Gaines decides to put Comer in the game. He has shaky start, but begins to pick up momentum. The attitude changes on the team, and they end up winning the game. Comer continues to be a star in the games and starts to get more media attention at practice. Meanwhile, L.V. takes Boobie to Midland to get an MRI. The doctor reviews the scan and tries to explain to L.V. and Boobie that there is a serious injury. Boobie has a hard time understanding this at first, but soon gets very upset, and tells the doctor that he is trying to take his football career from him.

The big Midland Lee game is coming up. Boobie and his uncle have convinced Coach Gaines that he is ok to play. When Boobie walks onto the field, the fans cheer

loudly. At first, the game is not going well. By halftime, the players look defeated. The rest of the game goes on, and Boobie keeps telling the Coach to put him in. Finally, Gaines puts him in the game. On the second play, Boobie is hit hard, and hurts his knee again – the Panthers lose the game. The Panthers are now in a three way tie to move on to the playoffs. According to Texas rules, the tie will be handled by way of a coin toss. The Panthers and Midland Lee advance, and it is at this point that the Dallas Carter high team is introduced as a contender for the state championship.

Boobie finally comes to terms with the fact that he will not be playing football anymore and goes to school to clean out his locker. It is an emotional scene as he sits in the car and cries to his uncle about the fact that he does not know where his future is headed.

The Permian Panthers make it all the way to the state championship game. The two sides meet to talk about logistics of the game, but race relations play a big factor in their decision. A neutral site, the Astrodome, is the agreed upon location, and it is decided that the officials must be equally mixed.

It is finally game day. All around town businesses have signs up that flash “Going to state.” The boys board the bus, and Boobie, who is dropped off by his uncle, asks to go with them. A long line of cars follow them to the game, and they even have a police escort. The Dallas Carter team is impressive, they are big, tough, and mean looking. Cowboys score twice quickly, making the score 10-0. On the sidelines, Coach asks Ivory what it is like on the field. Ivory says they are big, fast, and dirty. The Panthers have a hard time moving forward. At the end of the first half the score is 26-7.

During half time, both teams are given speeches and recite the Lord's prayer before going back onto the field. Dallas is clearly the more athletic team, but the Panthers do not let their momentum die. During the fourth quarter, Comer catches the ball in the kick off and scores a touchdown which gets the Panthers momentum going again. They have a couple more big plays, and the score is now 34-28 with two minutes left in the game. In the last play of the game, Mike tries to run the ball. He is short, and they lose.

The film ends with Gaines taking the names of the seniors off of his roster, while Brian, Mike, and Donny talk about what they will miss about the game. Mike throws a football to a group of kids playing nearby, who all run to catch the ball.

### **C. Analysis**

This analysis looks at how the film *Friday Night Lights* represents media stereotypes. This analysis also gives consideration to what the film says in regards to historical context. Many of the scenes that are discussed address several different issues. To organize the analysis, the scenes are reviewed in the order they appeared in the film.

#### *Family and values*

The opening scene of the film shows Mike Winchell at home with his mother. They are reviewing football plays at a table, while Mike eats his breakfast. They seem to have a steady rhythm going, when suddenly she interrupts the review and asks, "You gonna get a scholarship?" Mike looks up, and replies, "Yes, Mom." She continues to review plays with him. The scene is interrupted to show Boobie Miles running to practice, as young boys follow him on their bikes. The scene returns to Mike and his

mother reviewing plays. She interrupts their review again to ask him, “Are you ready for this Mike?” Mike does not respond, but just stares at her.

This scene, although just a few seconds long, gives a lot of information. When the scene begins, we first see a shaky camera pan across the front of Mike’s house. The camera focuses on a sign in the first yard that shows that Mike is number 20 for the football team. The house is humble, with an older car sitting in the driveway. The front yard is neat and tidy. Although the house is not fancy, it clearly looks as though it is cared for. Although the first shot is clearly focused on Mike’s mother, viewers can see a messy counter behind her. As Mike responds to her quizzing questions, he looks nervous. He is visibly shaking. The camera cuts quickly between the two to emphasize the nervousness that Mike expresses. The next shot shows the mom’s hand as she continues to talk. Viewers are now able to see that she is quizzing Mike from a binder full of papers. Mike again responds, however, this time the camera’s rack shot focuses on several medicine bottles and a blurry outline shows Mike in the background. The camera cuts quickly to show a glass of orange juice that he is drinking with his breakfast. Another quick cut finally gives viewers a front angle of the mom’s face. She continues to quiz Mike, but she is still in her pajamas and looks tired and old. Another quick shot shows the two talking, but the mid close shot used here gives the audience a better view of the interior of the house. Unlike the front of the house, the inside is messy, and the furniture is dated. If a viewer does not know the setting of the film, they may question if Mike and mother are poor, or if they are living in the 80s. The scene cuts to Boobie running and then back to Mike and his mother at home. The first cut back to them shows



the reason Mike has been visibly shaking, he is rattling his foot under the table. Another quick rack shot first focuses on a leaky faucet and then focuses on the mother behind it. When Mike's mother asks if he is ready, the camera uses a close up shot to enhance the look that Mike gives to his mother. The lighting in this scene is dark and dreary. It suggests a certain level of sympathy that should be felt for the two.

This scene speaks volumes. We see the side of football that is not glorified – a single mom, preparing her son for football season. She is obviously sick, but makes sure that her son not only eats breakfast, but has a healthy one. Rather than think that football is a “silly game” and that there are better things to worry about, such as health, she is eager to jump in and prepare her son for the seriousness of the game. During this scene, Mike is respectful to his mother and seems to appreciate her assistance in helping him prepare for the football season. However, unlike most mothers who have the utmost confidence in their children, Mike's mother seems hesitate as to how ready he is. Mike's hesitations and lack of expression seem to suggest that he is not confident either. Not only does this scene give a representation of a single parent family with an only child, and a family on the lower socioeconomic scale, it highlights the values of this town – football is serious even to those whom you would think should have better things to worry about.

#### *Teens, race, and status*

A second noteworthy scene gives a representation of teens, race, and status. The boys are in the locker room getting ready for their first practice of the season. Boobie asks, “Where your girlfriend at, Water Bug?” Player Chris Comer looks at Boobie and

does not have a chance to reply. Boobie asks, “We ain’t got a girlfriend yet? You wanna know why you ain’t got a girl yet, Water Bug?” Comer answers, “Why?” Boobie explains, “You got the wrong shoes on, man. You got on white Adidas. Everybody know the shoe is Nikes. Nothin’ holds a nickel next to Nike. Ask Ivory. Ask Preacher Man.” Ivory responds, “What kind of shoes on your feet don’t matter.” Boobie replies, “Come on, Preacher. Bullshit!” Ivory again responds, “Don’t matter at all.” Boobie debates, “You know God made black beautiful. God made Boobie beautiful, black and strong. And when Boobie knocks some fools out, Boobie gonna knock ‘em out with black Nikes on his feet. Ain’t that right?” Ivory responds to Boobie’s banter and says, “I could knock you out in a pair of flip-flops.” Boobie responds calmly, “Yeah, well, I’m gonna knock ‘em out with Nikes on my feet, and I’m gonna smile when I do.”

This scene comments on several different aspects. First, Boobie is represented as a stereotypical young Black male. He does not speak proper English and seems to care only about his image. Although Chris Comer and Ivory Christian’s characters are conservative and quiet, these characteristics are not an emphasis here. It is also interesting to look at the dynamic between the three Black teenage boys. Boobie seems to respect Ivory’s religious stand. Except for the “bullshit” comment, he refers to him as Preacher Man, and makes a reference to God in his conversation with him. Ivory does not seem intimidated by Boobie, and talks to him honestly and directly. Chris Comer, on the other hand, does not seem to be up to par with the boys. Boobie teases him, and no one stands up for Chris. In this scene Chris seems nervous to speak, and does not say much.

