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**AMERICAN FOOTBALL IN THE AUDIOVISUAL FIELD:
NARRATIVE, SPECULARITY, DISEMBODIMENT**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

FILM & DIGITAL MEDIA

by

Brett Kashmere

June 2024

The Dissertation of Brett Kashmere is approved:

Professor Rick Prelinger, Chair

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Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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2024

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ABSTRACT

AMERICAN FOOTBALL IN THE AUDIOVISUAL FIELD:

NARRATIVE, SPECULARITY, DISEMBODIMENT

Brett Kashmere

As a mediatized spectator sport, American tackle football has never been more popular. At the same time, football's undeniable connection with traumatic brain injuries and degenerative brain disease has spurred a decline in youth participation and an existential predicament. Fewer kids are playing the sport, but will Americans ever stop consuming football? If not, why not? Who remains to fulfill America's insatiable desire for football and what does this reveal about the economic and racial structures of the National Football League (NFL)—the most profitable sports league in the world? This dissertation details how we reached this point (of peak football, and of a mounting public health crisis), and considers what America's fascination with football has wrought. Football's embodiment of American economic, social, and political values has helped to naturalize the game as American myth. Reflecting on the visual, aural, and rhetorical sources of football's power, I first historicize the creation of America's football mythology, paying close attention to the role moving images and narrational devices have played in the sport's popularization; from its appearance in early cinema, newsreels, and narrative features to the promotional documentaries of NFL Films. Using an interdisciplinary framework

of textual analysis, contextual cultural history, visual culture studies, critical theory, and Black feminist thought, I closely analyze a cross-section of media objects, including narrative and documentary films and television programs as well as experimental media works, to explicate the dominant ideologies embedded in American football. But my reading is also attentive to signs of resistant and oppositional articulations, ruptures, and pleasures. I locate these counterhegemonic articulations and counternarratives in unconventional nonfiction and avant-garde films, but in mainstream dramatic offerings as well.

This research asserts that in American sports media, the labor and performance of football is regularly transfigured as narrative, with unscripted reality (the playing of a game) and dramatized spectacle fused into one, which in turn creates a distancing effect. This disavowal, of football's arduous physicality, is one of the constitutive elements underpinning football's success as a media sport. This century's data-driven turn in sports management and analysis has added a further layer of abstraction and distance, as athletes' bodies become increasingly perceived as data points and profiles to be atomized, parsed, and controlled. I maintain the consequences of this disembodiment are not yet fully understood or appreciated. In counterpoint to the game's ideologies of conquest, racial capitalism, hegemonic masculinity, coercive entitlement, and white supremacy, I also contemplate football through a lens of tenderness, intimacy, and care, bringing forward more utopian potentials.

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To my parents, Dianne and David Kashmere, and my sisters Jodi Kashmere and Stacey Kashmere-DeJong: your formative and unconditional love and encouragement has helped me become who I am today, to pursue the work that I do.

This dissertation is dedicated to Astria Suparak, the best life partner, friend, collaborator, and reader that I could ever hope for. Thank you for your openness, your intellectual, creative, and emotional support, your patience, your

edits, your humor, and your cat videos. Every day with you is a gift. I am forever thankful for and awed by your love.

INTRODUCTION

A One-Hundred Yard Universe: American Football on Screen

As a mediatized spectator sport, American professional football has never been more popular. The game's signature platform, the National Football League (NFL) is the most profitable sports league in the world, taking in approximately $18.6 billion in revenue in 2022. The NFL is comprised of and financed by its 32 member teams, and operates, on a corporate level, as a trade association.[1] Televised football is probably the closest thing that America has to a national pastime; it is an entrenched autumn and winter ritual for tens of millions of Americans, and it continues to take over more and more of the annual calendar. Most of the highest-rated programs each year are NFL telecasts. 29 of the 30 most watched American broadcasts of all-time are Super Bowls. In February 2024, over 123 million Americans tuned into the Super Bowl. As a result of this immense guaranteed audience, the cost of a 30-second ad during the game now exceeds $5 million. Meanwhile, close to 10 million people currently play *Madden NFL,* the league's most popular video game franchise. The offseason NFL Draft has become a multiday event that draws over 50 million viewers. Around 75 million people participate in fantasy football on an annual basis. And it's

[1] Until 2015, the NFL operated as an unincorporated non-profit association, meaning the league itself was tax exempt. A public backlash, however, forced the NFL to voluntarily relinquish its tax-exempt status, but that was basically a PR move.

estimated that yearly NFL sports-betting totals over $100 billion. The American Gaming Association expects that $23 billion will be wagered on the 2024 Super Bowl alone.[2] Football's staggering commercial success and vitality as a cross-platform mass cultural product, however, belie rising uncertainty about the sport's long-term outlook.

FIGURE 1. Screenshot of *NFL Madden 22* (EA Sports, 2022).

[2] Dave Zirin, "The Super Bowl of Gambling," *The Nation,* February 9, 2024, https://www.thenation.com/article/society/super-bowl-las-vegas-gambling-online-betting/

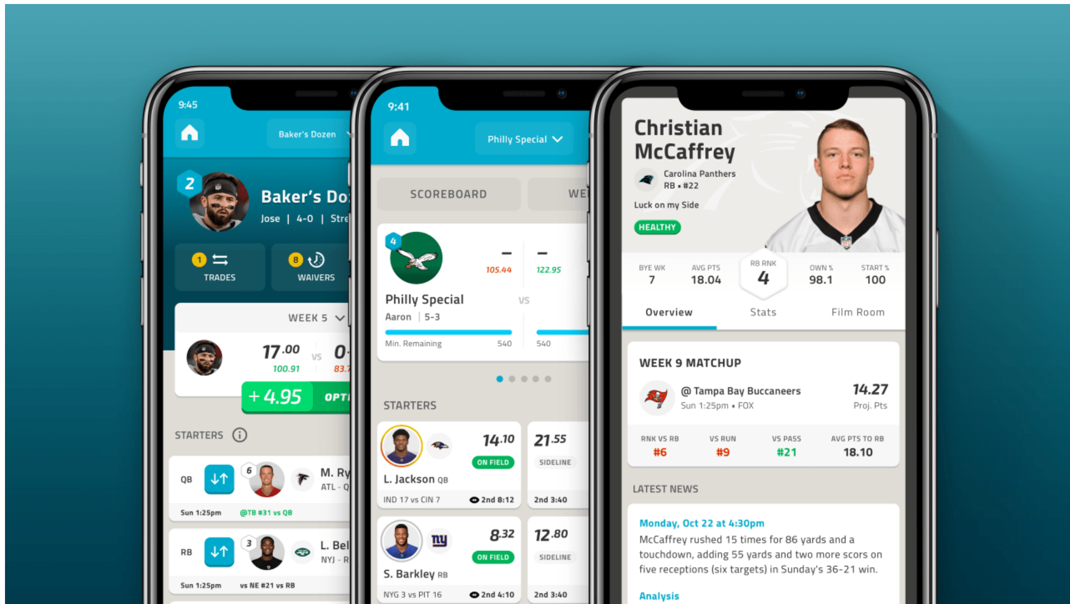

FIGURE 2. NFL.com fantasy football app.

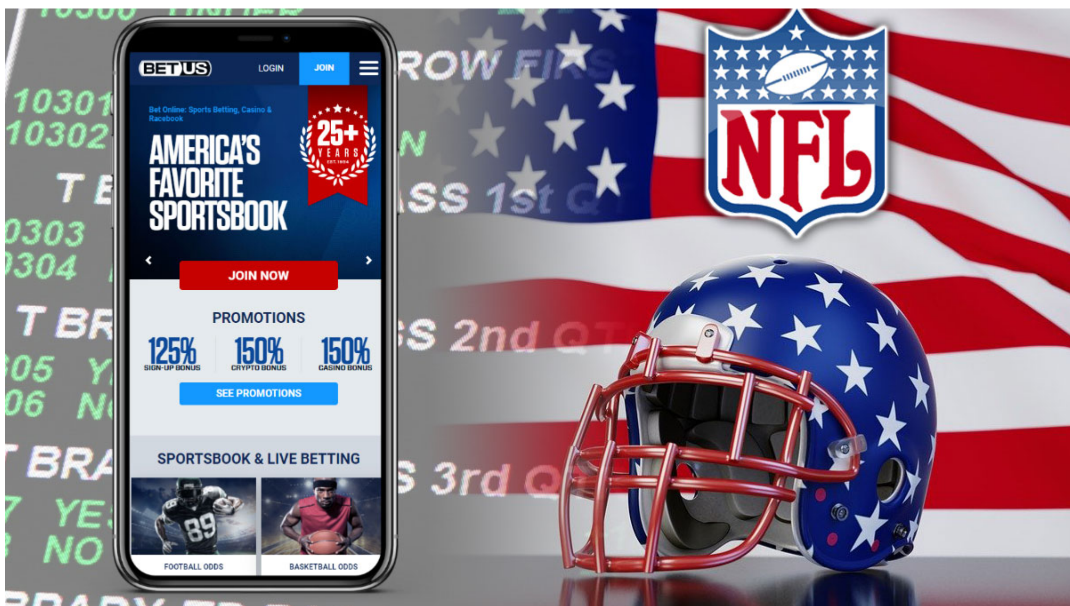

FIGURE 3. BetUs mobile gaming app.

Even as the NFL and big-time college football rake in record profits, football's future as an organized, embodied activity that predominantly male,

majority non-white Americans engage in now faces numerous challenges.[3] After years of denial and obfuscation by the NFL, the causal link between football-induced repetitive head trauma and long-term brain damage has come to light; thanks to a growing abundance of scientific studies, investigative reporting, mainstream news coverage, and nonfiction and narrativized treatments. Many high schools now struggle to field teams due to fears of catastrophic injury, legal liability, and declining participation. The on-field cardiac arrest of Buffalo Bill safety Damar Hamlin during a nationally televised game on January 2, 2023, brought the game's corporeal risks into sharp focus; inspiring a new round of self-reflection about football's inherent brutality and our complicity as viewers.[4] We're at an inflection point: Fewer kids are now playing the sport—primarily because their parents won't allow them to—but will Americans ever stop consuming football? If not, why not? Who remains to fulfill America's insatiable desire for football, and what does this reveal about the economic and racial structures of the NFL? What will football's collapsing insurance market and

---

[3] The notion of football as an exclusively "men's game" is currently undergoing revision. For more on the history, present, and future of women's football, see Gertrud Pfister, "Challenging the Gender Order: Women on the Gridiron," in Gerald R. Gems and Gertrud Pfister, eds., *Touchdown: An American Obsession* (Great Barrington, MA: Berkshire, 2019), 197-213.

