



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindadeild

IN BLACK AND WHITE: A STUDY OF THE PORTRAYAL OF RACISM
IN THE BOOK, FILM, AND TELEVISION VERSIONS OF H.G.
BISSINGER'S *FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS*

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

Heimir Berg Vilhjálmsson

Febrúar 2009

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Enskuskor

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ABSTRACT

This essay is about H.G. Bissinger's non-fictional book *Friday Night Lights: A Town, a Team, and a Dream* and its portrayal of racism in connection with a small Texan town's high school football team. The portrayal of racism in the book will be compared to how two other versions of the story confront the subject, and which version addresses it most effectively.

The other versions discussed consist of a Hollywood feature film released in 2004, produced by Brian Grazer and directed by Peter Berg, which bears the name of the book, and the first season of a television series, produced and directed by the same producer and director of the movie, released in 2006, and which also holds the original name (IMDB).

Although the blatant racism that Bissinger reveals as the norm in West Texas during his residence in the depressing oil town of Odessa is confronted separately by all three versions, they portray the problem in different ways and are therefore subject to comparison. This essay is going to reveal through evidence, argument and discussion, that it is in fact the original book by the author Bissinger that shines the clearest light on the issue of racism.

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INTRODUCTION

The book, *Friday Night Lights* by the author H.G. Bissinger, tells the story of the 1988 high school football season of the Permian Panthers, and simultaneously of the whole town of Odessa. Initially, Bissinger only wanted to write a sports book about high school football in general, but once in Odessa he realized he had to write about the impact it had upon daily life in the town as well. Although it was a town whose economy was driven by the instability of the oil industry, it was just as much a town of high school football. The town was held together by the football team and it did not matter in what condition the economy was, what the weather was like, or even who was the president of the United States, as for fifty odd minutes every Friday night during the fall, the Permian Panthers fought for the continuing honor of the town. Despite the closeness the inhabitants of Odessa felt every time the Friday night game came nearer, it was not a deep-rooted feeling since the town was rife with all kinds of prejudices, especially concerning the racial attributes of their neighbors.

This essay on *Friday Night Lights* will argue that although racism is evident throughout the non-fictional book by Bissinger, as well as in the Hollywood movie and prime time television show inspired by the book, it is Bissinger's original version which presents us with the most realistic treatment of this subject because he manages to confront the subject more thoroughly than Peter Berg and Brian Grazer, a director on the one hand and a producer on the other, manage to do in their other versions, and gives details of prejudice from the very beginnings of the town's history. As a result, Bissinger manages to catch the essence of racism, whereas the other versions are not able to do so and therefore lack the same depth in their discussion of this phenomenon.

BRIEF ASSESSMENT OF THE MATERIALS IN DISCUSSION

The book, *Friday Night Lights*, is a true story of the most awful racism Bissinger had ever witnessed. It portrays the story of a town, more than that of a team, in pursuit of the ultimate dream of becoming champions of the state of Texas and describes “the wonder of a group of boys coming together with little more than a dream in their heads and somehow getting an inch away from that dream” (Bissinger, 2001). While living in Odessa, Bissinger witnessed too many social problems to ignore them and decided to discuss most of them in his book. Among these problems was the issue of racism, which is clearly one of the most appalling and in the same way most striking feature of the dwindling oil town. The racism was so casual that nobody even noticed it anymore since everybody had their minds so imprinted with views of the black population, and therefore most of them did not even care if it was racist, that was simply the way in Odessa, Texas, during the year of 1988.

A few years after the publication of the book, a movie version, based on the events depicted in the book, was produced by Brian Grazer, in association with director Peter Berg and writer H.G. Bissinger. The movie is true to the source of the book although with minor differences, but the heart of it “chronicled the enjoyment, pressure, and pain placed upon the team of 17 year old boys” (Mazurek). The biggest difference from the book is the fact that the movie is not able to go into all the issues Bissinger discusses in his book and therefore it focuses on the football aspect, rather than being a study of small town Texas life, with all the faults and imperfections it contains. As a result, due to the depth of the book, the movie cannot follow the book to the core of its sociological studies, for as the author of the book, H.G. Bissinger, said in an interview that if everything in the book had been used in the movie, it would “have

been a ten-hour movie given the book's complexity" (Bissinger, Reading Group Guides). The movie is therefore oriented toward football and skims past the racial and social bitterness portrayed in the book, despite glancing at the two aforementioned subjects.