By looking at the cinematic elements used in this scene viewers will notice a much different emphasis. When Boobie speaks his first few lines in the scene, the camera never focuses on his face. Instead it focuses on the towel that he is folding, that has “Terminator X” written on it in big letters. As he talks to Comer, the camera’s focus on him is at an eye-level angle although he is seated on a bench. The eye-level shots continue as Boobie talks to Comer. This suggests the inferior position that Comer has to Boobie. When Boobie’s face is finally shown, we get a medium shot that shows that he is not wearing a shirt. As Boobie talks about the white Adidas and the black Nikes, it seems to suggest that a racial reference is being made. When Boobie makes the comment that “black is beautiful,” it gives explicit emphasis to the reference. When Boobie talks about the black Nikes, he stomps his foot on the ground to give emphasis to his shoes. The camera cuts to Comer at an eye-level camera angle for a reactionary shot to Boobie stomping his foot on the ground. Comer is low to the ground in this shot because he is tying his shoes. This again suggests the inferior status that Comer has on the team. Boobie stomping his foot so close to Comer’s face suggests that Boobie is flaunting his superior status. Later when Boobie makes the “black is beautiful” statement, the camera cuts to Comer who is looking at his white Adidas. This point of view suggests that Comer is starting to internalize his inferiority to Boobie simply because of his shoes. Then, when Boobie makes the statement, “God made Boobie beautiful, black and strong” this highlights Boobie’s attitude in regards to physicality. As mentioned in the literature review, the language often used to refer to Black players emphasizes their supposed innate natural athletic ability. Boobie too uses this language to refer to himself,

suggesting that he has also bought into this line of thinking. The shot of Boobie making this comment is a straight on medium close shot of Boobie shirtless – which gives even more emphasis to his physicality.

This short scene also includes much to be interpreted. The emphasis on race is made repeatedly in this short scene, mostly explicitly but other times implicitly. Since there are only three Black players on the team that get acknowledgment in the film, there is no doubt that there may be racial difficulties in the town. Historically speaking, in a rural Texas town, racial tensions would be expected. The teen drama among these three boys should also be given attention as well. Boobie and Ivory obviously seem to have more respect on the team. The two speak to each other as equals and are not afraid to tease each other or be direct. Comer, on the other hand, seems intimidated by the two. They refer to him in conversation, but what he has to say really does not matter. Later on the film, it is discovered that Comer is really only Boobie's "back-up's back-up." Therefore, Comer's standing with the team is low because he does not seem to have much to offer for the team. No doubt, what happens on the team is only a small reflection of the attitudes in the community. It can be expected that Comer's small standing on the team is even smaller in the community. Boobie and Ivory, on the other hand, are likely to be favored in the area due to their high profile player status.

#### *Community, family, and pressure*

Another key scene that gives insight into the intensity of the community's involvement with the football program takes place at their first practice of the season.

The scene is approximately five minutes long and allows viewers to see how much pressure is put on the boys to play.

The scene begins with the boys lining up on the field for practice. As drills take place the camera pans to the different exercises that are performed simultaneously on the field. In the stands are college recruiters from all around the country, taking notes and watching intensely. Boobie's uncle, L.V., talks loudly and boisterously to the college recruiters about Boobie. The editing of this scene has the camera cutting back and forth to various parallel action scenes. One of these scenes involves the players being interviewed by the media. The first interview is with Comer who tells reporters that he thinks Boobie will get the Heisman Trophy someday. Another shot shows reporters asking a group of young boys who their favorite player is. They respond in unison, "Boobie Miles." L.V. continues to talk confidently about Boobie to the college recruiters. As he talks to them, the camera cuts back and forth to Boobie on the field, who is having an amazing practice. One parallel action shot shows Boobie signing autographs for a group of young children. The second interview of the scene has reporters talking to Boobie. They ask him, "Should we believe the hype?" He asks in return, "What hype?" They answer, "The hype about Boobie Miles." He replies, "No, hype is something that's not for real. I'm all real." Scene continues with as reporters continue their interview with Comer, and shots advance with more scenes from practice.

An interview with Billingsley highlights the pressure that the boys are under. He tells reporters, "Odessa's a small town, and, uh, if you screw up, everybody knows about it." Reporters ask him, "Your dad played at Permian. What's it like to be the son of a

local legend?" Before Billingsley can answer, the camera cuts to a shot of his dad sitting in the stands. He looks visibly annoyed and yells out, "Hold on to the damn ball, Donnie!" The camera cuts back to Billingsley who refuses to answer the question and tells the reporters, "Next question." The camera cuts to a shot of reporters continuing to interview Boobie. They ask him, "How are your grades, Boobie?" He answers, "I get straight A's. I'm an athlete." They ask in response, "In what subject?" He replies, "There's only one subject. It's football. Ain't no other subject." The next cut shows the team running a play where Billingsley drops the football. A spectator in the stands asks Billingsley's dad, "You sure he's part of your gene pool, Charlie?" Charlie who has already been upset walks down to the field. Charlie's reaction must be customary, as the spectator says, "Red alert. Red alert, everybody." As Charlie walks down to the field, a cut is made to Coach getting interviewed. He is asked, "What about the expectations of coaching a team like this in a community like this?" He responds, "Well, I guess there's always a surprise or two in every community." The camera cuts back to Charlie, who has finally made it onto the field. He gets Donnie's attention, and says, "Come here. Come here. What's the problem?" Donnie replies, "Get off the field, Dad." Charlie ignores the request and continues, "Why can't you hold on to the football? What's so goddamn hard about holdin' on it?" The coaches and players stand around and make no effort to interrupt the altercation. Donnie replies, "I'm sorry." Charlie continues, "All you gotta do is hold on to the goddamn football, and you can't do it. Tell me why you can't do it. Just tell me. That's all I wanna know." Donnie tries to defuse the situation and replies, "I'll try better next time. Come on," and walks away to join the team. Charlie grabs

Donnie and throws him to the ground saying, “Don’t you walk away from me.” Donnie tries to get up, but Charlie throws him to the ground again, saying, “Don’t you walk away from me when I’m talkin’ to you, you hear me?” Coach Gaines watches the two, but does nothing to interfere. Charlie continues, “Tell me why you can’t hold on to the ball! Tell me. Answer a question.” Donnie gets to his feet again, and a fellow teammate finally runs over to try and calm Charlie down and tells him, “It’s the first day of practice.” Charlie continues to push Donnie around and finally hits him in the head, causing him to stumble backward. The two are finally broken up, and Charlie makes one last statement to Donnie before walking off, “Embarrassin’ me out here.” Donnie walks back to the team. The players try to be encouraging to Donnie. Mike even tells him, “It’s all right. Don’t worry about it.” The only player who is not very understanding is Boobie. Boobie teases Donnie and says, “Billingsley, you ain’t gotta worry about holdin’ on to the ball, man.” Donnie asks, “Why’s that?” Boobie replies, “Cause you ain’t gonna get the ball. Your job is be blockin’ for Boobie. I don’t care if your daddy is over there cryin’.” Donnie rushes to Boobie and knocks him to the ground. The two start fighting. In the meantime the camera cuts back to an interview that Donnie had with reporters. He tells them, “Our team’s been playin’ with each other for a long time and, uh, we got the brotherhood part of it down pretty much.”