[4] Kurt Streeter, "We Should Never Watch the Same Way Again," *New York Times,* January 4, 2023, B6; Jenny Vrentas, "Violence in the N.F.L.," *New York Times Morning* newsletter, January 5, 2023, nytimes.com/2023/01/05/briefing/nfl-injuries-damar-hamlin.html

impending wave of concussion litigation mean for football as an entertainment industry, and as an amateur sport?[5]

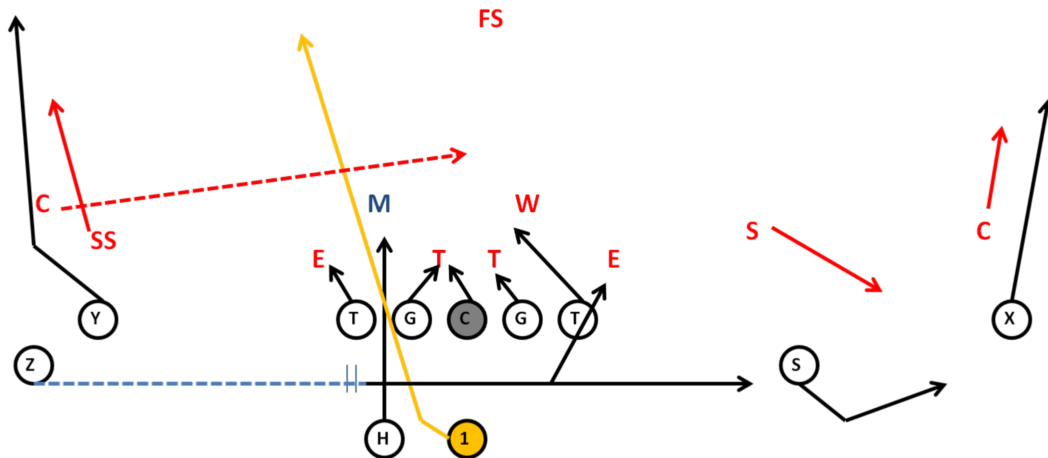

FIGURE 4. A football play, diagrammed.

These questions frame this intervention into the nexus of class, capitalism, race, and masculinity in American football and its mediated products, and highlight what is at stake. This project attempts to historicize and theorize American football as a distinct media form, one that is laden with cultural meaning and mythic significance. I am particularly interested in football's evolution over the past century as a media sport, and as a uniquely narrative sport. Highly scripted and heavily coordinated, football also has its own

---

[5] See Steve Fainaru and Mark Fainaru-Wada, "For the NFL and All of Football, a New Threat: An Evaporating Insurance Market," ESPN.com, January 17, 2019, https://www.espn.com/espn/story/_/id/25776964/insurance- market-football-evaporating-causing-major-threat-nfl-pop-warner-colleges-espn

hierarchical star system: its quarterbacks and coaches granted cultural stature equivalent to Hollywood leading actors and directors. Like a screenplay, the playbook assembles a set of scenes, rigorously rehearsed and given structure on the day of a performance (game) (FIG. 4). Within the course of a game, each offensive series functions much like a self-contained cinematic sequence, mini-arcs rich in dramatic tension, pitting protagonists against antagonists, with rising and falling action. In filmmaking as in football, "blocking" conveys a similar meaning, referring to the arrangement and coordination of bodies within a production's mise-en-scène or a play design.

More than any popular team sport, American football is a contest of complex logistics, patterns, and specialization; a Fordist-assembly-line model of sport. As Christopher Martin and Jimmie Reeves point out, football "is marked by a highly differentiated division of labor," and conveys masculinist values of "discipline, conformity, and winning."[6] Writing about the militarization of professional football, Michael Butterworth notes that "sports audiences, especially football audiences, have come to see the military—and its attendant masculine values—as a fully integrated, *normal* participant in contemporary sport productions," football broadcasts in particular.[7] Organized as a colonizing

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[6] Christopher R. Martin and Jimmie L. Reeves, "The Whole World Isn't Watching (But We Thought They Were): The Super Bowl and U.S. Solipsism," *Sport in Society* 4, no. 2 (2001): 216.
[7] Michael L. Butterworth, "NFL Films and the Militarization of Professional Football," in *The NFL: Critical and Cultural Perspectives,* eds. Thomas P. Oates and Zack Furness (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015), 206. His emphasis.

conquest of an opponent’s territory, football’s militaristic and imperialistic connotations are embedded in its very structure and terminology and expressed in its rhetorical production and mediated forms.

This multimodal dissertation details how we reached this point (of peak football, and of a mounting public health crisis), and what America’s fascination with football has wrought on the macro- and micro-levels. Reflecting on the visual, aural, and rhetorical sources of football’s power, I first historicize the creation of America’s football mythology, paying close attention to the role moving images and narrational devices have played in the sport’s popularization; from its appearance in early cinema, newsreels, and narrative features to the promotional documentaries of NFL Films. I closely analyze a cross-section of media objects, including narrative and documentary films and television programs as well as experimental media works, to explicate the ideological meanings embedded in American football. Football’s embodiment of American economic, social, and political values has helped to naturalize the game as American myth. But my reading is also attentive to signs of resistant and oppositional articulations, ruptures, and pleasures. I locate these counterhegemonic articulations and counternarratives in unconventional nonfiction works like *A Fall Trip Home* (1964), *TVTV Goes to the Super Bowl* (1976), and *Marshawn Lynch: A History* (2019) but also in mainstream dramatic offerings such as *Brian’s Song* (1971) and *Remember the Titans* (2000). Football’s

welding of bureaucratic pattern and unscripted action, I contend, yields considerable friction.

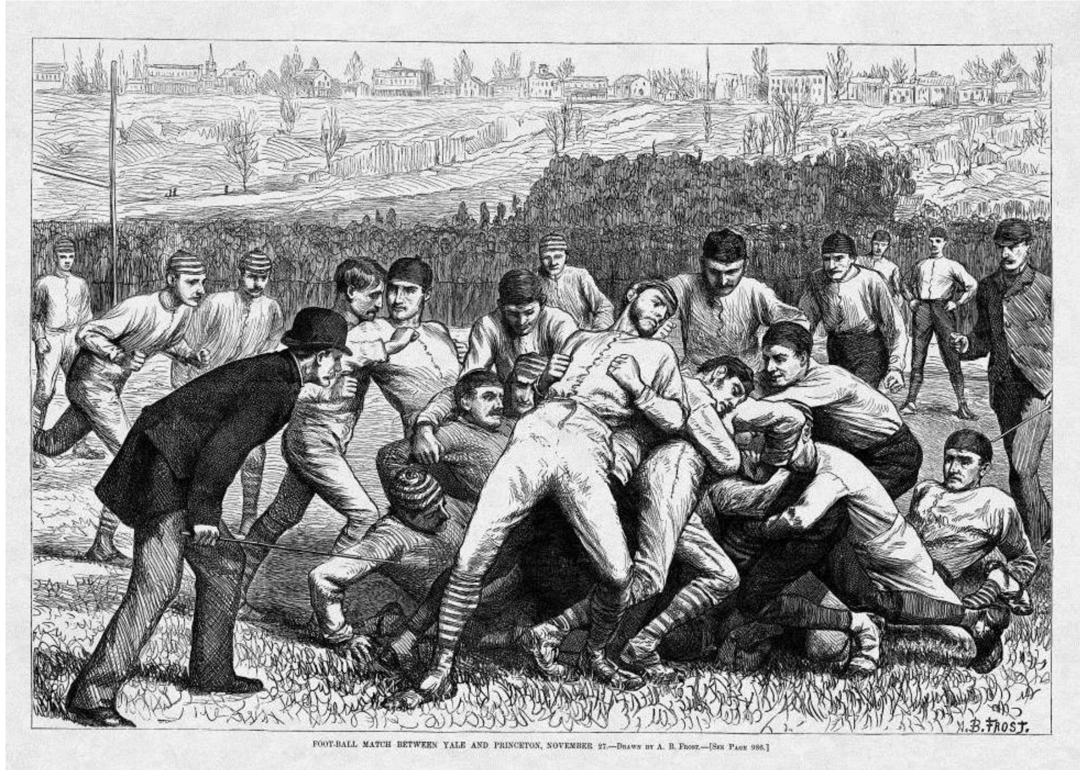

FIGURE 5. A.B. Frost, “Football Match Between Yale and Princeton, November 27,” *Harper’s Weekly*, November 27, 1879. From the Library of Congress.

Becoming America’s Game

American football was forged in the culture of the late 19th-century Ivy League, having evolved as a variation of rugby and English soccer. The first intercollegiate football game took place on November 30, 1869 in New Brunswick, New Jersey, with Princeton and Rutgers fielding teams of 25 men per

side.[8] The American version of football developed across the later decades of the 1800s over the course of unofficial intermural matches between students from Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, primarily. Before its rules and conventions had been fully established and codified, "American colleges students on the east coast participated in primitive forms of the game of football, resembling more the association [soccer] than the rugby version." According to historian Marc Maltby, "these games, played in the early 19th century, were haphazard affairs."[9] During this formative period, football's brutality was a matter of controversy and public debate. Skull fractures were recurrent, resulting in numerous on-field fatalities. As public health scholar Kathleen Bachynski notes, during the 1897 season, a succession of football tragedies, including the death of prominent college star Von Gammon, intensified discussion about football's suitability as a sport for American boys and "civilized" young (read: white, collegiate) men.[10] An anonymous *New York Times* op-ed published the same year under the headline "Two Curable Evils" conflated the mayhem of football with the horrors of lynching, arguing for financial remedies to these asymmetrical forms of public violence. Its recommendations: "Make lynching expensive" (by penalizing counties via civil liability) and "football unprofitable" (by eliminating admission

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[8] William S. Jarrett, *Timetables of Sports History: Football* (New York: Facts on File, 1993), 2.
[9] Marc S. Maltby, *The Origins and Early Development of Professional Football* (New York: Garland, 1997), 4.
[10] Kathleen Bachynski, *No Game for Boys to Play: The History of Youth Football and the Origins of a Public Health Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 9.

fees to college games).[11] Despite calls for reform the on-field casualties persisted. In 1905, 18 men died from football-related injuries, including Union College halfback Harold Moore, which garnered national attention. Responding to the widespread criticism of football's brutality in the popular press, President Theodore Roosevelt, an outspoken proponent of "rough games," implored college football's leaders to establish reforms to improve player safety and promote greater sportsmanship.[12] "I want to make the game not soft but honest," Roosevelt declared.