The television series that was made later, aims to go back to the source and follow the structure Bissinger had used in his book. That is, the directors only want to "use the football season to add structure, but the series will definitely be much more character driven" (Travers). By character driven he means that football would not be as important a factor as in the movie and that they would tell a story of a society rather than a team pushing for the highest honors in high school football, the state championship title, by making the football less accentuated. By following Bissinger's construction they manage to delve deeper into the society under discussion, whereas the movie cannot do that, mainly because of the time limit it has to contend with. The series therefore manages to explore some of the issues that Bissinger puts forth in the book, but which have been left out of the film.

It was intended to be a book that was a very fair and balanced look at sociology and that is definitely something we wanted to do in the show and one of the reasons why we wanted to do the show is so we could do what we couldn't do in the movie, which Bissinger couldn't do in the book, which is to explore these issues. (Topel)

The television show manages to explore the issues that Bissinger portrays in his book, and could not be covered in the movie, and moreover, it is able to portray all the problems without being too offensive or biased toward either side, as with the subject of race for an example. As a result,

the television show does, in fact, manage to go into the racist debate without causing too much of a stir while discussing the problem.

RACISM UNVEILED

Deep inside the vast plains of Texas lies the small town of Odessa, a town that seems just as insignificant as every other small town that spreads its roots across the state of Texas. Indeed, there are many towns as depressing as Odessa that consist of the same characteristics, the same economical instability and melancholy for prolonged periods of the year. These towns feel the same, look the same and, on the whole, appear to be none other than Odessa in disguise, wandering some hundreds of miles from home. Nevertheless, one does not need to look closely at the town to realize that there is something special here, something that the other towns lack – they desperately want a successful high school football team comparable to the famous Permian Panthers. They are the heart and soul of Odessa and without them “life really wouldn’t be worth livin’” (Bissinger 20). If it were not for the great Permian Panthers, it is almost certain that life in Odessa would be even more pessimistic and disheartening. Although Bissinger’s primary topic is football, it is a book about so much more than high school football as it represents through sociological studies a fair view of a conservative town filled with racial prejudices, among other issues. Bissinger is able to illustrate the growth of the deep racism that was present in Odessa from the very establishment of the town, because he gets to know the heart of the town while he resided there, and that is one of the reasons that his representation is the most realistic one of those available and discussed here.

The fact that he is able to discuss the influential persons of Willie Hammond, Jr. and Laurence Hurd and their fate, is extremely important for the reader to comprehend the vicious and inhumane prejudices against the black population in the Texas town. The aforementioned characters were both respected and significant in the search for a brighter future for the black community in general, and of great importance in fully demonstrating the reality of the monopoly of the almost untouchable white community of Odessa. On the one hand there was Willie Hammond, Jr., “the first black city councilman, and later the first black county commissioner in the history of the county” (Bissinger 95). As he was a public figure and of great importance to the black community, he became the first black person that others could look up to as a role model. Nevertheless, he was later convicted of insurance fraud (Bissinger 95), although always maintaining his innocence as he claimed he was the victim of a political setup because of his ethnicity. The other influential person referred to above, Laurence Hurd, was a minister who resided in Odessa and demanded the desegregation of the schools. He gained great support from the minorities, but as soon as his voice became too powerful a weapon for them, lightning struck. His criminal background was discovered, and that further established the poor view the whites had of the blacks. The whites maintained that their view of blacks had nothing to do with racism or prejudice, it was just how things were, and that blacks were notorious criminals that were not worthy of respect because of their own actions. Hurd was later convicted for an armed robbery of a bank he never admitted having robbed and the dominance of the white population had therefore managed to silence two of the most influential voices the black community had ever had in the society of Odessa. The black community had put all their faith on those two individuals to lead them out of the misery of the south side, only to be struck down. Not once, but

twice. If the desegregation of the school system that they both fought for had not taken place, it might have been a knockout blow.