The fight with Boobie and Donnie continues as an interview with Coach Gaines begins. Reporters ask him, “People here at Permian are already predicting a state championship. Is there any pressure to that for you guys?” Coach Gaines answers, “Well, any time they start predictin’ the state championship, there’s always pressure,

believe me.” Reporters continue, “You guys don’t have a lot of size. How can you make up for that?” Coach Gaines answers, “We’re gonna rely on our speed, discipline.” The camera cuts away from the interview to a shot of Ivory in a drill getting tackled several times by teammates. A quick cut again takes viewers to reporters interviewing Ivory. They ask him, “Do football players get special treatment here?” He does not respond. They prompt him again by asking, “What do you have to do to be a better football player this year?” Again he does not respond. They try one last time and ask, “Do you enjoy playing football?” It is not a surprise that he does not respond for the third time. The camera cuts to Ivory’s drill continuing and Coach Gaines talking to the boys about staying humble. The camera cuts quickly to a young boy who told reporters earlier that Boobie Miles was his favorite player. The kid yells out, “Yo, Bobbie Miles!” A quick cut shows Boobie’s interview continuing as he tells reporters, “It is hard to be humble.” A quick cut shows Coach Gaines talking to the team again, and then another quick shot shows Ivory still refusing to answer questions from reporters. The scene ends as the editing cuts back and forth between Ivory continuing to get hit from players and Coach Gaines talking to the players.

This scene truly highlights the pressure that is put on the football team. It is surprising to see such a large amount of media representation at the first practice of the season. There are several reporters and cameramen working on the field. They are interested in interviewing not only the coach, but several players and even enamored youth. Another point of interest are the college recruiters in the stands. Normally, college recruiters travel to see high school teams practice twice during the year. First,



during the college's bye week for football, this is usually sometime in October, November, or December. Second, they may travel to see teams during the month of May, when high school teams are gearing up for their spring football game. It is highly unusual to find college recruiters in the stands early in the fall season because their colleges are usually getting ready for their season to begin as well.

Another aspect of this scene that highlights the pressure put on the team is the incident with Donnie and his father. When Charlie began to cause a scene regarding Donnie, the spectators did not seem to act surprised. Most likely, this type of reaction from Charlie was typical. When he walked onto the field, no one, including the coaches, interfered with his interruption of the team's practice. It is quite possible that due to Charlie being a star athlete in his day, this allows him a certain amount of leeway to act inappropriately in the community. Since he had contributed his share to the community's standing, he was now able to rely on that to excuse his behavior. Coach Gaines' hesitance to approach Charlie about his behavior shows that Gaines acknowledges the silent code that is present in the community. He knows that if he had asked Charlie to leave, or get off of the field, most likely he would have received backlash from members of the community that support the team.

The scene that highlights Charlie's inexcusable behavior that the community accept, relates to Boobie's interview with reporters about his grades. Obviously in this community, if you are a star athlete people will turn a blind eye to your unacceptable qualities, whether it deals with your behavior or your grades. No doubt the interview regarding grades was Berg's way of addressing how Boobie was handled with kid gloves

at his school. Although Berg does not go into detail about Boobie's "handling," Bissinger's book offers a detailed explanation of this. Bissingers explain that Boobie was considered learning disabled in school. He was able to receive extra help and was even exempt from certain expectations that all other students had to comply with, for example "the state-mandated competency tests that were a requirement for a high school diploma" (Bissinger, 1990). As far as Charlie goes, in Bissinger's book he describes Charlie by saying, "Charlie Billingsley may not have been the meanest kid ever at Permian, but he was somewhere near the top, and it was hard to forget how that tough son-of-a-bitch had played the game in the late sixties" (Bissinger, 1990). These two examples serve to show how the community stood by their players, even if it meant enabling them and encouraging persons who would never be independent.

*Status, community, race*

Another noteworthy scene that happens takes place at the house of a booster for the team, Buddy Garrity. The scene opens with an establish shot to show 8 people sitting around a dining table. Everyone is dressed up, and there is a crystal chandelier hanging above them. No doubt this shot intends to establish that these people are upper class. As the scene continues, viewers notice that Coach Gaines and his wife are among the people. The next shot shows a woman smoking a cigarette and telling Coach Gaines, "What I saw was speed out there, but uh, where's the beef, Coach? I saw me some small boys." A man across the table smoking a cigar chimes in with, "They're small." The camera angle changes to focus on Coach Gaines as he replies, "I think we're gonna be okay." The new camera angle allows a better view into the dining room. The view displays fine china on

the table and lavish items against the wall. Another woman at the table looks at Coach Gaines with surprise and asks, "On defense?" Gaines respectfully replies, "Yes, ma'am. I firmly believe that." Coach Gaines looks down the table to his wife that is sitting at the other end. She smiles at him, but it is obvious that she is bored. She is sitting next to what seems to be the head booster, and he is talking about oil. The shot cuts back to the man who is smoking the cigar. He says, "Midland Lee likes to busy it up the middle, too." Coach Gaines agrees with him and says, "You're right about that." Gaines glances downward as if he wants to end the conversation. However, it continues as the woman with the cigarette next to him puts her hand on his shoulder, leans towards him and says, "You know what you should do? You should play Boobie Miles defense. Work him both ways." He explains to her, "The problem with that is I don't want him to get hurt. We need him to score touchdowns." The woman smiles and says, "Bullshit. That big nigger ain't gonna break." The camera cuts quickly to show a reactionary shot of Coach Gaines as he hears her. She continues, "You wanna beat Midland Lee, you play him middle linebacker. Break some heads out there." Another woman interrupts and asks, "Are you ready for Midland Lee, coach?" The scene ends as he turns to look at her.

This scene provides insight into a couple areas that Berg seems to want to comment on. Take for instance the idea of boosters. In most areas, boosters are a group of community members who take on responsibilities such as providing meals for the team before games and helping to promote game day atmosphere. However, in some towns where the boosters are especially supportive they may be even more generous. By way of booster support, some communities have been known to pay coaches' salaries, give a

car as part of payment, and even provide housing for a coach. Head coaches are often put in a difficult situation, because they are forced to balance the power that the boosters have over the program with their own vision for the team. In communities where the boosters are generously supportive, they often feel an entitlement to their position within the program. When they have an idea, they expect to be listened to. When they want something from the coach, they expect it to be given. This dining scene highlights these expectations. Coach Gaines and his wife no doubt feel obligated to dine with these boosters in order to have their continued support for the program. Mrs. Gaines therefore sits through a dinner conversation that she has no interest in to support her husband. In turn, Coach Gaines sits through the unsolicited suggestions of people who have no idea what he wants for his team. Coach and Mrs. Gaines must be polite and agreeable during this meal so as to not cause any reason for conflict. This leads to the second area that Berg comments on.

The second part of this scene that deserves attention is when the woman with the cigarette calls Boobie a “nigger.” As noted in the background of this chapter, Berg decided to address the bigger themes that were brought up in Bissinger’s book through creative cinematic elements. The awkwardness of this situation for Gaines is developed by the editing. When Gaines expresses that he does not want Boobie to get hurt, the camera is on eye level in the scene. It simply shows a side profile of Gaines as he talks. However, the woman is turned to Gaines, so viewers get a straight on view of her as she talks. As soon as she says “break,” the camera cuts quickly to a straight on close up of Gaines as a reactionary shot. He finally looks her straight in the eye as she talks. This

editing is used to show the shock that Gaines experiences when she says this. However, he cannot comment on the statement. It would be inappropriate to correct a booster who has that attitude about Blacks. This statement reflects the attitude of Whites in Odessa at that time. According to Bissinger's book, Odessa has a rich history of racial disengagement. During the period that the film reflects, no doubt Coach Gaines worked hard with the team to make sure that none of the racial attitudes of the town were interwoven into the attitudes of the players. Being a middle class citizen of the town and working with teenagers all day, Coach Gaines was probably not used to being associated with people who still had such strong racial views. It is realistic to expect that he knew the views existed, and that he could handle the talk. But this scene also served to illustrate the racial tension that existed at the time.