To accommodate popular sentiment, rule changes were introduced to assuage concerns and "debrutalize" college football. Gang tackling and rugby-style mass formations like the flying wedge were banned. Most notably, the legalization of the forward pass in 1906 opened the game up, spreading players further outward from the ball. However, despite these modifications, numerous colleges temporarily abolished football beginning in 1906, including Columbia and Northwestern. On the west coast, University of California, Berkeley prohibited the sport from 1906 to 1915; Stanford until 1919. While college football was working through a reassessment of the game's violent nature, and a loss of popularity as a result, professional leagues were beginning to emerge throughout the Midwest and Northeast as an outgrowth of private athletic clubs. In the 1890s, club teams in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York began recruiting

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[11] "Two Curable Evils," *The New York Times*, November 12, 1897, 6.
[12] Maltby, *The Origins and Early Development of Professional Football*, 32-33.

college players ("ringers") to bolster their squads. The origins of pro football have been traced to an 1892 contest between the Pittsburgh Athletic Club and the Pittsburgh Allegheny Athletic Association, who paid Yale gridiron star Walter "Pudge" Heffelfinger, "the acknowledged greatest college player of the 19th century," $500 to suit up for them.[13] Over the next two decades, athletic club and other semi-pro teams began to generate community interest and local excitement, but press coverage lagged. Despite its issues, college football continued to dominate at the box office and in the national and regional headlines. Pro football's growth as a spectator sport throughout the Progressive Era was gradual and highly centralized in the Midwest.

Unlike college football, which was a staple of national sports media coverage throughout the interwar period, professional football did not achieve mainstream acceptance and commercial success until its relationship with network television was secured. However, as the cultural historian and former Kansas City Chiefs' lineman Michael Oriard outlines, "in the years between the two World Wars… football underwent tremendous growth at all levels."[14] The most successful and long-lasting professional enterprise, the American Pro

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[13] Ronald A. Smith, "American Football," in Gerald R. Gems and Gertrud Pfister, eds., *Touchdown: An American Obsession* (Great Barrington, MA: Berkshire, 2019), 8.
[14] Michael Oriard, *King Football: Sport & Spectacle in the Golden Age of Radio & Newsreels, Movies & Magazines, The Weekly & Daily Press* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 3.

Football Association (APFA) was formed in 1920. Comprising 14 Midwest teams, the APFA changed its name to the National Football League in 1922.[15]

Although the development of pro football continued to be hindered by its perception as a rough and violent game, the end of the first World War gave rise to a sports renaissance in the United States. The economic prosperity and increases in leisure time that followed from the Industrial Revolution, spurring the creation of an American consumer culture, transformed spectator sports into a viable business interest in the postwar years. The emergence of the American professional sports industry in the early part of the 20th century also coincided with and co-benefited the professionalization of media industries like publishing, radio, and film. After the nadir of the 1919 Black Sox game-fixing scandal, baseball's Major Leagues saw a surge in popularity through the 1920s, a period during which baseball's Negro Leagues were also thriving. Baseball's evolution as "America's pastime" and a popular entertainment was greatly aided by the development of the radio industry, which brought the games from urban centers to rural communities. The first domestic voice radio broadcast of a live sporting event took place on April 11, 1921, with KDKA's airing of a boxing match between Johnny Ray and Johnny Dundee at Pittsburgh's Motor Square Garden. Later that year, KDKA produced the first World Series radio broadcast as well, with play-by-play by renowned sportswriter Grantland Rice. However,

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[15] Maltby, *The Origins and Early Development of Professional Football*, 199.

KDKA's broadcast range was limited to parts of the Eastern United States. By 1927, the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) were transmitting the World Series live from coast-to-coast.[16] The National Hockey League's expansion into the United States in the mid-1920s through its halcyon "Original Six" years (1942-43 to 1966-67) broadened the sport's audience in major American markets like New York, Boston, and Chicago. During this era the success and celebrity of white heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey, following the dominance of Black heavyweight champ Jack Johnson the previous decade, lifted prizefighting to new heights of national popularity and spurred a golden age of boxing films. Athletic icons like Dempsey, Babe Ruth, Red Grange, and Jim Thorpe were recruited to headline feature films and serials, ushering in a "modern age of [mass mediated] sports superstars."[17]

An explosion of football films in the 1920s, such as Sam Wood's *One Minute to Play* (1926), starring Grange, helped introduce the still-developing American variation of football to a burgeoning, multicultural nation of immigrants. Meanwhile, the packaging and distribution of sports highlights via weekly newsreels such as *Pathé News* (1910-1956), *Hearst Metrotone News* (1914–1967), *Paramount News* (1927-1957), *Fox Movietone News* (1927-1963),

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[16] James R. Walker, *Crack of the Bat: A History of Baseball on the Radio* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015).

[17] Andrew Miller, "Winning It All: The Cinematic Construction of the Athletic American Dream," in Ricardo Miguez, ed., *American Dreams: Dialogues in U.S. Studies* (Cambridge Scholars Press, 2007), 113.

and *Universal Newsreel* (1929-1967), beginning in the 1910s and 20s, cultivated an American sporting public. In the following decades, highlight compilation series like Castle Film's *Football Parade* and Pathé's *Football Thrills* whetted viewers' appetite for audiovisual coverage of the maturing sport through the pre-television decades.

Developments in equipment technology also had a major impact on football's midcentury growth and public respectability. Most notably, in the 1950s, the hard plastic football helmet and facemask were adopted, reducing catastrophic injuries and on-field fatalities. The polycarbonate helmet prevented skull fractures thereby saving lives. But a new, unforeseen problem was created as well. The hard-shell helmet and facemask allowed players to bang their heads repeatedly without feeling any immediate pain. This cumulative helmet-to-helmet contact, causing the brain to move violently back and forth, over and over again, is now understood to be the main contributing factor for chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE). CTE is a degenerative brain disease akin to Alzheimer's Disease, but which starts earlier in life.[18] CTE symptoms include changes in behavioral and emotional regulation, such as fits of anger and rage, reduced executive and cognitive functioning, and impaired memory. CTE affects not only professional football players, but those who played at the college, high school, and pee wee levels as well. As Dr. Robert A. Stern of Boston University's

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[18] Interview with Dr. Robert A. Stern, Boston University, July 23, 2019.

CTE Center explains, American children were put in the position of having their brains smashed repeatedly as Pop Warner youth football became an organized national enterprise across the 1960s. Kids who began playing in Pop Warner leagues in the early-1960s are now in their late-60s and 70s; those who started in the early-1970s are only in their late-50s and early-60s. This is why researchers such as Stern fear we are at the beginning of a brain disease epidemic caused by repeated sub-concussive hits to the head, following the widespread adoption of plastic helmets at the start of the 1950s.

The 1960s is the decade when professional football moved fully to the forefront of American sports culture, thanks to its harmonious partnership with national television. In the early-60s "the NFL was on the *verge* of becoming the most popular TV attraction in American sports,"[19] but its audience still trailed those of baseball and college football. Four factors that helped spur pro football's televisual transformation into "America's Game" were: (1) The election of Alvin Ray "Pete" Rozelle, a savvy marketing executive with a public relations background, as NFL commissioner in 1960; (2) the signing of the NFL's first league-wide network television contract, with the up-and-coming American Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) in 1962; (3) the creation of NFL Films as a promotional media arm of the NFL in 1965; and, (4) the launch of *Monday Night Football* in 1970, which brought the NFL into primetime with attendant prestige

[19] Allen Barra, "America's Game: A Clash of Titans and the Voice of God," *American History* 50, no. 4 (October 2015): 23.

and market reach. In addition, Rozelle's rebranding of the NFL Championship Game as the Super Bowl in 1969, and its development as a mass media event, represent a pivot point in football's ascension as a television sport.

By the mid-1960s, the new marketing opportunities created by broadcast television and merchandising had amplified the NFL's popularity and brand identity. This empowered Rozelle to convince the league to acquire its own in-house film production company. Each of the 14 NFL franchise owners contributed $20,000 to the purchase of Ed Sabol's independent Blair Motion Pictures.[20] The company was subsequently renamed NFL Films, with Sabol assuming a prominent role as company president and director of business affairs. He hired his son, Steve, a middling college football player and art major, to be its creative director. Steve Sabol's artistic vision, particularly his narrative refashioning of sports action, devotion to a cinematic aesthetic, and talent for poetic hyperbole, were essential in shaping the look and sound of NFL Films, and by extension, our memory of pro football.

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[20] Paul Lomartire, "NFL Films Frozen in Time," *Palm Beach Post*, January 30, 1999, 7D.

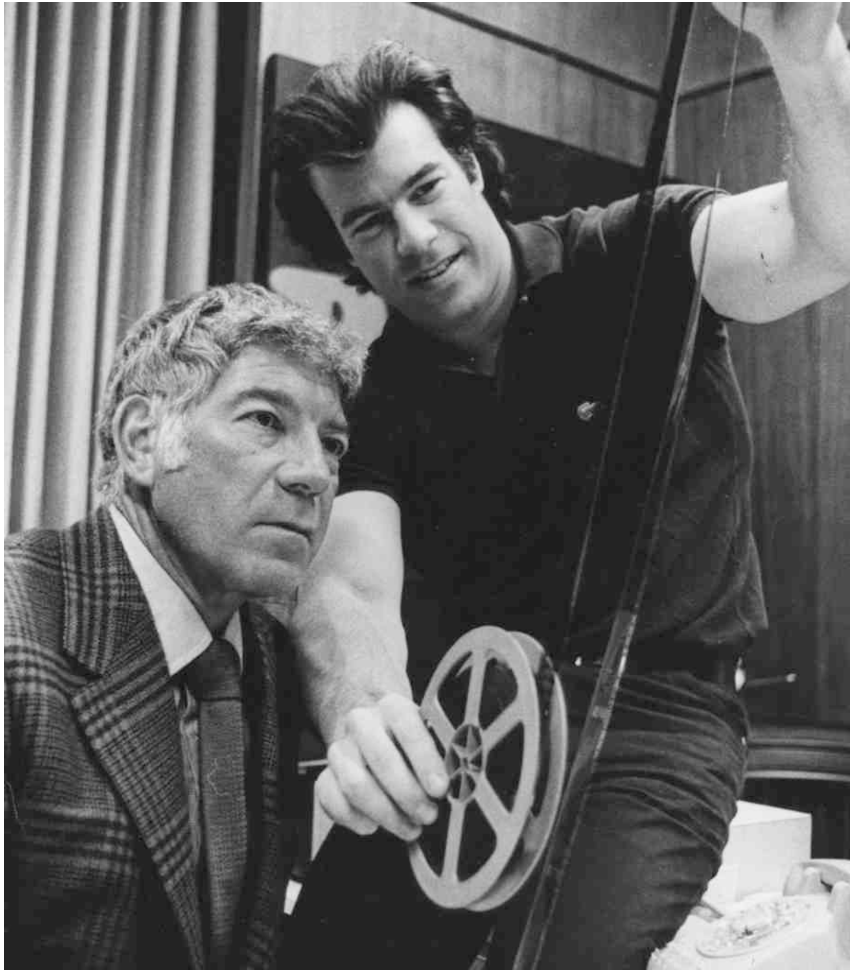

FIGURE 6. Ed and Steve Sabol inspect a reel of 16mm film.