Bissinger obviously felt obliged to elaborate on these two individuals, as they were the first black persons to gain respectable status in the blue-collar town of Odessa, and since they were not mentioned in either of the two other versions of *Friday Night Lights* it is apparent that Bissinger's original work was in fact the one which discussed the issue of racism to its core. However, it is understandable that the movie and the television series did not go into the details of this particular subject, or mention it for that matter, given the brief time they had to discuss the subject of racism as extensively as the book. Therefore, it can be maintained that through his book, that Bissinger discussed racial prejudice in Odessa all the way back to its origins, whereas the other versions were only able to demonstrate partly the whole issue of racism, in their adaptations of Bissinger's book.

RAILROAD TRACKS

As stated above, the book follows the Permian Panthers during the year of 1988, and despite being a book about high school football it is more of a sociological study of small-town American life. It gives the reader the opportunity to experience the small town feel of the town from its inhabitants and through their lives, which is essential to get the essence of the story being told, which is not only that of the players of the team, but also of the town of Odessa itself. Given the freedom the author has to depict all the racism in Odessa, it is understandable that the book goes deeper into the background of the place and its history than in the other two versions of *Friday Night Lights* as it would not be possible to describe it to such a great extent because of the approaches both the

movie and the television series, make. This statement is especially true when it comes to the movie version, rather than the television series, as the latter had more time to depict the racial discrimination, because of the obvious difference in time limits. Despite the fact that the television series had more time to explore the delicate issue than the movie, they do not pry into the historical background as much as they could have done.

To understand just how deep the racism is in Odessa, one has to look at the background and see how Bissinger portrays it as almost innate in the inhabitants of the depressing oil-town. He portrays the majority of the people of Odessa as old-fashioned, especially towards the subject of race, and they looked upon the black community with disgust and referred to them as “niggers”, an adjective as common as any other in Odessa (Bissinger 89). The town had always consisted of two parts, one in which the white community lived and the other in which the minorities lived and amazingly in the year 1988, at the time Bissinger stayed there, not much had changed throughout the years. Although the negative attitude towards blacks had declined, the railroad tracks still divided the town in to two, as they had always done.

... still rooted in the days when the line between white and black was bluntly defined by the American version of the Berlin Wall – the railroad tracks that inevitably ran through the heart of town. (Bissinger 91)

The black population therefore lives below the tracks, often in extreme poverty and discomfort, while the white population enjoys all the riches life offered during booms in the tedious oil industry. Bissinger's reference to the Berlin Wall clearly demonstrates just how strong racial attitudes are in Odessa, and that they are nowhere near disappearing.

Despite the railroad tracks literally defining the border between the minorities and the whites, a similar kind of railroad track is emotionally imprinted in most of the white population as they simply cannot accept the blacks as decent citizens of Odessa. In neither the movie version, nor the television show, are there any such clear distinctions shown comparable to Bissinger's description of the railroad tracks that partition the town.

Nevertheless, there is one scene in the television show that could be a symbol of some kind of tracks defining the status of ethnicity in the minds of people in Texas, although without being as clear as in the book. This scene is in direct contrast to Bissinger's illustration of the cultural racism in Odessa, through which the white people used to disdain the black population that lived below the railroad tracks. In the television show, it is Ray "Voodoo" Tatum, a black quarterback, who shows signs of racism when he angrily mentions to another player of Hispanic origin that he should go back across the river to where he came from, referring to the Rio Grande River that is a natural boundary between the United States and Mexico, defining the border between the state of Texas and Mexico (Encyclopedia). It can therefore be claimed that Voodoo's lack of tolerance for the Hispanics is clearly demonstrated in this short sentence, which is absolutely out of character with the unity between the minorities in Odessa as described by Bissinger in his book. As a result of this, it can be argued that although the television show has one indirect allusion that points towards "tracks" or a dividing line defining the status of ethnicity in Dillon (the television series "Odessa"), it is clear that the book portrays them in the most authentic way.