#### **D. Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter was to interpret Berg's filmic depiction of Bissinger's novel. Rather than choose to interpret the novel exactly, Berg decided to depict the novel more creatively. In doing so, the major themes from the novel, particularly race, were illustrated rather explicitly. This chapter took scenes from the film and extracted Berg's explicit messages and discussed them more directly. These scenes highlighted representations of race, family, status, and connected them to the historical context of the film.

In the film, Berg uses creative license to illustrate several points. However, there were two recurring points that were emphasized. One major point he highlighted was the fact that race relations were still a matter of concern in the town of Odessa in the late

1980s. This was illustrated directly and explicitly due to the fact the film stayed true to its historical setting. A second point showed was how important high school football is to the town of Odessa. It put an enormous amount of pressure on the team and accounted for the acceptance of inexcusable behaviors.

## V. CHAPTER THREE - *FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS* – PILOT EPISODE

Chapter one of this thesis showed how the media discourse regarding *Friday Night Lights* emphasized the significance of the role of race as a connector to other key topics. Chapter two of thesis showed how the film's late 1980s historical setting was reflected, particularly regarding the representation of race. This chapter, in contrast with the film, will show how the television show's contemporary setting is reflected particularly regarding representation of race. This chapter will also show that the television series *Friday Night Lights* was well liked among audiences, and that the show utilized a realistic aesthetic by way of visual representation and relatable characters and situations. These points are discussed while proving that although the show is reflective of a contemporary setting, it stayed true to the essence of the franchise both thematically and ideologically.

### **A. Background**

The television series *Friday Night Lights* ran for five seasons. During and after this time the show received numerous nominations, honors, and awards. For example, in 2006, 2007, and 2009, the show received the AFI TV Programs of the Year award. In 2007, it won Outstanding Casting for a Drama Series from the Creative Arts Emmy Awards, the Eddie Award for Edited One-Hour Series for Commercial Television, and the George Foster Peabody Award for Broadcast Excellence. In 2008, the show won Outstanding Directing in a Drama Series from the NAACP. In 2009 and 2011, the show

won the Humanitas Prize for the 60 Minute Category. In 2010, Connie Britton won the Satellite Award for Best Actress in a Series, Drama. Recently, the show has received more commendations. Kyle Chandler, who plays Coach Taylor, won best actor in a drama series at the Emmys. And a second Emmy winner was Jason Katims, who won best writing for a drama series. The various awards and commendations attribute to the show's success in casting, filming, and plot. Based on the many nominations, honors, and awards, there is no doubt that critics agree the show was successful.

Despite the many honors and the fact that the show was loved by viewers, critics were baffled by the low ratings. Jake Coyle, a writer for *The Associated Press*, described *Friday Night Lights* by saying, "Though never a ratings success, the show gradually found a fervent following" (Coyle). Even Guy Raz, a host of a radio broadcast on NPR, noted, "Although *Friday Night Lights* was never a ratings hit, it did earn a hard-core and devoted following." Phrases such as "never a ratings hit," "never a ratings success," or "ratings-challenged" were popular in articles that expressed disappointment in the fact the show was not more popular. Chuck Barney, from the *Contra Costa Times*, stated that the show simply needed "some kind of attention-seizing hook." The show consistently placed below 50 in the Nielsen rankings. During the first and second season the show averaged over 6 million viewers. However, by the fourth season it was down to 3.85 million viewers. (What is interesting to note, is that the show was popular among what *Media Life* magazine called affluent viewers who had little experience playing football. According to *Media Life*, *Friday Night Lights* tied for the 11<sup>th</sup> most watched show by viewers with a median household income of \$65,000 per year.)



The issue of low ratings did not go unnoticed. In an interview on NPR, director Peter Berg was asked, “You’ve been around television for a long time. And this series has gotten a lot of critical acclaim and has a very devoted audience but not a huge audience. Why do you think it struggled to find the big numbers that the networks want?” His reply on July 15, 2011 was:

I think there were, there’s two reasons that we’re struggling with the rating. I think one was a preconceived idea that the show was going to be exclusively about high school football. And that was off-putting to a lot of people, and it was off-putting to women, it was off-putting to high school football players who were concerned that it wouldn’t be realistic. It was off-putting to sports fans who were, you know, getting their fill of football. Getting over the initial hurdle of football was a big problem. And the second, you know, problem which was – is equally significant for us is, you know, a question of time slot. First we were opposite this television show “Dancing with the Stars,” which was hugely successful. And now we’re up against “American Idol,” and these shows are just, you know, beating us up regularly and we can’t win that way.

Although we will never know the true reason as to why the ratings were low, Berg’s comment does offer us insight and a good theory as to why it may have been. Obviously, Berg was interested in the answer to the same question and did research to try to find the answer. We won’t know if his theory is correct, but it does sound plausible.

Fans were disappointed that the series was short lived. However, the show’s profitability may be one reason why the show lasted as long as it did. Although the show is no longer syndicated, it is still making money. For example, all five seasons are available for streaming on Netflix. On iTunes, the episodes are available for \$2.99 each. It could be possible that the show was allowed to continue simply because it was profitable to networks through markets such as DVD sales, rentals, or Netflix streaming.

## **B. Realistic Aesthetic**

The reason the show was enjoyable to watch was because it utilized a realistic aesthetic to entertain viewers. In order to define realism, one may look to John Fiske's book, *Television Culture*. Here he explains how Raymond Williams described three characteristics of realism. Williams "finds it has a contemporary setting, that it concerns itself with secular action – that is, with human action described in exclusively human terms – and that it is 'socially extended'" (Fiske, 22). According to Fiske, these three characteristics are especially befitting for television because "television's audience, like realism's content, is socially extended, unlike the more selective audiences of theater or many cinema films" (22). These characteristics are especially evident in *Friday Night Lights*.

The show employed realism in two ways. One way that this was done was by means of the topics presented. The challenges of life that the show depicted are those that many viewers would be able to relate to. Challenges such as marriage, parenting, family, adolescence, career, and a struggling economy are all matters for concern for American audiences. Married couples could watch and relate to the main characters, Coach Eric Taylor and his wife Tami, as they dealt with the challenges of parenting and marriage. Young boys could follow Tim Riggins, as he dealt with the challenges of growing up without a father, while being raised by an older brother. Kids from urban areas could relate to Vince Howard, another character who develops later in the series, as he worked hard to ensure that football would be his way out of a life of gangs and crime. The problems that the characters in the television series dealt with are the same problems

that the everyday American dealt with on a daily basis. Dan Zeiger, writer for *The Tribune* in Mesa, Arizona, commented on the issues in the show, in an article entitled, *Friday Night Lights Portrayed game of life*. He said, “Through the years, issues from abortion to alcohol, drug addiction and murder have been handled deftly by the show, without being overly preachy or cliché.” Although people of all backgrounds and personal difficulties could find ways to relate to the show, it also found a way to bring people together. Throughout the show, the theme of loyalty and faith abounds. Even writers and reviewers used words such as “American” and “patriotic” when speaking of the television show.

Although the title of the show would lead many to think that the series was only about football, football was only a small facet of *Friday Night Lights*. Football’s centrality, not just in the pilot, but throughout the series must be acknowledged. The element of football in the series is not just used as material to keep football fanatics interested in the show, but the element of football has a complex involvement in the series. In an article entitled, “You can learn a lot from football,” published in the *Los Angeles Times*, writer Dane Johnson discusses the complexity of the game. In the article he says, “One can learn perseverance thru adversity, teamwork, and self-discipline from the game of football, and those who train harder, work smarter and are highly dedicated to the game, tend to be more successful than others, even those who might be more naturally gifted. That nugget is not only true in football, it’s true in life.” Just as Johnson explains that many of the lessons learned from football are applicable to life, *Friday Night Lights* employs this philosophy throughout the show.