NFL Films: Print the Legend

For five decades, Ed and Steve Sabol oversaw NFL Films together (FIG. 6). Son-in-law to an overcoat magnate, Ed Sabol cashed in his corporate stock at the age of 40 and began a new life as an amateur filmmaker. Described as “a loud, vulgar,

funny iconoclast,"[21] Sabol's first foray into sports filmmaking was as documentarist of his son's little league, then high school, football games, which he lensed with an 8mm camera. As his ambition grew, the elder Sabol built a 25-foot tower on the sidelines of the school's field to improve the perspective of his camerawork.[22] A few years later he parlayed his improved production skills, entrepreneurial knowhow, and football (home) moviemaking credentials into a successful bid to film the 1962 NFL Championship Game. Unlike most other sports highlight films of the era, *Pro Football's Longest Day* (1962) used color rather than black-and-white 16mm film stock and employed a multi-camera, multi-angle perspective. Also notable was the film's shrewd narrative framing, which pitched the game as a struggle between cosmopolitan New York City, pop. 7.8 million, embodied in the debonair, multi-position star Frank Gifford, and humble, industrial Green Bay, pop. 63,000, with its plainspoken quarterback, Bart Starr. As the sports media scholar Travis Vogan notes, formally, *Pro Football's Longest Day* was not that different from the conventional newsreel-style highlight films common at the time. But it pointed the way towards a more dramatized and visually expressive treatment of sports action.[23] The film impressed Rozelle and moreover, established a rough template for a new, more

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[21] Michael MacCambridge, *America's Game: The Epic Story of How Pro Football Captured a Nation* (New York: Random House, 2005), 182.
[22] Rich Cohen, "They Taught America How to Watch Football," *The Atlantic* (October 2012): 44.
[23] Travis Vogan, *Keepers of the Flame: NFL Films and the Rise of Sports Media* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 14.

contemporary kind of nonfiction sports film, one that would be refined and elaborated in the work of NFL Films.

From the beginning, NFL Films' aesthetic practices positioned it at the vanguard of sports media innovation in the United States. The company's use of extreme slow-motion photography, optical effects, telephoto lenses for close-ups of faces and body parts (like gnarled hands), reverse angles, and on-screen graphics enabled the game to be represented and experienced in new ways; while its roving field-level cameras, bench and spectator reaction shots, and wiring of players and coaches for sound imbued game footage with a greater sense of intimacy, mobility, and dimensionality. Sensorily, NFL Films brought fans closer to the action. This telescoping was magnified by the small screen of television. However, to distinguish its product from other sports television properties, NFL Films embraced 16mm color film as a crucial stylistic ingredient. "Film is about romance, magic and history. Videotape is about sitcoms and news," Steve Sabol insisted, downplaying the fact that NFL Films' productions were primarily distributed and experienced electronically on small screens rather than on film.[24]

Another crucial technique was the company's deployment of bold, authoritative voiceover. During NFL Films' formative years, corresponding with the emergence of cable TV, and later, ESPN, NFL Films' integration of expressive

[24] Quoted in Lomartire, "NFL Films Frozen in Time," 1D.

narration and commanding vocal delivery forged a storytelling style that glorified the game while minimizing its social contexts and specificities. As Steve Sabol put it, channeling Mark Twain, we "never let facts get in the way of a good story."[25] This extended to Sabol's own biography as well. While a student at Colorado College, he marketed himself as "Sudden Death" Sabol and the "Fearless Tot from Possum Trot," modifying his place of birth from a New Jersey suburb to a Pennsylvania coal town to rural Mississippi. He created fake media campaigns to promote himself, using his parents' money to print T-shirts and take out embellished newspaper ads. He conned sportswriters into naming him to the all-conference team despite having barely played. Anticipating the NFL Films methodology, Steve Sabol understood that when the legend becomes fact, print the legend.

House artists with creative vision, ambition, autonomy, and a generous budget, the Sabols were at once aspiring story-poets and self-aware propagandists. Rhetorically, NFL Films voiceover scripts leaned towards self-conscious lyricism, referencing literary figures like Ernest Hemingway and Gertrude Stein. As filmmakers, the Sabols strived to elevate the league's players and coaches to the level of American heroes and legends, and to portray football as a romantic spectacle. "I've never considered myself a journalist," Steve Sabol explained. "I mean, where would Paul Revere be without Longfellow's poems.

[25] Quoted in Maury Levy, "Sudden Death Sabol Reels Again," *Philadelphia Magazine*, November 1972, 103.

Every great adventure needs its storyteller, and that's what we are… We're romanticists."[26] During the Sabols' tenure, which ended with Steve Sabol's death in 2012, NFL Films helped repackage the game as both an extension of traditional American values and an exciting television sport. As an author and archivist of the league's official history, the company played a key role in shaping the NFL's image and its center-right, masculinist ideology and great man treatment of history. "We are here to promote the league and professional football," NFL Films' PR director Ann Fisher explained. "Our mission is clear-cut. We make legends and myths and try to make everyone and the game look good."[27] The specific ways in which they did so warrants further examination, as the consequences of the mediated celebration of football's violence come into sharper view.

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[26] Quoted in Bert Hubbuch, "NFL Films Football as Art," *Florida Times Union,* December 7, 2003, C13.
[27] Quoted in Tim O'Brien, "Promotion is Primary Role of NFL Films," *Amusement Business*, February 4, 1989, 6.

FIGURES 7 and 8. *NFL Crunch Course*, released as part of NFL Films' home video line in 1985.

In the early-1980s, NFL Films began repackaging material from their archive to produce compilation videocassettes for home use, many of which came free with subscriptions to *Sports Illustrated* magazine. VHS sales skyrocketed during the 1982 NFL players strike, further swelling NFL Films' direct-to-consumer market.[28] Emphasizing satire, slapstick humor, and sensational spectacle, popular tapes such as the Vincent Price-hosted *Strange But True Football Stories* (1987) (with segments like "Gallery of the Grotesque"),

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[28] "Strike Stimulates NFL Videotape Sales," NFL Films press release, November 5, 1982, Ralph Wilson Jr. Pro Football Research and Preservation Center, Pro Football Hall of Fame, Canton, Ohio.

The NFL TV Follies (1987), starring the comedian Jonathan Winters, and *Merchants of Menace* (1989) extended the company's football programming beyond game summaries, weekly television series, and year-end highlight films. One of NFL Films' best-selling videos of all time, *Crunch Course* (1985) (FIGS. 7 and 8), assembled the game's most devastating hits and collisions. The emphasis on football's dangerous physicality and tough, soldier-like characters extended to its narration. Phrases extolling football's violence and its resonance as a war proxy, such as "ballet and brutality," "from whistle to gun," "cruel rites of manhood," "hands of combat, hands of pros," and "a game of thunder and destruction," frequent NFL Films' voiceover scripts. Controversially, they created a celebratory monument of the first Iraq war for the Pentagon, *Victory in the Desert* (1991), which featured Whitney Houston's melodramatic Super Bowl XXV rendition of the national anthem.[29] Football's grip on the collective American psyche, and the popular success of the NFL, have been strengthened through the products of NFL Films, which revolutionized the way America watches and remembers football.

In press coverage of the company, NFL Films is often praised for its technical innovations (slow motion, "tight on the spiral" shots, etc.); its rousing

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[29] For examples of the critical response to *Victory in the Desert*, see "Money Walks and Bullshit Talks," *The Village Voice*, June 11, 1991; Keith St. Clair, "And Now Let's Go to NFL Films for the War Highlights," *Washington Times,* March 29, 1991; John Freeman, "TV's Desert Fox Thinks Up a Storm," *San Diego Tribune*, March 29, 1991, E6; DeWayne Wickham, "NFL Films Out of Element in Mideast," *USA Today,* April 2, 1991.

combination of close-to-the-action documentary footage, percussive orchestral music, and stentorian narration; its popularization of the sports blooper film; and the creation of long-running TV series such as *NFL Game of the Week* (syndication, 1965-2002; NFL Network, 2003-2006; ION, 2007), *Inside the NFL* (HBO, 1977-2008; Showtime, 2008-2021; Paramount+, 2021-2023; The CW, 2023), and *Hard Knocks* (HBO, 2001-present). However, the company's more enduring cultural influence may be its fusion of documentary and narrative in the sports media space. One can trace the narrative impulse in American football documentary from NFL Films' "epic histories" like *They Call It Pro Football* (1967) and *Big Game America* (1969) through the television drama *Friday Night Lights* (NBC, 2006-2008; The 101 Network, 2008-2012)—an adaption of a nonfiction book photographed in a documentary verité style, to docu/fictional programs like *Friday Night Tykes* (Netflix, 2014-2017), *Last Chance U* (Netflix, 2016-2020), and *Warriors of Liberty City* (STARZ, 2018). Continuing the visual, racial, and cultural mythology of the sport as constructed by NFL Films through its processes of hindsight, aestheticization, mythification, and cinematic narrativization, these contemporary televisual football narratives contribute to how the game is defined in the popular sphere. That is, as a gender-segregated, heteronormative, manly sport; one that teaches and reinforces patriarchal masculine behaviors and values (toughness, virility, compliance to authority, etc.) and that justifies its capitalization of racialized Black athletic bodies for the

entertainment of a predominantly white mainstream American audience though vague promises of economic opportunity and social mobility.[30]

FIGURE 9. Eric Reid and Colin Kaepernick kneel before the playing of an NFL game on September 12, 2016.

Methodology: Mixing Coverages

What is an appropriate critical, ethical, and political method for analyzing professional football today? What are the sources of the NFL's cultural power? Why is the sport so important to so many? Why is that popularity limited, primarily, to a single country? How are ideology, racial and cultural myths, and

[30] This process of exploitation and fantasy-creation is at the heart of bell hooks' critique of the documentary film *Hoop Dreams* (1994). See hooks, "Neo-Colonial Fantasies of Conquest: *Hoop Dreams*," in *Reel to Real*: *Race, Class, and Sex at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 96-103.

hegemonic masculinity intersecting in the rhetorical discourse produced by and around the narrativized entertainment spectacle of the NFL? What meanings are embedded in its media products?

The succession of Colin Kaepernick's on-field protest of racial injustice, beginning in August 2016 (FIG. 9); its propagation and the resulting backlash; the November 2016 election of Donald Trump, whose explicitly racist campaign fueled, and was fueled by, the resurgence of white supremacy; and the NFL's blackballing of Kaepernick, informs my methodology, which is committed to an interdisciplinary and intersectional analysis of American football as a cultural form and capitalist enterprise. This project draws from approaches and ideas from cultural studies and visual studies, to think historically about American football's cultural mythology, iconography, televisual circulation, reception, and discourse; Black studies, to address the interlocking racism, sexism, homophobia, exploitation, and violence inherent within American football; and film and media studies, which provides the tools for critical formal and rhetorical analyses of specific media texts.