ONLY WAY OUT

When Bissinger lived in Odessa, you could not find any respectable black people that others could look up to. Therefore, the importance of the school desegregation in 1982, eighteen years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, was immense to the black community, as it seemed the only way for the blacks to gain respect from the white population and to be accepted in the community of Odessa was through playing football with the Permian Panthers. In a sense, the Wall of Fame in the field house became the claim for fame for blacks in Odessa (Clappsdale), as it was virtually impossible for them to gain the respect of the white part of town by any other means. Bissinger clearly gives evidence of this in his book, for example through his illustration of the frustrations Boobie has to endure. He is a big six-foot running back who weighs two hundred pounds and runs as fast as anybody else. He is the star player of the team and alone merits the ticket price to the games. He has recruiters from all over the country monitoring his situation and trying to entice him to sign for their schools. He is arrogant and overconfident, he considers himself the best player, and makes sure that everybody knows what he is capable of accomplishing. He flourishes on attention and demands to be the focal point in any situation. In spite of everything, he becomes injured and consequently he has become an expendable product that has been exploited to the fullest while it was possible, for prior to the injury he was considered one of the best talents that had arisen for a long time and an essential part of the team to say the least. He had his vision on becoming a professional player and had a dream of being the “rookie of the year or somethin’ like that” (Bissinger 56), only to be broken down and have his candlelight blown out as there is “no candle that burned out more quickly than that of the high school athlete” (Bissinger xiv). As a result his life

has taken an enormous blow, as there were few things he can do in Odessa besides pleasing the town through touchdowns and wild runs down the turf at Ratcliff Stadium on Friday Nights.

In the other versions of *Friday Night Lights*, there is evidence of similar racism, once more through the character of Boobie Miles on the one hand and Smash on the other. In the movie, there is one scene that demonstrates this particularly well. Shortly after Boobie discovers that the horrific injury he had suffered would lead to his early retirement from football, and subsequently realizing that his dream of getting away from Odessa is in shatters, he notices two black garbage collectors doing their job and becomes conscious of the fact that being black in Odessa at the time of the events depicted in the movie, his future would probably be of a similar nature to those garbage collectors. This scene is a great representation of Boobie's agonies as described by Bissinger in the book, as it catches the very essence of his mind. That scene does not need words to demonstrate what he was thinking as it was such a brilliant commentary by the director of the movie. The future that Boobie sees in these two garbage collectors is not the same one he had anticipated as he was convinced he could not do anything but play football. As he realizes this, he simultaneously comes to terms with the fact that he is the trash being thrown away.

In the television series, however, it can be claimed that Smash only uses steroids in order to get away from Dillon. He has been told by some well-known scout that he has to improve his game if he is to get a scholarship and Smash therefore decides upon taking the steroids as he can see no other way out of Dillon for him and his family but through his football career. Although not obviously attached to the subject of racism, it can certainly be argued that Smash only takes the steroids because if he cannot get a scholarship, his family will have to live forever in Dillon, a

town that treats black people like second-class citizens. He therefore exploits the illegal performance-enhancing drug in order to leave Dillon in search of a better life in a town free of racial bigotry. In the book, Bissinger revealed Boobie's case in a much more descriptive way and bluntly reveals that he wants to get out of Odessa and that he is being treated unfairly because of his ethnicity;

“What would Boobie be without football?” echoed a Permian coach when asked the question one day. The answer was obvious, as clear as night and day, black and white in Odessa, Texas, and he responded without the slightest hesitation.

“A big ol’ dumb nigger.” (Bissinger 67)

As can be seen from the preceding extract from Bissinger's book, blacks are not held in high regard by the majority of the white population, who want nothing to do with them if they did not provide anything to the advantage of the whites. Although Smash's affair with the steroids can be argued to be racially motivated, we never see as clear a distinction of racism through his character during the television show, or through the film version of Boobie Miles, as in the book itself. Both the movie and the television show use another way to express the subject of racism. In spite of this, it is clear that the aforementioned events of Boobie and Smash are colored with racism although it is not as brusquely mentioned as in the book.