In an article written by Edward Wyatt and published in the *New York Times*, entitled “Gridiron Dynamics in Black and White,” Peter Berg comments on his intended role for football in the series. Wyatt writes:

The idea was to create a television show that exists as much more of a soap opera, or an exploration of human beings,’ than as a chronicle of a football team’s pursuit of glory, said Peter Berg, who develops the television series and directed the feature film and who is also Mr. Bissinger’s second cousin. In the television series, ‘you won’t see near the amount of football’ as appears in the film, Mr. Berg said recently in a telephone interview. ‘We use football season to add structure, but the series will definitely be much more character driven.

A second way that the show proved to have a realistic aesthetic was due to its natural, collaborative and improvisational filming style. In an interview, with an AP Entertainment writer, Jake Coyle, Jason Katims, executive producer of the show, reflected on how filming of the show was done naturally. He stated:

One of the early episodes, we were shooting in a Baptist church. Everybody in the place was effectively part of the community: the congregation, an organ player, singers, a minister. I was up there in the church talking to the minister when we were getting set up to shoot . . . And then suddenly, without anyone ever calling action, the musicians started playing and the congregation started getting into it. It very naturally was happening. The (assistant director) screamed out, “Hey Jason you’re in the shot!” They just started shooting. And that’s very typical of the way *Friday Night Lights* worked. Nobody called “action,” nobody told the background what they should be doing.

This interview shows the level of naturalism that the producers were looking for in the television series.

In the same interview, Katims comments on another scene that helps to highlight the improvisational filming style. He stated:

There was one day where we were shooting some practice scenes on the football field. But we weren’t shooting yet, we were just setting up and waiting for people to come. And Taylor Kitsch was walking up in his uniform just starting his day.

Jeff (Reiner) the director got one of the camera operators to start filming him and told one of the assistant coaches to run up to Kitsch and just start screaming at him for being late. Taylor Kitsch wasn't working yet, he was literally just walking to the set and suddenly he's being bombarded by this coach.

There were several other examples found in interviews and articles, where the actors shared similar experiences of times where shots were improvised and on the spot.

The pilot, much like the movie, also uses realistic style elements. In *Television Culture*, John Fiske explains how television often employs realism. He states, "its small screen and comparatively poor definition lead it to concentrate on mid-shots and close-ups of people acting, reacting, and interacting. Its repetition and its origins in studios rather than exterior locations lead it to rely on familiar interior settings or a human domestic scale that fit comfortable into the family room within which it is usually viewed" (Fiske, 22). Fiske also explains that the technical process that television editing employs often gives way to a realistic aesthetic. For example:

Cheaply produced dramas . . . are normally shot with multiple cameras in the studio and have limited or no post-production editing . . . This absence of authorial (or editorial) intervention adds subtly to the sense of realism, the sense of liveness, that is happening now – the same perfect match between represented television time and the lived 'real' time of the viewer is, after all, characteristic of genuinely live television, such as sport (23).

The effects of the technical process that Fiske speaks of is apparent in *Friday Night Lights*. The editing used often gives the same sense of "realisticness" that Fiske speaks. These elements gives the series an almost documentary type feel to viewers.

According to Robert Yahnke, retired Professor from the University of Minnesota, there are several techniques that are commonly employed in documentary films. One such example that is seen in the *Friday Night Lights* pilot is the composition of shots.

The camera may track shots from left to right, or up and down. Also, objects in a frame may have symbolic placements. Then, the type of shot, such as extreme long shot or extreme close-up, may be used to signify meanings well. A second example, which is also seen in the *Friday Night Lights* pilot, is how filmmakers may choose to communicate to audience by means of the cuts they use when editing. An unexpected close-up or a reactionary shot are all methods of conveying meaning. These documentary style elements create a natural look on television. Filming looks authentic and realistic.

### **C. Summary of the Pilot**

To analyze all of the shows in the television series would be a daunting task. For the sake of this thesis, I look at the pilot. A television pilot is an episode used to test interest in a show intended to become a television series. The pilot is usually the first episode of a series, but is not always. Sometimes the audiences do not always see the pilot. Their first viewing of the show may begin with something different than what is initially pitched to the network. Although elements in a television series may change from the pilot, the pilot is generally seen as a first impression of what is yet to come. Analyzing the pilot episode for *Friday Night Lights* is a good place for a researcher to provide a close analysis. In this case, the pilot episode is a bridge between the film and the television series. By examining the pilot, a researcher can get a true reading of how the producers of the show wanted audiences to receive it. Themes for the series are usually set up here, as well as the aesthetic that reflects the true nature of the viewing experience.

The events in the pilot happen over the course of five days – from Monday to Friday. For the events on Monday, viewers are thrown into the lives of most of the main characters. Viewers see Coach Eric Taylor and hear radio commentary regarding how the town does not have faith in his abilities as a coach. Matt Saracen is introduced, and viewers learn how dependent his grandmother is on him. Tim Riggins' lifestyle of alcohol, girls, and no real parental figures is seen right away. Lyla Garrity and her traditional family seem loving and nurturing. At practice, the media interviews several of the players. Smash Williams is cocky and ambitious, determined to be a Heisman trophy winner. He is asked about his father, who died some years previously, and Smash is defensive and guarded. Racism is questioned in interviews with Smash and Riggins. Neither denies that racism exists, but neither says more to draw attention to the issue. Riggins is questioned about his alcohol use by the media, and Coach Taylor is distracted by Riggins' inability to keep up with the team during practice. During practice, the tension between Smash and Riggins intensifies for the viewers to see. After practice the media follows the boys to their favorite burger diner. The media is especially interested in talking to Jason Street, the star quarterback of the team, but Smash continually tries to divert their attention. In another scene, Coach Taylor, who has stayed after practice to watch game film, is visited by his wife Tami. She seems supportive and is only upset about Coach Taylor volunteering the family to attend a football event at the local car dealership the next day that she obviously does not want to go to. The show ends the scenes of Monday night by briefly following the activities of some of the main characters as they wrap up their evenings.

The events that happen on Tuesday do not begin until after practice. Coach Taylor meets up with a friend who went to scout the team that they are playing on Friday. They talk about strategies for the game, but the friend ends the conversation impressing upon Coach the importance of winning the game. The rest of Tuesday takes place at the car dealership, where a local booster has put on an event for the football team. There the mayor speaks and introduces the football team to crowd. Coach Taylor says a few words, but allows the team to entertain the crowd. When the show is over, the camera does quick shots between several interactions that are happening. In one scene Tami is unexcitedly talking with ladies from the community about joining their book club. In another scene, the mayor is giving Jason Street playing advice. Viewers also see Tyra, later flirting with Jason Street as the media takes pictures and his girlfriend walks in. As Jason tries to smooth things over with his girlfriend, Tyra gets bored and decides to flirt with Smash, which intensifies the tension again between Riggins and Smash.

The scenes for Wednesday and Thursday are short. There is a community event where the high school players practice with the local pop warner team. Proud parents snap pictures of their little ones playing with the local heroes. In the locker room, Jason Street gives the young boys a pep talk. They are allowed to ask questions, and it is obvious from these questions that the boys admire Jason. He humbly answers them, and then leads the team in prayer. On Thursday, Coach Taylor goes to look at a house that Tami expressed interest in on Monday. The real estate agent is pushy with him, and he finally cuts her off by saying “Let’s see how we do on Friday first.” The other scene that



takes place on Thursday involves Riggins, Street, and Lyla hanging out at a type of bon fire. The three discuss their future, and agree on the motto “Texas Forever.”

