

Friday Night Lights and the Spectacle of Everyday Life

Partway through the first season of *Friday Night Lights*, Jason Katims and Peter Berg's critically acclaimed teen drama, there is a confrontation that occurs between two high school football teammates at the local ice cream shop. Tim Riggins, the stoic fullback, asks Smash Williams, confident (if not borderline cocky) running back, if he could “call his boys off” following a racially charged walk-out from practice that threatens the team's chances at progressing in the playoffs. Smash shoots back that it is a two sided issue, asking Tim why he doesn't call the white players off, pointing out Tim's own past aggressions before telling him-“This football done brought us together, but on the real? We ain't even cool like that.” (S1E15). Their argument is a moment that encapsulates much of the series' politics, as well as it's relationship to the idea of the spectacle (as defined by Debord) that is the high school football game. Through out the season, the show not only examines disconnect between the performative identities crafted in relation to the spectacle and how people operate within this inherent isolation, but also the ways in which spectacle brings about community. Through the mechanics of suture this examination gains new depths, allowing *Friday Night Lights* to offer a poignant and often heartwrenching look at a world built around spectacle, and the cracks within its foundation.

The series' first season, which aired in 23 episodes from October 2006 to April 2007, is built upon the duality between spectacle and reality. The first episode establishes this through the way in which it introduces its characters, as well as through general events of the plot. The story follows various residents of the fictional town of Dillon, Texas, over the course of the 2006 High School football season. “Pilot” as an episode is structured in such a way that the audience is constantly reminded of the looming spectacle that is the opening game of the Dillon Panther's season. At various points throughout the episode, text denoting the day of the week will appear on screen, heightening the audience's anticipation for that pinnacle of the week, Friday. As Debord explains in his 1967 book *The*

Society Of The Spectacle, “The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.” (12) That is, the spectacle is not just a singular thing or event, but also that event's shockwaves, the community created through its existence. We see this frequently throughout the pilot episode as the importance of football to this community is repeated again and again. It dominates the media we see within the show's universe, with many of the key players being introduced through interviews with a local television station, and commentary often being provided diegetically through a Panther Football themed radio show. Along with this, community interactions are all shown to be touched by football. Businesses close for game day, the high schoolers teach pee-wee football practice. Following this practice, Jason Street, team captain and promising quarterback, fields questions as the children sit amongst the teens. This creates an image of unity between groups, and suggests that in eight or nine years we could be seeing these children again, only this time in the position of their idols, suggesting a cyclical pattern in the football culture of Dillon. As they kneel down to pray, one child asks him “Mr. Street, do you think God loves football?” to which Street's replies with “I think that everybody loves football.” (S1E1). The pilot takes great care to establish this status quo, the idea that football is a baseline-- a familiar and far-reaching omnipresent event, before allowing the series to pick at what exactly that means; to show us that for as much as the show is about the grandiose spectacle of football, it is also about those intimate moments between people that are so frequently ignored. A teen girl picking at her nails in the guidance councilor's office (S1E8), a boyfriend and girlfriend goofing off and innocently leg wrestling while alone in a cabin (S1E17). Small moments like these are scattered throughout the series, often feeling just as if not more important than the all consuming spectacle that is football.

The series' ability to make observations and comments on the nature of the spectacle hinges on its ability to suture the audience. Kaja Silverman explains the concept of suture as “that moment when the subject inserts itself into the symbolic register in the guise of a signifier, and in doing so gains meaning at the extent of being.” (219) In other words, it is a moment in which a viewer allows

themselves to be immersed in the world of the series, not necessarily relating to a character, but accepting the images and narrative as a form of reality. Silverman outlines several visual methods through which media facilitates this, namely the concept of shot-reverse-shot, and while *Lights* does utilize this technique, the brunt of its suturing occurs through its unique, naturalistic camerawork. Shot in high grain, low contrast film, the series' shaky docustyle camerawork rarely provides the audience with “typical” shots.

During a sequence in the show's sixth episode where Tami Taylor, wife of the head coach and school guidance councilor, is speaking with Tyra Colette, a teen very vocal about her dissatisfaction with life in Dillon, the camera is never steady. The shots in the shot-reverse-shot pattern are rarely framed “properly” with a clear view of the speaker. More often than not their faces are only halfway in the frame, situated in the far end of the image. Occasionally, a face will be washed out completely by a ray of sunlight. This down and dirty style of cinematography heightens the realism of the scene. As with the typical shot-reverse-shot sequence, the audience is allowed to occupy the role of both women, as well as that of an outsider. However, through the exaggerated framing techniques the viewer is brought further into the scene. It feels as if we are sitting next to these women, watching them speak from the corner of our eye, averting our gaze as if we are worried they will notice us staring.

This immersiveness, constant throughout the series, allows for heightened suture. During football games the camera is at once lost in the crowd, with arms and heads of Panther fans occupying as much of the frame as the field, and a member of the team, jumbling around focusing on everything and nothing all at once. Silverman writes, “The operation of suture is successful at the moment that the viewing subject says 'Yes, that's me,' or 'That's what I see.' ” (222) When the camera so deliberately places the audience as a member or voyeur of a scene, it is easy for a viewer to make these statements. We, the audience, are all at once allowed to be a coach, a player, a fan, and an outsider. In being given these privileges, we have the ability to view the spectacle from a myriad of angles, and the show is then able to make its commentary.