BLACK ANIMALS

Laurence Hurd, mentioned earlier, was said by Bissinger to have a firm belief about sports, and his belief revolved around the fact that in the twentieth century blacks were being exploited in the sports arena for the gain of the white man, just as they were used on the cotton fields as slaves for many generations before. Hurd's point was that, since blacks' athletic prowess could get them to stardom and respectability they had to be prepared for the long way down if something should stand in their way, for the whites would not hesitate to "spit them out once their talents as running backs or linebackers or wide receivers had been fully exhausted" (Bissinger 109). This is exactly the treatment Boobie Miles has to tolerate according to the book by Bissinger, but not quite the same as in the movie by Peter Berg, the producer of both the movie and the television series of *Friday Night Lights*, under discussion here. As previously declared, Boobie Miles is the best example on this point in the book since he is the star running back of the team. He was considered one of the best talents to have arisen for a long time, and he himself was not just *dreaming* of being a professional football player, he knew he was going to *be* a professional player. But first, he was going to win the Texas State Championship with the Permian team and he was going to be the best player. In spite of his vision, he did not manage to do any of the aforementioned since he became injured and never regained full strength again. Since he could not offer the whites anything after his injury he was considered useless and expendable, as can be seen in the following quote:

... just do to him what a trainer did to a horse that had pulled up lame at the track, just take a gun and shoot him to put him

out of the misery of a life that no longer had any value.
(Bissinger 67)

Bissinger reveals the astonishing truth of racism in Odessa in such a blatant fashion and although it may strike the reader as somewhat of a disgusting prejudice against another race, it most certainly was only the general way of thinking in Odessa. It can be seen from the preceding quote that Hurd was not far off the truth in regards to the comparison to the cotton field, as whites in town thought that Boobie ought to be treated like an animal because of his skin color because his days as a quality player had come to an end. A similar reference to an animal is used in the movie to refer to black individuals, although it is not pointed at anyone in particular. It is more of an argument between the officials of the Permian team and the Carter Cowboys team prior to their State Championship game, about which referees should referee the important game. The main dispute revolves around how many stripes the “zebras” should have, a metaphorical reference to the referees, the animals “zebras” being best known for their distinctively white and black stripes. The teams are trying to come to terms with the ethnicity of the officials, as both are afraid of receiving poor refereeing if the officials were ethnically in favor of the opposing team. Although football referees in the United States often go by the name of “zebras”, because of the outfit they wear during matches, one can get the impression during this particular scene that the director wants to raise a dispute about the subject of racism. The gesture that the actors use implies that they are in fact arguing over the ethnicity of the referees, rather than the uniforms as such. This scene is a clear example of the subconscious method Peter Berg uses in order to portray the racism of the book in his movie.

The connection to the zebras in the movie can be viewed as a link between the part in the book where Boobie is referred to as a lame horse that ought to be shot, and the comments made in regards of Smash and similar players in the television show. The callous animal metaphor mentioned above is at one time referred to in a comparable way during the television show. It comes when coach Mac McGill refers to players like Smash as being fearless, like junkyard dogs in the aftermath of a game in which he starred. What he means by this comparison is that the black athletes are able to run tirelessly all night long if they want to, whereas the white athletes will never be able to do that. However, these comments from the coach are clearly meant to demonstrate the racial imbalance that Bissinger felt so obvious during his residence in the small town of Odessa, and which he reveals so blatantly in his book. The unashamed racism that is aimed at Boobie in the book does not transfer as plainly into the movie version, which in no way exposes such malicious and spiteful racism towards him as evident in the book, except for the scene in which he gets injured, as it is apparent that white players from the opposite team injure him deliberately. Their animosity can be seen when the two opposing players celebrate the tackle that injures Boobie by sneakily slapping their hands. However, following his injury and right until one of the final scenes in the movie, he is still considered a part of the team that seeks to follow its dream of winning a State championship title, although he is not able to contribute on the field. Although his character might feel like an outsider it is apparent from the speech Coach Gary Gaines makes during the final game of the season, when he refers to Boobie being willing to give everything to be out on that field with the rest of the team, that he is not being treated like an outsider, or more importantly, like a useless black boy.