The scenes for Friday night are the most intense and emotional for the pilot. The first scene starts by showing businesses all over town with “closed” signs on them. Then, Coach gives the players a pre-game speech, while the media takes pictures. He talks about expectations, and the popular phrase “clear eyes full hearts can’t lose” is introduced in the series for the first time. The game starts, and the Dillon Panthers score a touchdown easily with Smash and Riggins being the stars on the drive down the field. With the Panthers on defense, the other team scores quickly. During the second quarter, the Panthers score another touchdown with Smash and Riggins again as star players. Just like the first half, the other team scores quickly when the Panthers are on defense. During halftime, the locker room is chaos – wounds are being cleaned, coaches are yelling, and Coach Taylor drills Street for information about what is happening on the field. The game starts up again, and the Panthers have a hard time playing offense during the second half. The other team gets a touchdown, and the tension continues to rise. Suspense builds up as Street talks to the players in a huddle. He gives them the next play, and they line up. Street throws the ball, but it is picked off. The defensive player makes it all the way to the line of scrimmage, so Street takes the initiative to make the defensive tackle, but after the play, Street does not get up. The crowd is quiet, and Street’s parents run down the stands to get to him. The ambulance soon arrives. Shots show the students with their fingers crossed holding them up in the air. The crowd claps as the paramedics cart him off, and the media follows after. As both teams try to get their heads back in the

game, Matt Saracen is slow to realize that not only is he now the starting quarterback, he is also the team captain with three minutes left to play in the game. His first play goes badly because he calls the wrong one, and the second one is an incomplete as well. Coach Taylor calls Matt to the sidelines and gives him a short pep talk calmly. Matt's third play works – a shovel pass to Smash, who picks up yards. His fourth play earns them a touchdown – a pitch to Smash, with Riggins blocking. With less than a minute to go, the Panthers try an onside kick, which allows Riggins to get the ball back to the Panthers' offense. The last play of the game is caught by Smash who wins the game for the Panthers.

After the game, instead both teams doing the usual congratulatory handshakes, they kneel down and Smash leads the teams in a prayer for Street. Everyone heads to the hospital. Coach is allowed in to see Jason. When he walks into the room, Jason is sitting up in a bed, with brace on, and is unresponsive.

#### **D. Analysis**

This analysis will focus on the key topics that have been mentioned throughout this thesis – race, sports, family, and socioeconomics. In this section particular attention will be given to examine the characters. I believe that *Friday Night Lights* is attractive to audiences because people are able to relate to the characters. The characters are relatable for two reasons. First, the character's stories, or narratives, allow for people of many backgrounds to find someone to connect with from a contemporary stand point. Second, the show presents the characters realistically, due to the visual representation that is constructed cinematically. Filming elements such as editing, point of view, camera

movements, and more, help to create an aesthetic that depicts the characters as authentic and genuine.

### *Social mobility through sports*

In terms of sports and film, the idea of social mobility is apparent in the pilot. One example of this is seen with the case of Coach Taylor. Early in the pilot episode, what looks to be a local news reporter has a sit down interview with Coach Taylor and star quarterback Jason Street. As the three talk, cameras and microphones record the conversation. The reporter first asks, “How does it feel to be the head coach after, what how many years?” Coach Taylor replies, “Six years, it is.” The reporter comments “Got yourself a heck of a quarterback.” Coach Taylor replies, “He’s a good boy very proud of him.” The reporter continues, “Now, you two have been at this together for some time, right?” For the first time, Jason Street answers and says, “Yes, Sir, he was my coach all through Pee Wee, and Coach Taylor’s been QB coaching me since, uh, freshman and JV years, so it’s been awhile.” The reporter remarks by asking, “So, Coach, it is a coincidence you finally get the head coaching job the final season of Jason’s high school career?” Coach Taylor responds by saying, “It is, it’s a very fortunate coincidence. You gotta feel blessed to spend your first year with a young man who’s got the talent and the moral strength this young man right here has.”

From this scene, viewers are able to pick up on several different elements. Due to football, Coach Taylor was able to rise in coaching status. His relationship with Jason Street began as a Pee Wee coach and rose all the way to varsity head coach. Audiences can interpret this as a way that football allows for upward mobility. In the case of Coach

Taylor, his social mobility came in two places – the coaching world and in the community. This example of social mobility through sports has metaphors that adults can translate to their own spheres in life. For example, some adults may see this as motivation to work hard. Hard work can lead to advancements in your own career. Other adults may even see this as an example to encourage their own children to be ambitious in their successes.

When considering the filming aspects, there are elements used to create a sense that Coach Taylor is real and relatable. When this scene begins, the camera is on eye level. This helps to signify that Coach Taylor is grounded and that his character should not be seen as intimidating. Next, the camera tilts down to focus on the handshake between Coach Taylor and the reporter. Audiences can interpret from this visual position that Coach Taylor is respectful and well aware of appropriate behavior. After the handshake, a shaky camera backs away from the scene to give watchers a full view of Coach Taylor's disposition. He is sitting in the chair, leaning forward, with his hands folded in front of him. This shows that he has a calm disposition, and is unruffled by doing the interview with the reporter – he is ready to comment. When the camera backs away, a full view of Jason Street is given as well. Jason is dressed in practice gear, but his uniform is clean, and he sits respectfully with his helmet poised on his knee. No doubt, he has been readied by Coach Taylor for this situation earlier. When the camera shoots back to Coach Taylor, we only see his right side profile. The sun is beaming in his face, so when he answers questions, he squints his eyes but still tries to maintain eye contact. Many people see the use of maintaining eye contact when having a conversation as a sign

of honesty. In the next full shot, the camera shows Coach Taylor again; however, his arms are folded in front of him. No doubt the purpose of this shot is show that Coach Taylor might be defensive as he is figuring out the accusation that the reporter is alluding to. Then, when Jason Street comments on his relationship with Coach Taylor, only a close up of the right profile of Jason and Coach Taylor are given. The sun beams brightly on Jason as he speaks about Taylor; however, the lighting casts Taylor's face in a bit of a shadow. This gives the illusion that Coach Taylor is humble about his experiences with Jason and his rise in his coaching career. This is an interesting aspect, because earlier, when the camera captured a close up of the right side profile of Taylor, the sun was beaming in his eye. As Coach Taylor continues to speak with the reporter, much of the camera work is simply a close-up of Jason listening to Taylor speak.

By just looking at the camera range, point of view, and lighting for this short scene, much can be interpreted. For starters, this scene depicts Taylor as a humble person who explicitly acknowledges his success. He understands the appropriate decorum for interacting with news reporters, even if he is unhappy with the tone of the conversation. Coach Taylor is depicted as having self-control, and he is easy to get along with.

#### *Advancement in Sports*

The pilot episode also gives an example of how sports often disillusion people into thinking that they opportunities for advancement are high. Take for example the scene when Smash speaks to a reporter about his future. In an interview, he tells a reporter, "We go in undefeated, shattering records. Taking these high expectations to unimaginable new highs. State champions." The reporter asks him, "What after high

school, Brian?” Smash answers, “Me and Mac Brown gonna get our win on in Pasadena. Get my national championship on, my Heisman on.” The reporter replies, “It’s known that a couple years ago, your passed away and he’s not gonna be able-.” Smash interrupts him and says, No, look, I don’t talk about that all right? You wanna ask me football questions, I’ll answer your football questions.”

As explained in the literature review of this paper, student athletes, who have never been successful academically, are often encouraged to believe that their athletic talents may be their own chance for success in the world. The scene’s use of slang terms, which are reflective of a contemporary setting, such as “gonna,” “wanna,” and “Get my national championship on” are most likely use to portray Smash in a negative light. Jason Street, who spoke politely, calling the reporter “Sir,” and was articulate, using complete sentences with no slang, showed evidence that academics and his presence were important to him. In Smash’s scene, there is very little evidence that academics are a priority for him. In Jason’s interview with the reporter, he sat up right, with good posture, and maintained eye contact with the reporter the entire time. On the other hand, Smash, sat back in chair, with his helmet held limply in front of him. This posture depicts a more comfortable attitude, almost discourteous. However, Smash’s character in this scene is one that many boys, especially African American ones, can relate to. Smash is young, his father is not in his life, he has no academic priorities, and figures that football will be his pathway to success. This character is the stereotypical image of what African American boys in the urban or rural areas.