Again, Debord explains “The Spectacle appears at once as a society itself, as a part of society, and as a means of unification.” (12) Football is so frequently shown to dictate the way the town operates. During his first date with Julie Taylor, the coach's daughter, newly appointed quarterback Matt Saracen attempts to wrangle tickets to a sold out movie from the girl at the box office. He tells her “I'm Matt Saracen... QB One...?” The ticket girl then explains that the theater no longer holds tickets for football players following a prior incident (S1E9). There is confusion, but the point remain, the players in Dillon are traditionally seen and treated as a kind of royalty in the town. Their sport is of the utmost importance because it is what keeps the town unified. The constant countdown to gameday, as well as the games themselves, are massive, all encompassing events. Frequently the camera shows us evidence of the entire town shutting down in preparation for the event. Shots of workers changing marquees in support of the team (S1E2), a tracking shot in the pilot showing a half a dozen identical signs in business windows saying “CLOSED. Gone to the game” (S1E1), enforcing the idea that the spectacle is far reaching. The games themselves are bright and crisp, the colors far more saturated than they are during scenes of the everyday. The images are “complete” that is, the subjects are far less frequently cut off by the frame. It creates a sense of unity. We go out to the game, we shout, we play, we act out these roles (fan, coach, player) that are expected of us.

It is then in direct contrast to what is seen in the moments outside the spectacle. In the case of Lyla Garrity, head cheerleader and seemingly ever-loyal girlfriend to the paralyzed Jason Street, the space beyond the spectacle becomes essential to her portrayal. It becomes most noticeable in the series' tenth episode, “It's Different for Girls”, when news of her sexual relationship with Tim Riggins, Jason's best friend, hits the school. Suddenly she has become the school whore, and her prior identity, the role of perfect christian girl she plays for the sake of expectation, is dismantled. While the events that unfold surrounding this are, at times, spectacles (she is dropped at cheer practice, Jason punches Tim in the face, a website dedicated to shaming her is set up), it is the moments that seem to exist in isolation that become most compelling. The episode opens to find her standing alone in the bathroom, positioned

in the far left side of the frame. She wets a paper towel and goes to work methodically scrubbing the word “slut” scrawled in lipstick across her locker. It is a moment of mundane intimacy that occurs just before returning to the hyper-performative world of cheerleading practice (S1E10).

A later scene occurs in the lunchroom, where two boys approach Lyla, who is sitting alone at her table, to proposition her. When Tim sits down with her and tells her “Let 'em look... I don't care.” she tells him “It's different for girls.” (S1E10). Once more we see the show's suturing techniques at work. There is a standard shot-reverse-shot between Tim and Lyla, but often the shots of both of them are obstructed in some way by other bodies, giving the illusion that the camera is spying on them along with the rest of their peers and heightening the realism. Debord writes that “...reality erupts within the spectacle and the spectacle is real. This reciprocal alienation is the essence and underpinning of society as it exists.” (14). The reality of the spectacle Lyla has become immersed in consumes and alienates her. Her telling Tim he is making it worse by being there is in many ways an attempt to exist unseen within the spectacle, to deny its reality. Attention is paid only to her spectacle (the affair) and not necessarily the reality of the situation, which is that of a scared young girl seeking emotional comfort in one of the only people she feels knows the same sense of loss she does. It is in this episode that Lyla realizes her position within the greater spectacle of Dillon, admitting to Tami that “Becoming a cheerleader for the Dillon panthers was this dream come true. And I bought into it. But you know what? The truth is since Jason's accident, I've been pretending? And I am done, pretending, Mrs. Taylor, that I care about any of this.” (S1E10). It is a quiet moment, the kind the series is so good at. She is teary throughout, the brave face she has been putting on is gone. Her admission to seeing the spectacle of Dillon football as a construct and her actions as a superficial going through the motions, is admission that, in Debord's terms, “all human life, which is to say all social life, is mere appearance.” (14) This appearance, her relationship to the spectacle, is shown as hollow and isolating. If those are the feelings of the head cheerleader, someone whose social standing is dictated almost entirely by the spectacle, then it is not difficult to make the assumption that the feelings of isolation are widespread

throughout the society.

And yet, at the end of the episode Lyla returns to cheerleading. She makes it to the cheerleading classic, puts on her best smile, and performs. She, like so many other members of the Dillon community, is accepting the spectacle as her reality for without it, what is there? “The spectacle manifests itself as an enormous positivity, out of reach and beyond dispute. All it says is: 'Everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear.’” says Debord (15). This adamancy in maintaining the spectacle despite the negativity it has been shown to bring is key to the series. Spectacle brings these people together, it creates the community and gives the people of Dillon meaning, but spectacle also creates a hollowness. It is in the attempts to navigate this hollowness, to reconcile the spectacle with what we think to be our true selves, that gives the series spectacular weight. By showing the audience the performativity at work, and through utilizing highly effective methods of suture, we are forced to examine the spectacle, what it is and why we return to it. It is in the small transient moments between people that we see what can lie beyond the spectacle, and it is in the moments of isolation that we see its value. It is as much about the Panthers winning the state championship as it is about Lyla offering Tyra a ride home to Dillon (S1E22). Though people may not be able to entirely relate to each other outside of football the spectacle brings them together, creating purpose and connection, for better or for worse.

The series' ability to examine this connection, as well as the positives and negatives that arise from it, allows *Friday Night Lights* to paint a compelling portrait of community and spectacle. In taking the camera and deliberately using it to place the audience within the world of Dillon, we are allowed an insider's look at this society and a greater understanding of the people and events within it. We see the far reaching nature of the spectacle, as well as the community it creates, and we are allowed to embrace it-- but not without critique. Through its portrayal of subtle physical moments, an overarching and seemingly tangible community, and evidence that even the people that seem to most easily fit the mold of this spectacle based society feel dissatisfaction, the series paints an engaging and heartfelt portrait of

the relationship between community and alienation. These things have allowed *Friday Night Lights* to create a decidedly human television series that just happens to feature football.

Works Cited

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