Stuart Hall's now-classic concept of "encoding and decoding" has been a key theoretical idea in the modeling of this project; in particular, for considering the way that events are narrativized in order to become communicative, or what Hall calls "meaningful discourse." His studies of popular culture, and television in particular, provide a useful model for examining the highly codified, technocratic nature of American football, its surrounding media products and discourse, and

the “preferred readings” that they reproduce. In “Encoding, Decoding,” Hall writes that “the event must become a ‘story’ before it can become a *communicative event*.”[31] The made-for-TV documentaries of NFL Films provide a rich field for examining the rhetorical discourse that is created by and around the mediated entertainment spectacle of the NFL. Hall’s theorization of the “professional code” is especially applicable when evaluating both the highly codified and bureaucratized nature of American football, as well as the constructed, technico-practical discourse of NFL Films’ sponsored documentaries; which often incorporated the word “pro” into their titles (i.e. *Pro Football’s Longest Day*, *They Call It Pro Football*, *Pro Football: Pottstown, PA* [1972]); and which were designed to obscure their primary purpose: to advertise the league, its member teams, and the sport. “The *professional code*,” according to Hall, “serves to reproduce dominant definitions [preferred readings] precisely by bracketing their hegemonic quality and operating instead with displaced professional codings which foreground such apparently neutral-technical questions as... presentational values, televisual quality, ‘professionalism’ and so on.”[32] The mofifs of professionalism and cinematic provenance and artfulness are ubiquitous within the rhetoric and packaging of

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[31] Stuart Hall, “Encoding, Decoding,” in *Culture, Media, Language* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990); rpt. in Simon During, ed., *The Cultural Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 92. Emphasis his. References are to the reprinted version.
[32] Hall, “Encoding, Decoding,” 101.

NFL Films. Following Hall's example, I believe we need to look beyond the games to the "message forms" they are produced, circulated, and consumed through.

In recent years, the visual turn in cultural studies has also been adopted in sports history praxis and in interdisciplinary analyses of sports imagery. A noteworthy example of the latter is Nicole Fleetwood's *On Racial Icons* (2015), which merges visual studies and critical race studies methods to examine how public images contribute to common-sense understandings of race in the United States. Most relevant to this project is Fleetwood's chapter focusing on LeBron James and Serena Williams (among others), which investigates how images of these sporting icons function within the circuitries of racial capital and entertainment culture.

Black American feminist thought constitutes another guidepost for this project, and a model for harmonizing historiography, cultural critique, and personal experience and subjectivity. My analysis of American football and the media extensions of this dissertation are inspired by the hybrid autoethnographic poetics and critical incisions of works like Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), which also takes up the image and media treatment of Serena Williams in its reflection on the dynamics of American racism, and Christina Sharpe's *Ordinary Notes* (2023). Black feminist theory and praxis provides essential tools for analyzing how gender, race, class, and subjectivity are operating within American pro football; how the sport perpetuates dominant ideologies of patriarchal masculinity and white

supremacy; but also, for imagining how those ideologies can be parsed, challenged, and countered. My engagement with Black feminism is focused by Jennifer C. Nash's work, and her reframing of intersectionality, which reorients the analytic back to its more generative and utopian inspirations. These include, per Nash, commitments to generosity, care, radical intimacy, dreaming, world-making, ethical practices of witnessing, transnationalism, and vulnerability.[33]

Black feminist thought helps us to consider how the NFL and NFL Films contribute to (that is, help create and reinforce) white supremacy and hetero-normative masculinity. In her 2004 book *The Will to Change,* bell hooks argues that the crisis of masculinity is more accurately a crisis of *patriarchal* masculinity. hooks makes a case for the necessity of interrogating and understanding patriarchy, which she defines as "a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak… and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence."[34] As a highly visible, gender-segregated, and hetero-masculine enterprise the NFL is active in the reproduction of patriarchal masculinity that hooks describes. Football, through its enforcement of homosocial but often homophobic behavior, adherence to male authority, and

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[33] Jennifer C. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).
[34] bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Atria Books, 2004), 18.

suppression of individual speech, *teaches* patriarchal thinking and practice. hooks's writing highlights the need for intersectional theorizations of the NFL. We need to look more closely at how racial inequity, class dominance, and hegemonic masculinity are mutually constitutive in football culture. We should start this work, I suggest, by examining how the NFL has historically represented, and historicized, itself. The early documentaries of NFL Films are especially instructive in this regard as they are especially skillful in the ways that they code their socio-political messages through modern production methods, auteurism, narrativization, and entertainment mechanisms.

Defining Media Sport Studies / Redefining the Sports Film

In addition to the theoretical framework described above, I locate this project within the field of *media sport studies*. As elaborated by scholar David Rowe and others, media sport studies delineates an emergent inter-discipline that gathers its threads from sport studies, cultural studies, and film and media studies.[35] The configuration that I refer to as media sport studies builds upon the foundations of sport studies—sociology, leisure studies, sport sciences, kinesiology—with theoretical perspectives and methodological techniques drawn from the

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[35] David Rowe, *Sport, Culture, and the Media: The Unruly Trinity*, 2nd edition (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2004). See also Lawrence A. Wenner, ed., *Media, Sport, and Society* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1989); Lawrence A. Wenner, ed., *MediaSport* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Raymond Boyle and Richard Haynes, *Power Play: Sport, Media, and Popular Culture*, 2nd edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

humanities to analyze (typically) the massification of spectator sports, and sport texts, through a sociocultural prism; with emphasis being on the processes of *mediation* and *mediatization*.

Travis Vogan's work on the cultural and institutional histories of sports media, including his comprehensive studies of NFL Films and ABC Sports, have been invaluable to the development of this project. Vogan's *Keepers of the Flame: NFL Films and the Rise of Sports Media* (2014) offers an in-depth formal, cultural, and institutional study of NFL Films, tracing the company's history and practices within the emergence of America's sports media industry during the network era; through to its downsized position in our fragmented post-network era of sports programming. Vogan's *ABC Sports: The Rise and Fall of Network Sports Television* (2018), particularly its chapter on the genesis and significance of *Monday Night Football*, and Victoria Johnson's 2009 essay, "Everything New is Old Again: Sport Television, Innovation, and Tradition in a Multi-Platform Era" detail the foundational role that the NFL has played in shaping the business and packaging of television sport.

Samantha N. Sheppard's theorization and analysis of race and representation within the sports film genre, and her concepts of "critical muscle memory" and "skin in the genre" have helped me to think about the various and complex ways that blackness functions in sports film and media in terms of both

content and formal aesthetics.[36] Thomas Oates's *Football and Manliness* (2015) has helped me think about how a feminist cultural studies framework can be used to address how contemporary perceptions of masculinity and race are shaped by commercialized football narratives and media products; from leadership and self-development literature to mainstream films and TV series to the NFL draft and football gaming. This project is also deeply indebted to the scholarship of Michael Oriard, whose sustained, decades-long work on the cultural history of American football offers a rigorous critical model rooted in textual analysis.[37] In addition, canonical essays like Michael Real's "Super Bowl: Mythic Spectacle" (1975), Margaret Morse's "Sport on Television: Replay and Display" (1983), Lawrence Wenner's "The Super Bowl Pregame Show: Cultural Fantasies and Political Subtext" (1989), and Nick Trujillo's "Machines, Missiles, and Men: Images of the Male Body on ABC's *Monday Night Football*" (1995) brought ideas from semiotics, communications theory, cultural studies, psychoanalysis, film theory, and gender studies to football scholarship. In the past decade, a bevy of new historical and theoretical analyses of the NFL as a mediated spectacle has built upon and broadened this work. Jesse Berrett's *Pigskin Nation: How the NFL Remade American Politics* (2018), which devotes a

[36] Samantha N. Sheppard, *Sporting Blackness: Race, Embodiment, and Critical Muscle Memory on Screen* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020).
[37] See Michael Oriard, *Reading Football: How the Popular Press Created an American Spectacle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Oriard, *King Football*; Michael Oriard, *Brand NFL: Making and Selling America's Favorite Sport* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

chapter to the emergence of made-for-TV football documentaries and the honing of NFL Films' signature aesthetic in the 1960s; and the anthologies *Touchdown: An American Obsession* (2019), edited by Gerald R. Gems and Gertrud Pfister, and *The NFL: Critical and Cultural Perspectives* (2014), edited by Zack Furness and Thomas Oates, have been instrumental to the shaping of my research and thinking. With this dissertation, I hope to add something of significance to this body of work.

In the United States, the sports film genre, as it has come to be defined through its codes, scholarship, production, and screening contexts and broadcast platforms such as ESPN, is dominated by two typologies: fiction sports films, like *Hoosiers* (1986) and *White Men Can't Jump* (1992), which often reinforce dominant attitudes and social and cultural stereotypes while distorting or whitewashing history (in the case of *Hoosiers*) for storytelling purposes; and commercial documentaries, including most of the titles in ESPN's *30-for-30* catalog, which typically focus on exceptional players, coaches, or teams. Both categories often service hagiographic or nationalistic agendas. Ezra Edelman's magisterial, 8-hour *O.J.: Made in America* (2016), made for EPSN, is the exception that proves the rule, offering a micro and macro exploration of modern American life told through the rise and fall of football star and actor O.J. Simpson. For all its comprehensive detail and rigor, though, the (tele-)film sticks close to the traditional sports documentary formula (mixing string-of-interview sequences with ample archival photo and footage illustration, and reenactment,

in a mostly chronological structure). As such, for me it represents a limit case for what's possible in documentary mainstream production.

The sports film genre is, by and large, deeply conservative and conventional. "Not all sports films are successful," David Rowe writes, "but it seems that to qualify for the title of sports film requires a predisposition to obey rather than transgress the confused and contradictory rules of the sports genre game."[38] Exceptions and antidotes to the mainstream sports film can be found by looking to nontheatrical cinema, experimental media, fan culture, and social media. The paradoxical nature of sport—as a site of biopolitical control, collective struggle, and individualized fantasy—makes it a rich and captivating subject. This project finds inspiration in visual and media artworks that explore the game of football as a screen format, aesthetic object, or site of identity formation. In addition to the experimental films and videos that I write about in the following chapters, Howardena Pindell's *Video Drawings: Football* (1976), Nancy Holt's 1985 artist book *Time Outs*, Mark Pellington's personal documentary *Father's Daze* (1993), Catherine Opie's high school football portraits and landscapes (2007-09), Shaun El C. Leonard's live performance *Bull in the Ring* (2008), and Esmaa Mohamoud's 2018 installation *Glorious Bones*, which references the Hollywood football narrative *Remember the Titans*, are among the numerous creative projects that have taken on American football as a

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[38] David Rowe, "If You Film It, Will They Come? Sports on Film," *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* 22, no. 4 (November 1998): 358.

subject of artistic inquiry. Many of these works reflect nuanced perspectives on the game, balancing positions of critically aware fandom and immersion in sports culture with analyses of football's formal and rhetorical dimensions and complicated histories.