Analyzing this scene from a filming standpoint will give a researcher a similar reading. This scene is the first one from the pilot that includes Smash. However, when it starts, the camera does not immediately begin filming on him. The camera is actually behind Smash, and focused on the reporter talking to him. For a couple frames, people are walking between the camera and its focus on the reporter. This view serves to allow audiences time to observe how the reporter is taking in Smash's comment. The reporter's face is expressionless, so that allows audiences to have an open mind in responding to how Smash's character will develop. In the next cut, the camera shot is close up for a side profile view of Smash. The camera cuts quickly to a full shot. This is the first time that viewers are able to get a sense of Smash physically. Smash sits alone, as camera crews are working quickly behind him. The space between Smash and rest of the scene's action helps to denote that Smash is independent, and perhaps a bit disconnected from the team. A few frames later the camera cuts to the reporter asking a question. However, camera uses a high angle shot to show him talking. This shot helps to create an awareness of Smash's lack of academic priority. By making viewers look up to the reporter, they are forced to acknowledge his success outside of the athletic arena. The reporter is African American, well spoken, well dressed, and poised. There is no doubt that in order for him to have reached his level in his career an education took him there. These elements emphasize Brian's lack of interested in academics. When Brian answers the question, the close up camera angle does not stay in that position long. It actually cuts back to a close up of the reporter as he is listening to Smash speak. The reporter smiles gently as Smash speaks, almost as if to say, "That's cute kid." As Smash is

talking, the scene does a cutaway to Smash running with the ball at practice, and then cuts back to a close up to show Smash finish his sentence. The use of this cutaway during the scene helps viewers to understand that Smash's mind is always in one place and one place only – football.

### *Representation of African Americans*

When speaking about race and the pilot, it is important to note that Smash Williams is the only minority character in the pilot episode. His character portrays many of the racial stereotypes perceived of African Americans. One example of this is seen during the scene at the car dealership. The car dealership is owned by Buddy Garrity. He starts off the scene by saying to the crowd, "Uh, we have a few introductions that we need to make at this time, starting with our mayor, Lucy Rodell." The audience claps for her, as she stands at the podium. She begins, "Thank you, thank you, and welcome everybody, to the openin' of this beautiful automobile dealership owned and operated by Buddy Garrity. Congratulations Buddy." She claps, and the audience joins in. She continues and says, "And of course, we wanna extend a special welcome to Coach Taylor and his coaching staff. Gentlemen, can you join me up here?" The staff begins to walk over the stage. She motions to them and says, "Come on up here fellows. Come on up, we want you up here on the stage with us." As the staff and players file onto the stage, the mayor looks out to the audience, who is clapping and cheering, and says, "This is your team ladies and gentlemen." Coach Taylor goes to the podium and says, "I'm gonna make this quick. As a lot of you know, my wife does most of the talking around the house. I'm gonna get in a lot of trouble for that too. Uh, thank you mayor. Uh, I



wanna second what Buddy said. I wanna thank you, everyone for coming out tonight. And I just want to say what a privilege it is for each and every one of us standing up here to be part of the mighty Dillon football tradition. We all – and I speak for each and every coach, player, and uh, trainer up here. We all feel honored. And we feel fully prepared to represent this beloved community this Friday night, and every Friday night. Until we bring home that state championship.” Smash Williams enters the scene, and begins rapping, “Panthers gonna play extreme. Westerby gonna cry and scream. Panthers gonna get diabolical. Hold up, hold up, hold up. Like Tom Cruise gets scientological.” The audience cheers as he continues, “Panthers gonna whoop that ass. As long as Street gets Smash the pass. C’mon, give it up, give it up! Put the rings in the air! Make some noise. Get up on your feet!”

This scene highlights the stereotypes of young African American males as being gangster rappers and arrogant athletes. The scene starts off with a formal tone. When Buddy Garrity speaks, he is dressed in a suit and tie. When the mayor speaks, she also is dressed in a suit, but is even accessorized with pearls around her neck and wrist. Coach Taylor, just as Garrity, is dressed in a suit and tie. All three speak in a thoughtful tone. Their short addresses are filled with compliments and gratefulness to the crowd. Those in the audience are dressed nicely as well, many in dresses and shirts and ties. However, the shot that presents Smash to the audience shows him in a polo shirt. The fact that he is wearing a polo shirt is not the issue. All of the other football players on stage have a polo shirt on as well. However, Smash has popped his collar up, and has the sleeves rolled up and tucked under, so that it looks like a muscle shirt. Unlike the other players,

who look uniformed in appearance, Smash has a rather large gold cross dangling from his neck. Rather than keep the same tone as Garrity, the mayor, and Coach Taylor – one of gratefulness and compliments, he raps about himself. This scene showed that Smash does not like to conform, likes to be in the spotlight, and once again academic language is not important to him, because he wouldn't have made up words like “scientological.” Although the scene does portray Smash with stereotypical images of young African American males, they don't portray him as being unlikeable. When he first enters the scene, the crowd cheers for him. Throughout the rap, the camera scans the audience, and people are smiling, and enjoying his performance. When he is done, his team clamors around him in support.

When analyzing this from a filming standing, this same conclusion can be reached. For example, when the scene with Smash begins, the camera starts filming from an over the shoulder shot, as if someone is standing behind Smash. A viewer cannot tell if it is Smash or not by the image, but they can tell it is Smash if they recognize his voice. The purpose of this shot is to add anticipation to what will happen next. The shot quickly cuts to an eye level shot, perhaps from the point of view from someone that is on stage with Smash. This shot gives audiences a level to relate to his excitement of being on stage. As he raps, a shaky camera makes many quick shots of Smash, the audience, and Coach Taylor's reaction of what is happening. The purpose of this filming technique is to allow audience to see that the crowd enjoys Smash's performance. Coach Taylor is smiling during this time. With Coach Taylor being the authority figure, audiences will feel comfortable in liking Smash as well. The shaky camera feeling, allows audience to

feel like they are in the midst of the crowd, like they are part of the audience. At the end of the scene, Smash puts in his last effort to get the crowd as enthusiastic as possible. During this part of the scene, the camera stays focused on him longer than any other part of the scene. The purpose of this is to allow viewers to understand the intensity that Smash's energy that has been put forth in his performance. All in all, the camera work in this scene depicts Smash as a likeable character. His actions portray that is the stereotypical African American athletic youth, who may be arrogant, and love the spotlight. However, although these elements often have a negative connotation, Smash is depicted as likeable. The arrogant elements can be twisted to a more positive connotation of confident. Likewise, rather than being attention seeking, Smash could be thought of as simply a performer.

#### *Representation of family, youth, and socioeconomic status*

Family representation in the pilot episode was diverse and varied. First, viewers saw examples of traditional family models through the Taylors, with Dad, Mom, and daughter, as well as through the Garritys, with Dad, Mom, and several children, and even the Streets, with Dad, Mom, and son. There are two scenes that seem to highlight the traditional family structure. The first short scene occurs at the beginning of the pilot. The scene shows the Garrity family, getting ready in the morning. It begins with Mrs. Garrity speaking to Lila saying, "And no going out with Jason Street this evening. We're having a family dinner tonight. That means the entire family, dinner together." Lila, who is occupied by decorating cookies replies, "Rally rehearsal tonight." Her little brother interrupts by saying, "She's gonna be rehearsing how far she can get her tongue

into Jason Street's mouth." Buddy Garrity comments, "Nip it." Lila catches his attention by saying, "I love you daddy," as she gets ready to leave. He replies, "Uh, love you too baby." This scene shows highlights the stereotypical traditional family. In the scene we have an authoritative father, a loving and concerned mother, the daughter who is the apple of her parent's eye, and the annoying little brother. Traditional families can relate to this structure, because often times their families are arranged in a very similar framework.