The racism aimed at Boobie in the movie is rather implied in the view that his future holds nothing special for him, as is discussed more closely elsewhere in this essay. However, in the television show, it is not a black player who gets injured, instead it is a promising white quarterback by the name of Jason Street who is paralyzed during a game. As we remember Boobie being racially and socially excluded in the book after his injury, in the television show, it is quite the opposite as Jason Street eventually gets a position as a coach on his team. Racially motivated or not, it can however be argued that being white is beneficiary to the unlucky quarterback as he is not taken from his teammates, but brought to them again in order to help him regain the confidence he needs to deal with his new life in a wheelchair. During the year of 1988, positioned in West Texas, an injured black player would not even have had the remotest possibility of being as fortunate as Jason Street was following a similar injury. As can be seen in this discussion, it can be argued that all three versions of *Friday Night Lights* use comments regarding black individuals and animals as a means to undermine the importance of black people, which is clearly not something that sympathetic people do.

BACK IN ODESSA

At the time Bissinger lived in Odessa, the education blacks received at Permian was not particularly educational as most of them were only attending the school in order to increase the value of the school's athletic prowess. Although the blacks in the book by Bissinger are not portrayed as essential to the academic purpose of the school, they are there only to run fast and tackle hard, the film version of the movie does suggest that white as well as black players are equally lazy. In the movie, Don Billingsley is not interested in attending classes as he has his mind on the field, which can be evident from his choice of subjects in the school. He

chooses the easiest subject he can find in the form of Food Science, because he does not want to be in the school at all. To him, school is only a setback for the impending Friday night and it delays the joy of being on the field, fighting the opposition players, tackling and dishonoring them, in the name of Odessa. While Boobie Miles is still not injured during the movie he talks about there being only one subject in school, and that is football. Nothing else matters as much as winning the State Championship.

In the early days of Odessa the minorities absolutely had no rights whatsoever and there were in fact laws that prohibited them from having certain human rights according to Bissinger (91-92). He informs the reader that since the black population of Odessa was only about 5 per cent (Bissinger 94) of the total of the inhabitants, and nearly all of them living below the tracks on the south side, the white population could go for days without even seeing a single black person. They were therefore unfamiliar with their manners and customs and felt intimidated by them and feared them, as if they were the plague or Black Death in person.

...the lack of contact created distrust and fear, and only further reinforced the images whites heard about and read about and had been in the town's psyche since the early days. (Bissinger 94-95)

Those who were frightened by the blacks usually got their perceptions of them from television where there were often scenes in which the police was arresting groups of black men being "arrested for raping an innocent white girl" (Bissinger 92-93). As a result, it is not surprising that the majority of the white population of Odessa looked down on the black population as they did not know any better.

The fact that Bissinger describes this aspect of life in Odessa as thoroughly as he does is very important for the reader to get the essence of the prejudices that were evident in Odessa, and to realize just how deep they went. Whereas Bissinger is able to give the reader the blatant facts of how life in Odessa was for the black population, imposed upon by the white population, through his portrayal of life in the heartbreaking oil town, and his description of the accounts of the life and events of Hammond Jr., and Hurd, it is simply not possible for the producers of the television series or the Hollywood movie to depict the background of life in Odessa as thoroughly as the author of the original work himself had managed to do. They have to work with so many aspects of production that Bissinger did not have to think about; for instance, the producers of the television series and the movie have to make their creation more marketable and therefore cannot dwell on the issue of racism for too long.