By engaging a diversity of approaches, perspectives, and objects, this project seeks to address some of the unseen political and economic flows of the American sports-media complex and proposes to redefine how the sports film genre is typically circumscribed and thought about; by bringing nontraditional and experimental sports films into juxtaposition with mainstream narrative and documentary cinema. By extension, this project asks: What can the media arts bring to commonplace understandings of sport and the social, cultural, and political ideologies that it is intertwined with and coproduces?

Structure

This dissertation includes two complementary parts: A written component that historicizes and theorizes football's narrational and representational practices, discursive conventions, myths, specular pleasures, and fandom; divided into four chapters. And a set of interstitial media works that interrupt the flow of chapters. Each of these three 'time-outs"—*Ghosts of Empire, Cleaning the Glass,* and *Formations*—remediate football's audiovisual and literary archive to explicate hidden or opaque dimensions. The written component is also mirrored by a research-based, feature-length audiovisual essay, titled *One-Hundred Yard*

Universe (*OHYU*), which remains a work-in-progress as I write this in February 2024. *OHYU* examines American football's impact on a single family—the Turners of Richmond, Virginia—over multiple generations (FIGS. 10 and 11). In seeking to understand the game's lived significance for the Turner family, in coexistence with football's emergence as an omnipresent feature in American life and culture in the 1960s, and what it means today, the film reveals how systems of structural inequality, patriarchal masculinity, and identity are at play in shaping America's most popular pastime.

FIGURES 10 and 11. A football family: Benjamin Turner (left, circa 1962) and Solomon Turner (right).

The written component of this project begins with a historical overview of football and its representation in mainstream American culture. Although American football and American cinema are of similar vintage, both dating to the

late-1800s, their conterminous emergence as 20th century entertainment industries has not received much scholarly attention. In Chapter One, "Screen Pasts," I begin by looking at football's early mediated forms —popular press and radio—and track the sport's uneasy assimilation into early cinema. I maintain that due to certain inherent conditions of the game, football did not make for a conducive or attractive film subject early on; as opposed to boxing and wrestling, which took place in tightly confined spaces, allowing for an easier arrangement of lights and cameras. In addition, boxing and wrestling both featured more stripped-down action, exaggerated gestures, and fewer participants. A boxing match's segmentation into brief, minutes-long intervals was conducive to the length of a four-perf 35mm film roll, which became the standard gauge in 1909. Football, on the other hand, was performed outdoors in large stadia, with upwards of 15 players per side and matches that took several hours to play. Despite the large crowds it drew for headline contests, as far as film subjects went, football was a crude and boring anti-spectacle. Through an analysis of some of the earliest filmed documents of football action, such as Thomas Edison's 1903 *Princeton and Yale Football Game,* I argue that films of football during the silent cinema era were more utilitarian than thrilling. The notion of "game film," as an object to be studied rather than enjoyed, is indicative of football's character as a media form during the first decade of the 20th century.

This would change with the evolution of the narrative feature and newsreel forms beginning in the mid-to-late 1910s. Later in this chapter, I

consider how the specificities of football's rules, structure, and frequent injuries have shaped its mediation, and how moving image formats such as film and television and have in turn shaped football into the spectator sport that we know today. More specifically, I look at how the development of the football newsreel segment and the sports highlight, as a distinct media form and news frame, contributed to the game's visuality and rising popularity in the 1920s. I also consider the role that sports icon Red Grange played in fostering the commercial viability of live action football and football movies alike. In films like the semi-biographical Grange vehicle *One Minute to Play* and the Harold Lloyd college comedy *The Freshman* (1925) the popular themes and tropes of football movies, such as the triumph of the underdog, the corrupting influence of money on the integrity of the sport, and the acceptance of the outsider, became readily established.

The chapter concludes with a close examination of the NFL's development as a popular entertainment via the promotional efforts of NFL Films, which emerged during the expansion and refinement of television broadcasting in the postwar era. I argue that football's mediation reached a new aesthetic and rhetorical level in the late-1960s and early 70s. NFL Films took the form of the newsreel highlight and added narrative structure and a cinematic audiovisual treatment. Through a close reading of NFL Films' signature documentary of their first decade, *They Call It Pro Football*, I explicate three key aspects of the NFL Films' method: (1) An underspecified treatment of history;

(2) the instrumentalization of an authoritative, mythologizing voice-over ("over-voice"); and (3) a reliance on racialized archetypes ("mythification"). This analysis brings together a critical enumeration of the company's visual and aural mechanisms (slow motion, multi-camera filming on 16mm, montage editing, optical effects, voice-of-God narration, and so on); with a contextualization of American sports media's maturation as a dominant capitalist institution of the 20th century "culture industry."

In Chapter Two, "Double Moves," I consider how American sports film and media of different stripes—from mainstream dramas to artist-made films—variously reify and resist football's racial and cultural myths. Through a process of close reading and contextual cultural analysis, I argue these media objects, including films such as *Big Game America, Remember the Titans,* and *Brian's Song*, evince complex mythologies regarding white and Black masculinities and homosociality. I begin this analysis by locating pro football within the context of American mass media of the 1960s and 70s. Later I draw upon James Snead's concept of "mythification," which theorizes how film codes communicate racial myths via interrelationships between white and Black characters, to examine a range of football texts that foreground interracial pairings. Given the sport's racial narratives, demographics, and history of raced positions and bodies, I maintain that football cinema offers a rich archive for applying Snead's analytic.

Chapter Three, "The Game is Not the Thing," presents an in-depth case study, focusing on the 1976 tele-documentary *TVTV Goes to the Super Bowl.*

Produced by the Bay Area video collective TVTV, this intimate, behind-the-scenes look at Super Bowl X merges the perspectives of players, spouses, fans, and the press. My analysis proposes that TVTV's intervention destabilizes the dominant image of masculinity as embodied and expressed in popular football docufiction and broadcast-media coverage of the sport; and in doing so, subverts the accepted mythology of American football. I argue that TVTV's counterhegemonic vision is made possible by its status as an ethnographic art project that exists outside of the production model of sports entertainment culture. Thus, the video operates against the logics of bureaucracy, professionalism, and mastery, logics which are embedded in the ideology of high-level football.

In Chapter Four, "Breaking Formations," I consider a set of experimental football films, including Nathaniel Dorsky's *A Fall Trip Home* and Kevin Jerome Everson's *Home* (2008) and *Tygers* (2014), that challenge commonplace understandings of the sports film genre and expand the possibilities of mediated football. I juxtapose these films with two works of the mainstream television and movie industries: the NFL Films made-for-TV documentary *Autumn Ritual* (1986), produced for broadcast on ESPN, and the biographical sports drama *Rudy* (1993), released by TriStar Pictures. Reading these films through a variety of theoretical prisms, my analysis proposes that the unconventional, nonnarrative films of Dorsky and Everson and the very conventional, revisionist *Rudy* wittingly and unwittingly tease apart and unsettle football's construction of

manliness; a masculinity that is most often grounded in physical dominance and submission. In *Autumn Ritual*, I focus on the haunting presence of the painter and former NFL pro Ernie Barnes, whose athlete-artist duality disrupts the film's hierarchy of racialized expertise and pulls at the seams of this otherwise fanciful and lighthearted TV special.

CHAPTER ONE

Screen Pasts: American Football and the Moving Image, from Edison to NFL Films

> Baseball is what we used to be. Football is what we have become.
>
> – Mary McGrory[39]

> If one wanted to create from scratch a sport that reflected the sexual, racial, and organizational priorities of American social structure, it is doubtful that one could improve on football.
>
> – Michael Real[40]

In the first moments of a 1903 Thomas Edison film, *Princeton and Yale Football Game* (FIG. 12), pregame images of collegiate players entering Yale Field is followed by a methodical panorama of the packed stadium. The pace is slow and deliberate, revealing a relaxed but anticipatory mood. More than half of the film's running time is devoted to indistinct views of the crowded grandstands, photographed from the opposite side of the field, as players warm up in the midground. A cluster of well-dressed, mustachioed spectators sporting bowler hats idles along the near sideline, smoking. Following this languid two-minute

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[39] Mary McGrory, "Deliver Us from Football," *Chicago Tribune*, October 13, 1975, A4.
[40] Michael Real, "Super Bowl: Mythic Spectacle," *Journal of Communication* 25, no. 1 (1975): 38.

opening, the film jump cuts to gameplay in mid-performance. In starts and stops we see a series of shots of ballcarriers careening into a mass of bodies, filmed from a fixed frontal position at midfield. The action is energetic and clumsy and the documentation, in a formal echo, seems randomly oblique. What is most striking about this visually inconspicuous document, one of the oldest existing films of a football game, is its continuity with the pictorial and structural aspects of American football media across more than a century: bursts of aggressive and vicious collision, interspersed with interruptive concealment (of breaks in the action, of injury), constructed for white male identification, framed to emphasize the event-spectacle nature of the contest, and padded by secondary diversions. In a contemporary football telecast, an on-field injury is often cause to cut away to commercial. When we return to the game, the twisted bodies have been cleared away, not to be seen again (unless replayed in slow motion and defamiliarized). In this chapter I consider how moving image formats such as film and television and their parameters have shaped football into the spectator sport that we know today, and in turn, how the specificities of football's rules, structure, and frequent injuries have shaped its mediation. Although American football and America cinema are of similar vintage, dating to the late-1800s, their conterminous emergence and imbrication as 20th century entertainment industries has received little consideration.

FIGURE 12. *Princeton and Yale Football Game* (Thomas A. Edison, 1903).

Beginning with a historical overview of football's early representation in mainstream American culture this chapter tracks the sport's gradual assimilation into cinema. I maintain that due to certain conditions inherent to the game, football did not make for a conducive or attractive film subject at the turn of the 20th century. Unlike boxing and wrestling, which took place in tightly confined spaces that allowed for easy arrangement of lights and cameras, and which operated according to exaggerated gestures, college (and later professional) football was performed outdoors in large stadia. I argue that football, in its nascent period, despite the enormous crowds it drew for headline contests (like Princeton vs. Yale), was, as far as film subjects went, a crude and boring anti-spectacle. Games were frequently low-scoring affairs, while the passing offense—a key component of football's excitement—was still in its

nascent development and not yet a featured part of the sport. Early attempts at translating football into moving images resulted in dry, nondescript documents; documents that were used for research and preparation rather than entertainment purposes. Films of football during the silent era were more utilitarian than thrilling. I suggest that the notion of "game film," as a pedagogical object to be studied rather than enjoyed, is indicative of football's character as a media form during the first decade of the 20th century.[41] This would change with the evolution of the narrative feature and newsreel forms beginning in the mid-to-late 1910s.