Examining this short scene from a filming aspect, gives more information as to the representation of the traditional family, as well as why audiences would feel that they can relate to the Garrity family. When the scene begins, the focus is not on Mrs. Garrity who is talking, but rather viewers see the outside of their house. The camera pans around it, as Mrs. Garrity talks. The purpose of this focus is to allow audiences to understand the socioeconomic status of the Garrity's. Their home is made of brick. They have a two car garage, a well manicured lawn, with two large SUVs in the driveway. A shaky camera pans around the house, as if this is the view that someone would get if they were driving past the house. As Mrs. Garrity continues to talk, the camera cuts to a medium shot of Lila decorating cookies. The purpose of this is to establish Lila as a main character. She is dressed in her Dillon Panther cheerleading clothes, obviously to introduce her loyalty to the program. Her hair is pulled back into a ponytail, with fluffy bangs hanging in front. Her image is purposefully, setting up the girl-next-door look. In the next shot, a close of Mrs. Garrity shows a blond haired woman, who seems in control and confident. This shot serves to establish Mrs. Garrity as the type of mom that American women wish

to be like. The next shot of Lila, telling her mom that she will not be able to make dinner, allows audiences to see that Lila is a little bratty, and as all teenagers are – a bit self-centered. As the annoying little brother comments, the camera pans around to the breakfast table. This shot serves to show how the family is united in their morning traditions. As the scene ends, the camera shows a close up of Lila giving her dad a kiss on the way out. This shot serves to highlight that fact that Lila and her father have a close relationship. Although this scene establishes, the Garrity's as an upper class family, their traditions and relationships are elements that many traditional American families value as well.

Viewers are also introduced to several non-traditional family units such Riggins and his brother with no parental figures, and Matt who lives with his grandmother and seems to be her primary caretaker. These two family structures also highlight a view into a lower socioeconomic status. A scene that serves to highlight these positions occurs with Matt and his grandmother at the beginning of the pilot. The scene begins with a view of Matt's grandmother sitting in a chair in the living room. She is watching an infomercial on TV. Matt clears dishes away, and then sets two sandwiches on the counter. He tells her, "Okay Grandma, I made you two tuna fish sandwiches, and I put your medicine in the green Gatorade, okay?" As he speaks he grabs his school items to leave. Grandma replies, "Green Gatorade. But I only want one sandwich." Matt replies, "Well, then just eat one." Grandma gets a little argumentative and responds, "But you made two, and I just want one." Matt tries to diffuse the situation, and responds back saying, "No, no, no, no, I'll eat the other one when I get home from practice, okay?"

Grandma seems happy with this arrangement and says, “You’ll be hungry after that good ol’ practice.” A horn honks in the background, but grandma continues, “You . . . I adore.” She laughs as Matt gives her a hug. Matt leaves the house, and gets into the car of his friend of his friend who takes him to school. This scene highlights the non-traditional family setting. As a high school student, Matt has to balance the pressures of school and football, as well as taking care of his grandmother. It is obvious that she is stubborn, and may even be a little confused in her old age. Matt tries his best to be patient with her, and take care of her the best he can, despite the fact that most of his time is spent at school.

Analyzing this scene from a filming aspect provides more information as to why audiences will relate to the show, and how producers highlighted this character’s situation. When the scene begins, the camera takes time to pan around Matt’s house. Viewers see a dilapidated home. It clearly needs a paint job, and the trees in front are bare and dying. This purpose of this shot is to establish that Matt and his grandmother are in a lower socioeconomic status, and to allow audiences to build sympathy for Matt’s situation. As the camera pans, there is a close up of the front yard. There is a sign in the front yard, advertising that Matt plays for the Dillon Panthers. All the players have signs such as this in their front yards; however, Matt’s sign is leaning to the left, almost out of the ground. The next shot shows grandma watching TV. It is a mid range shot, that shows her left side profile. The focus is a little blurry, and the lighting is dark. This creates an uncomfortable view for the audience, causing them to anticipate what will happen next. A shaky camera cuts quickly to different aspects of the house such as an

older television, and mismatched odds and ends around the house. This allows viewers to understand that this house has not been cared for. As Matt gets ready to leave the house, the camera focuses on non-significant items, but other items that are in the background help to establish the situation – dirty dishes, several medicine bottles, and older cabinetry. The quick shots show that Matt is in a rush to leave, and taking care of grandma is holding him back from leaving. While grandma and Matt have the conversation about the sandwiches, the camera cuts to a close up shot of grandma tapping her foot on the ground as she talks. This shot adds to the impatience of the scene, highlighting that Matt is late and needs to go. The shaky camera that seems to sway back and forth while filming emphasizes irritation that Matt has with the situation. Finally, the honking horn in the background helps to establish that pressure that is on Matt on these typical school day mornings. The elements of filming in these scene help to create sympathy for Matt's situation. Audiences will feel drawn to Matt, due to struggles, and his maturity in putting his grandmother first.

### **E. Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to show how the television show's contemporary setting is reflected particularly regarding representation of race. This chapter also showed that the pilot episode tried to appeal to audience by using situations and characters that the average American viewer was similar to. The show used characters from various socioeconomic backgrounds, different family structures, and varied personal issues. Although many of these circumstances are not original, it still added to the charm of the show. The show also tried to create appeal by the use of visual elements

in filming. The show used a realistic aesthetic to create a naturalistic viewing experience. Many of the elements employed were similar to those used in documentary style films. Components such as shaky camera movements, close ups, use of lighting, and quick cuts added to the viewers experience. Audiences could feel like they were actually in the scene, feeling what the characters felt, and seeing what the characters were seeing. The television series highlighted its contemporary setting in various ways, particularly through its use of representation regarding race by reflecting thinking prevalent to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



## VI. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to highlight the significance and representation of race in the film and television show *Friday Night Lights*. The role of race is significant because it is interrelated to the topics of sports, family and socioeconomics. *Friday Night Lights* used racial stereotypes like those that the media often uses to emphasize representation of race in sports, family and socioeconomics. Although there were similarities regarding the portrayal of race, the film and the television show were different because their treatment of race reflects the time periods for each. The core claim of this thesis showed the representation of race was different in the film as compared to the television show due to their varied settings, one historical and the other contemporary. Although both the film and the television show were produced in the 2000s, their different historical periods allowed for contrasting representations of race in spite of the fact that they both drew from the book, *Friday Night Lights*. The film's representation of race is reflective of its late 1980s setting. Therefore, due to historical setting, viewers of the film would see a more explicit handling of racial issues. That time period allowed for issues to race to be handled straightforwardly and directly. However, the television show's contemporary setting, by contrast, allowed for the representation of race to be handled more suggestively, indirectly, and implicitly, which reflects the new ways of thinking about race that are prevalent of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

I would like to see an investigation of *Friday Night Lights* continue. For starters, if the sequel to the first movie is released in the near future, will the sequel address explicitly or implicitly? Secondly, I would like to see more research done in regards to the television series. For the sake of this paper, only the television pilot could be examined. However, it would be interesting to see if the implicit commentary on issues of race in the community and family are stable throughout the entire series. Do the statements about such issues seem to always stay consistent? Finally, I would also like to see a synopsis on how films, television shows, etc. comment on the role of race in high school football in American society.

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