EXPLOSIVE RACISM

Despite the fact that the producers of the television series are not willing to discuss the topic of racism as overtly as Bissinger does in his book, they still manage to portray racism in small-town Texas life in the story of the Dillon Panthers' quest for a state championship. They manage to discuss this sensitive topic during a prime time television show through Berg's unspoken description of racism rather than through using offensive vocabulary. Berg's portrayal of racism in the television series is subtle, as previously stated, and sometimes merely visual, but nonetheless powerful. Nevertheless, as with the movie version of the book, the television series has some difficulties in confronting the delicate subject of the unashamed racism that was evident in Odessa at the time Bissinger dwelt there. Being a show that is supposed to be on the air on prime time

they cannot portray it as blatantly as in the book, because of the possible audience that could be watching, for example vulnerable children or real life victims of racist abuse that might relive the horror they went through the first time by seeing such an act on television. Therefore they have to reveal racial prejudices through much more inconspicuous means than in the book, despite dealing with it forcefully. The aforementioned Peter Berg said that racism could be unspoken and through development it could become more and more explosive (Wyatt). As a result he means that they were able to discuss the subject of racial discrimination in the show despite not mentioning it as obviously as in the book.

As an example of this, there can be mentioned the fact that outside of the coaching staff, there are very few indications of adult black men in the community, and as a matter of fact there aren't any, except for one. In a single scene it is made clear to the viewer that Smash has a father and that he is a criminal, which further establishes the views Bissinger portrayed in his book on the black population. These kind of subtle, almost invisible messages from the directors of the television series can be argued to have no other significance than to put in their share of what might be called indications of racism.

Although much of the racism portrayed in the television show is discreet and modest there are scenes that are very obvious, such as the scene when Matt Saracen gets Smash a job at the place he worked. It happens soon after he starts taking steroids because he is in dire need of money since drugs do not come free. He is found to be stealing money from the cash register. This scene is clearly meant to correspond to the poor opinion the white population in Odessa has of black people. Bissinger describes very honestly in his book, that most of the black population simply did not deserve the respect of their white counterparts, since the majority of them did not even deserve to be referred to as being

black since it was an adjective too affirmative for them, given that they had always stolen or lived off welfare (Bissinger 90) instead of making a decent living like white people did. These images described by Bissinger had been in the town's psyche since the early days and they mostly consisted of racism and prejudice against black people as there seemed to be few that could be trusted among them. This view in particular was further proved by Bissinger when he informed the reader of the unbelievable story of the black boys from the Carter Cowboys team. They had been living the dream and had everything at the age of eighteen and there was simply not a wish they could not fulfill as every recruiter in Northern America seemed to be on their tail. Despite this, they were eventually sentenced from thirteen to twenty-five years of imprisonment for various armed robberies along with some other black teenagers. As was discussed elsewhere in this essay, the white people maintained their views on the blacks as they always managed to find their way into trouble, and the news that five players of the Cowboys team were going around committing armed robberies did not come as a shock to any of them since they were all black. As can be seen from the above discussion, the view that Bissinger portrays of blacks in the book as cheating and lethargic was without a doubt in the minds of the directors of the television show when they decided to let Smash try to steal from the cash register.

Despite how subtly the producers of the television series choose to portray successfully the vigorous racism described by Bissinger in his book, it can be seen from the discussion here that it is in fact Bissinger's original book that portrays racism as a widespread and common prejudice in the most effective way.