Some turning points for football's eventual victory as a screen format: The sweeping proliferation of television sets into American homes in the first half of the 1950s; the subsequent expansion and technological refinement of television broadcasting during the postwar economic boom; the liveness and popularity of sports programming; the American Football League (AFL)'s watershed five-year contract with the American Broadcasting Corporation in 1960, which shared television revenue equally among the member teams regardless of market size, followed by the National Football League's first league-wide national TV contract with CBS in 1962; and the founding of NFL Films in 1965. An in-house publicity organ for the National Football League, NFL

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[41] By "game film," I am referring to a photochemical or electronic moving image document of a sporting context, often recorded from a variety of angles, for the purposes of analysis, training, and preparation.

Films took the concept of the highlight montage, which populated newsreel coverage of the sport in earlier decades, and added narrative structure and a cinematic, multicamera, multiangle treatment. These techniques soon became absorbed into the sports media vernacular and standardized. In the hands of the Sabols and television innovators like Roone Arledge, who seized on TV's technological advances, mass audience, and viewing practices, pro football was modernized as a popular entertainment—an attractive sports property imbued with the mythology and romance of American exceptionalism. In this chapter I argue that football became the perfect sport for televisual mediatization because it had the most to gain from what TV could offer, and moreover, of all television sports, best conformed to commercial production and broadcast practices. An average professional football game contains approximately 11 minutes of action. That same game takes over three hours to play, from whistle to gun, providing *many* opportunities to insert sponsorship messages. Televisual techniques such as replay and slow motion, not to mention TV's frequent advertising breaks, help cover over football's intrinsic gaps. The structural parallels between a football game and a television program speak to their symbiotic connection and help to explain football's evolution as America's, and thus American television's, favorite spectator sport.

Football's mediation reached an aesthetic and rhetorical highpoint in the late-1960s and early-70s, in the narrative documentaries of NFL Films. Chapter One concludes with a close look at the development of the NFL as a popular

attraction through the lens of NFL Films. This analysis brings together an enumeration of the company's visual and aural mechanisms (slow motion, multi-camera filming on 16mm, montage editing, voice-of-god commentary, orchestral music, etc.) with a critical analysis of the company's signature film, *They Call It Pro Football*, paying special attention to its use of narration and NFL Films' construction of voice. (Additional textual and formal analysis of some of NFL Films other noteworthy works can be found in the second and fourth chapters.)

Sports Entertainment, Athletic Bodies, and Visual Culture: A Brief Genealogy

For millennia, sports have been intrinsic to daily life, physical well-being, civic identity, and social harmony. That presence has expanded in the last century to occupy entire sections of newspapers and news hours, in turn begetting 24-hour television channels, talk radio stations, and endless punditry. Sports are now seamlessly integrated with pop culture, celebrity culture, music, and fashion trends, and obsessively analyzed from a myriad of positions that employ wide-ranging methods. Meanwhile, ancillary aspects of sports have nearly eclipsed the sports themselves. In the information age, fans are the new experts, gambling with likenesses, and athletes are objectified as data, becoming sets of statistical profiles and avatars. Sports economies are shifting towards the virtual; the daily fantasy site FanDuel generated more than $300 billion in revenue in 2023, streaming platforms have emerged for live viewing of video game play, and

eSports leagues are increasingly lucrative. Understanding American football's popularity as a televisual entertainment requires consideration of American sports media's maturation as a dominant capitalist institution of the 20th century culture industry. The following historiographic contextualization maps football's travel through magazine and newspaper publishing, radio, early cinema, silent narrative films, newsreels, and tele-documentaries.

FIGURE 13. Julian Davidson Oliver, "A Game of Foot-ball," *Harper's Weekly*, December 7, 1878. From the Library of Congress.

During the period that American football took shape—from the 1870s to the 1920s—American sports coverage was dominated by print media.[42] Football's earliest forms of press coverage were thus found in newspapers and magazines. Michael Oriard writes that in the late-1800s, "fans were drawn to the game, in large part, by the sensationalized coverage in their daily newspapers."[43] In addition, during the late-1800s and early-1900s, weekly and monthly general interest periodicals such as *Harper's Weekly, The National Police Gazette, The Saturday Evening Post*, Collier's *Once a Week*, *Life,* and *Puck* printed illustrations that gave rich visual articulation to early college football contests. Julian Davidson Oliver's 1878 drawing "A Game of Foot-ball," for example, in which a player's jersey is torn from his body as he attempts to hand the ball to a teammate near the goal-line, captures the disorderly, chaotic energy and claustrophobia of intercollegiate matches of the time (FIG. 13). However, as football was gaining in popularity and stature towards the end of 1800s, the profession of sports writing was still seeking credibility. In detailing the historical merger of sports and mass media, the historian Robert McChesney points out that early sports journalism was so looked down upon that people had to write under pseudonyms. Although the first American magazine dedicated to sports appeared in 1820, which inspired a spate of competing

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[42] Robert A. Baade and Robert A. Matheson, "The Economics of American College and Professional Football," in Gerald R. Gems and Gertrud Pfister, eds., *Touchdown: An American Obsession* (Great Barrington, MA: Berkshire, 2019), 170.
[43] Oriard, *King Football,* 2.

publications, the subject "was generally considered vulgar and disreputable among a large portion of the American reading public at the time."[44] The flourishing of newspaper publishing in the 1830s and 1840s, in particular the emergence of cheap, mass-circulation daily papers (the "penny press") aimed at working- and middle-class readers, provided an expanded platform for sports coverage. Due to its growing public appeal, "sport began to receive regular attention from newspapers vying for a large readership."[45] In 1895, publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst established the first self-contained sport section upon his purchase of *The New York Journal*. By the 1920s, the newspaper sports section had become a commonplace feature. As the celebrated sports belletrist Grantland Rice put it, "The grip which sport now has on the masses, the classes, the high-brow and the low-brow, man, woman, and child, is beyond all measuring."[46] Though college football received widespread coverage during the 1920s and 1930s, the pro game, which was still primarily situated in small cities across the American rustbelt, struggled to gain credibility, and in turn, attention in the national press publications. However, African American newspapers like the *Chicago Defender*, *Pittsburgh Courier,* and *Baltimore Afro-American* were an exception, covering prominent Black stars like Charles W. Follis ("The Black

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[44] Robert W. McChesney, "Media Made Sport: A History of Sports Coverage in the United States," in Lawrence A. Wenner, ed., *Media, Sports, and Society* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1989), 51.
[45] McChesney, "Media Made Sport," 51.
[46] Susan Reyburn, *Football Nation: Four Hundred Years of America's* Game (New York: Abrams, 2013), 101.

Cyclone"), Fritz Pollard, and Paul Robeson during pro football's integrated early years.

Starting in the early 1920s, radio broadcasting radically changed the way that sports were experienced. The first electronic mass medium, radio expanded the footprint of American sports by an order of magnitude. Sporting contests, conversely, provided the inspiration and content for some of the earliest radio experiments and programs. On November 25, 1920, the first play-by-play audio broadcast of a football game, between Texas University and Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas, aired on WTAW in College Station, Texas. However, instead of a live human voice, the transmission used Morse code.[47] During the summer and fall of 1921, America's first commercially licensed radio outlet, KDKA of Pittsburgh, aired broadcasts of a heavyweight championship fight between Jack Dempsey and challenger Georges Carpentier; Davis Cup tennis matches; baseball's World Series; and the first human-voiced broadcast of a football game, between West Virginia University (WVU) and the University of Pittsburgh. The WVU-Pitt broadcast was also notable for its commercial sponsorship, marking a shift towards advertiser-supported programming. As Eric C. Covil explains "most college football games in the 1920s were aired on what was termed 'sustaining broadcasts.' This meant that colleges were not charged for airing rights nor did stations receive income from advertising during

[47] David Halberstam, *Sports on New York Radio: A Play-by-Play History* (Lincolnwood, IL: Masters Press, 1999), 34.

the games."[48] But as sports became increasingly nationalized via the radio airwaves, the commercial potential would prove too enticing for advertisers and leagues to resist. The attraction of live coverage of popular sports like college football, boxing, and professional baseball helped secure widespread interest in radio, spurring the medium's expansion and competition for broadcast rights. By 1922, 600 local radio stations were operating across the US. That same year, more than 70 universities applied for radio licenses, fortifying the bonds of college football and radio. The founding of the National Broadcasting Corporation in 1926, followed by the launch of CBS in 1927, ushered in the first era of network broadcasting. NBC's first nationwide broadcast was, unsurprisingly, a football game: the 1927 Rose Bowl, played January 1st.

Although coverage of live sports in radio's initial phase was irregular and primarily limited to major events, such broadcasts became an integral component of radio programming and helped drive sales of the new technology throughout the decade.[49] In the early 1920s, only about 60,000 American homes owned a receiver. By the end of the decade, approximately one-third of American households, 12 million in all, had a radio. Importantly, the technology distributed the real-life drama of athletic competition to audiences near and far,

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[48] Eric C. Covil, "Radio and Its Impact on the Sports World," American Sportscasters Online, 2013, http://www.americansportscastersonline.com/radiohistory.html
[49] Sut Jhally, "The Spectacle of Accumulation: Material and Cultural Factors in the Evolution of the Sports/Media Complex," *The Insurgent Sociologist* 12, no. 3 (Summer 1984): 44-45.

in the time of its unfolding, thereby knitting together diverse publics in common interest and forging connections across social divisions. McChesney notes that radio "opened up new vistas for millions who never had access to a major sporting event in the past. The emergence of broadcasting continued the nationalization of sport and helped to entrench it even more as a fundamental social institution."[50] While college football had a symbiotic relationship with radio from the very beginning, drawing on established regional fanbases and media infrastructures, the new medium's adoption of pro football took longer to materialize. College phenom Red Grange's highly publicized interstate leap from the University of Illinois to the Chicago Bears in the fall of 1925 helped spark radio coverage of the professional game but the initial impact was modest and primarily limited to NFL cities. According to Oriard, "Regular broadcasts of pro games began in Chicago in 1926 and New York in 1928, but not even the NFL championship game [established in 1933] was carried on network radio until 1940."[51] During the 1930s and 40s, as commercial radio matured and radio sets became a fixture in more than 90 percent of American homes, advertisers began purchasing sponsorship rights for major events like the World Series. A new sports/media commodity was thus created: the audience.[52]

[50] McChesney, "Media Made Sport," 59.
[51] Oriard, *King Football*, 49.
[52] Jhally, The Spectacle of Accumulation," 45.