CASUAL AND RAMPANT

The racial part that is so apparent in the book is not as noticeable in the movie, understandably because it is such a delicate subject and a thin line to cross when making a movie that is supposed to reach worldwide recognition. Although there are not as many indications of racism in the movie as in the book, there are still a few that can be noticed. For the best part of the movie there is not a single frame that can be viewed as racist, except through the character of Boobie Miles, the star running back of the Permian team. Early in the movie, when coach Gary Gaines is attending a dinner party with his wife, some woman refers to Boobie Miles being a nigger and that the coach should not only use him in the offense but in the defense as well because of his attributes. Boobie is quick, strong and powerful and the woman wants Coach Gaines to exploit everything he can offer, just as was discussed earlier about the view William Hurd maintained about the athletic programs. She uses the degrading word as an adjective to describe the appearance of Boobie as easily as blinking an eye and this indicates a racism being extensive and unrestrained. As detailed by Bissinger, the offensive and racially prejudiced word is used very casually in Odessa and he manages to portray how the inhabitants use it very often in his book. In fact the inhabitants have become so inconsiderate of the blacks that they even have different meanings for the term, one for each type of black people really. It is obviously inevitable for the producers of both the television show and the movie based on the book to reduce the effect of the word in their productions as it probably would not have been a very good marketing strategy to use the word as freely as Bissinger reveals it had been used in the real life town of Odessa, Texas, during his stay there. Therefore, the scene discussed above, in which Boobie is referred to as being a “nigger”, is in fact the

only reference in the whole movie where it is used so strikingly as in the source upon which it is built.

The producers of the television series stumble upon the same difficulties of how to challenge the blatant vocabulary used in the book, and as discussed elsewhere in this essay, they use a much more restrained and subconscious way to deal with the subject of racial discrimination, whether it is through words or actions. An example of this method is a scene in one of the episodes when the Dillon Panthers are competing against the Dunston Valley Cardinals, a notorious team that consists only of white players. That game turns out to be of extreme significance to the discussion of are fierce and ferocious and commit multiple fouls on the black players, and Smash in particular, which eventually leads to a riot on the field after some racial comments made by one of the white players of the opposite team. However, the racial comment that infuriates the Dillon players is an allusion to Smash as being a tar baby because of his skin color. That is exactly the kind of racism that Berg wants to portray because the term used in the show is very ambiguous, and thus they are able to discuss the topic of racism on prime time television. If the producers of the show wanted to discuss racism, they had to do it from a different point of view than Bissinger did in his book as they would never be able to discuss the subject as bluntly in a popular television show as in the printed version by the author. In addition, to further prove the point of the common racial discrimination in Texas in general, the Dunston police stop the Panthers' bus while driving back home to Dillon, in order to arrest Smash for attacking a player of the Dunston team. In the book there is no indication of an attack of an opposition player being based on racial motivations, but as we can see, the riot that takes place in the game between Dillon and Dunston Valley Cardinals is instigated by those comments and late tackles on the black players, on Smash in particular.

When the police enter the action it becomes obvious to the viewer that it is meant to portray racism as ordinary and widespread in the state of Texas. There is a similar scene in the movie when Boobie is injured. He is tackled really hard and while lying on the ground in pain there is a short clip of two white players of the opponents' team celebrating the great tackle that got Ratcliff Stadium holding its breath for fear of their most gifted player. This tackle led to his early retirement from football. In the book, however, there is no mention of his injury being intentional or accidental either, for that matter, it was just football, and you can get hurt playing football.

As a result of this discussion, it can be argued that racism is in fact extremely extensive in Texas and common amongst the white citizens of the state. Through the words by Bissinger and the visualization of the directors of the other versions of *Friday Night Lights* it becomes clear that racism is, as mentioned above, casual and rampant.

EPILOGUE

In the introduction to this essay, I argued that the original book of *Friday Night Lights* by H.G. Bissinger portrays the topic of racism most effectively of the three available versions. Afterwards, the issue of racism in all the versions of *Friday Night Lights* is discussed, and compared in order to decide which one really contributed the best presentation of this delicate subject, and concluded that it is in fact the original non-fictional book by Bissinger that portrays the subject most realistically and most successfully. In order to reach this verdict, racism, as portrayed through the book, the movie and the television series is discussed thoroughly and the events that bore any resemblance to racism are revealed, analyzed and compared to each other.

To sum up, although racism is an element found in all three versions of *Friday Night Lights*, it is most effectively presented and discussed in the original text by Bissinger because he had the freedom to discuss all the aspects of racism as they appeared to him during his year-long stay in the town. The other versions do not manage to present the subject of racism as effectively as Bissinger does in his book and that is one of the reasons why his version is the most effective one in portraying this social problem.

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