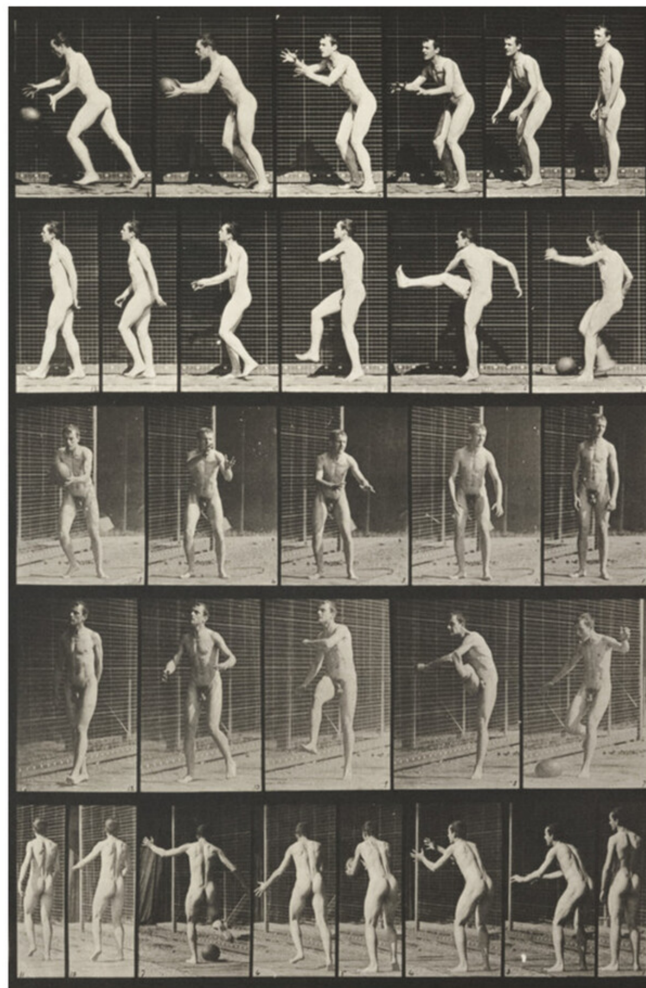

FIGURE 14. Eadweard Muybridge, Nude man playing football, drop kick
(Animal Locomotion, 1887, plate 300), University of Pennsylvania.

The sports historian Douglas Noverr points out that "Film and sport were quickly connected in the late 1890s as Thomas Edison introduced one-reelers

that capitalized on the growing popular interest in baseball and other sports."[53] During the silent cinema period and into the 1930s, filmic treatments of sports tended to spotlight its spectacular and visual dimensions, namely athletic bodies and action: from motion experiments and actualities such as *Sandow* (William K.L. Dickson, 1894); to fight pictures, many of which were, as the film historian Dan Streible reveals, reenacted matches or staged sparring scenes;[54] and highlights of newsworthy college and professional contests, packaged into newsreels.[55] Eadweard Muybridge's scientific studies of human locomotion, conducted at the University of Pennsylvania in the 1880s, included the first "football movie": a set of sequential photos of a nude male athlete kicking a football (FIG. 14). David Chapman observes that Muybridge's 1887 images demonstrate an "early interest in football at the very beginnings of [cinema's] archeology in America."[56] Roughly a decade later, Étienne-Jules Marey produced his chronophotographic analysis of Olympic athletes, taken during the 1900 Paris Games.[57] Media artworks like Nam June Paik's *Lake Placid '80* (1980), a

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[53] Douglas Noverr, "Foreword," in Ron Briley, Michael K. Schoenecke, and Deborah A. Carmichael, eds., *All-Stars and Movie Stars: Sports in Film and History* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), vii.
[54] Dan Streible, *Fight Pictures: A History of Boxing and Early Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).
[55] Raymond Gamache, *A History of Sports Highlights: Replayed Plays from Edison to ESPN* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010).
[56] David Chapman, "Football Warriors: The Archeology of Football Movies," in Gerald R. Gems and Gertrud Pfister, eds., *Touchdown: An American Obsession* (Great Barrington, MA: Berkshire, 2019), 217.
[57] Andrew C. Billings, James R. Angelini, and Paul J. MacArthur, *Olympic Television: Broadcasting the Biggest Show on Earth* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 16.

high-speed video collage of motion on ice and snow, commissioned for the Olympic Winter Games, Bette Gordon's loop-printed diving film *An Algorithm* (1977), and Paul Pfeiffer's video sculpture *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (2001), which digitally reformats and erases objects and figures from basketball game footage, have carried forward this use of sport imagery as a springboard for formal exploration.

The preoccupation with gendered, muscular bodies in proto- and early cinematic renderings of sport is worth lingering on. This fascination forms a continuity with classical depictions of the athletic body dating as far back as the Bronze Age, and which persists in our contemporary visual culture. "When we think of the athlete's body," Judith Butler writes, "we are drawn to the image of a muscular sort of being; it is a body that we see or, rather, imagine… a body whose contours bear the marks of a certain achievement."[58] This ideal of the athletic body, Butler suggests, exceeds its athletic function and conditions our desire as viewers. The fetishized spectacle of the athletic body is central to the production of the sporting gaze, which Roland Barthes's semiological analysis of wrestling provides insights into. "Wrestling is not a sport, it is a spectacle," Barthes maintains.[59] Expressed near the beginning of the opening essay of

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[58] Judith Butler, "Athletic Genders: Hyperbolic Instance and/or the Overcoming of Sexual Binarism," *Stanford Humanities Review* 6, no. 2 (1998), https://web.stanford.edu/group/SHR/6-2/html/butler.html
[59] Roland Barthes, "In the Ring," *Mythologies*, translated by Richard Howard and Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 3. Barthes' essay was titled "World of Wrestling" in the original English translation of *Mythologies,* translated by Annette Lavers (Hill and Wang, New York, 1984).

Mythologies (1957), this sentiment ignites his thinking about the non-sport of professional wrestling, what we now call "sports entertainment." For clarification, I define sport as a rule-bound contest of physical prowess and skill performed between teams or individuals. If not *quite* a sport—wrestling's rules exist only to be overturned and transgressed—I propose we consider it as kinetic rehearsed athletic performance in likeness with sports such as figure skating and gymnastics, which similarly balance extreme physicality with choreography, aestheticization, and bodily display. Although Barthes asserts that wrestling is not a sport—he values its predictable patterns, which he sets in contrast to the combat sports of boxing and judo—his attention to the wrestlers' gestures, physiques, the skillfulness of their performances, and his focus on external signs, provides a foundation for physiological and structuralist considerations of sport.

In his essay, Barthes does not analyze wrestling as a mediated entertainment. He acknowledges, however, an affinity between the viewing conditions and artifices of pro wrestling and B-movies. Like genre films, wrestling follows well-known formulas and draws on familiar archetypes (heroes/faces, bastards/heels). It is not a coincidence that wrestling was one of the first sporting entertainments to be featured on early commercial television. Its tightly confined space of action, accommodating to bulky midcentury camera technology, and controllable conditions were well-suited for the new medium (similar to boxing and early cinema). Wrestling's bold, exaggerated gestures and

facial expressions lent itself to a pattern of long shots and close-ups, making it easier to shoot and produce. In addition to its suitability as a TV sport, the opportunity to gaze at eroticized muscular bodies in the privacy of one's home may well have been a factor in wrestling's televisual popularity. The sociologist Gregory Stone suggests as much, while overlooking its queer appeal: "Perhaps the female fan… is engaged in a quest for sexuality," he observes, adding, "I see more females in the background on my TV set when I view wrestling matches than when I view other games and contests."[60]

In wrestling, Barthes finds echoes of ancient Greek comedy and tragedy. "The virtue of wrestling is to be a spectacle of excess," he begins, which is played out at the level of symbolic gesture and repetition.[61] For Barthes, sport entertainments like wrestling, car racing, and bullfighting fulfill the purpose of theater in previous eras, namely social ritual and the sublimation of the audience's violent impulses. The anticipated "emphatic kick given to the vanquished bastard" is one such ritualistic component of wrestling's signifying system, which provides the public a simulation of justice and a cathartic release: "For the fan of wrestling, nothing is finer than the vengeful rage of a betrayed combatant who passionately attacks not a successful adversary but the stinging image of foul play. Of course it is the image of Justice which matters here much

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[60] Gregory A. Stone, "American Sports: Play and Display," *Chicago Review* 9 (1955): 95-96.
[61] Barthes, "In the Ring," 3.

more than its content."[62] Barthes's emphasis on image here invites a second thought. What he highlights is a simulation, in the Debordian sense—an appearance that obliterates the human actor behind the mask. I stretch the point to emphasize that the investment in mythic spectacle that conditions wrestling (in Barthes's analysis) requires that viewers deny or undersee the arduous physical work—behind the scenes—that creates the appearance. I maintain that this disavowal is one of the constitutive elements underpinning football's success as a "media sport."[63]

Barthes's theory of sport-as-spectacle, expressed in his analysis of wrestling and his script for the National Film Board of Canada essay film *Of Sport and Men* (1961),[64] connected ideas around theatricality, allegory, and masculinity to the construction of national mythologies. He was more interested in considering names, faces, expressions, and style, and posing broad philosophical questions ("What is a national sport?"), than in the social function of sport as it relates to lived conditions. Pierre Bourdieu, on the other hand, was attentive to how sport contributes to class subjugation by enacting control over bodies, an element which Barthes alludes to but doesn't interrogate. Bourdieu identified sporting practices as a locus of struggle between classes and class

[62] Barthes, "In the Ring," 10.
[63] By "media sport" I am referring to sport's photochemical or electronic reproduction, encoded assembly, and dissemination.
[64] Roland Barthes, *What is Sport?,* translated by Richard Howard (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

factions, arguing that the subjugated classes engaged in sports that relied on bodily strength at higher physical risk (like rugby or American football), while the privileged classes valued sports that developed the body and its health (like running, tennis, or swimming).[65] Class and social position determine which "sport products" we participate in or consume, which he described as "tastes," without being fully conscious of our choices. "Tastes (i.e. manifested preferences) are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference… There is no accounting for tastes… because each taste feels itself to be natural—and so it almost is, being a habitus—which amounts to rejecting others as unnatural and therefore vicious."[66] It is through this process that sport, according to Bourdieu, "invariably reproduces the dominant social and cultural relations."[67] Which leads me to wonder: is America's obsession with football, a sport that is closely associated with the dominant values and structures of American society, natural? And if not, how did football become naturalized as America's game?

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[65] Although this kind of deterministic thinking about which classes participate in which sports is, for me, a flaw in Bourdieu's argument, it has resonance with the changing demographics of youth football participation today. It also recalls the 2019 college admissions scandal, in which wealthy families bought their children admittance to elite universities by posing them as athletic recruits for less visible sports. They did so by collaborating with college coaches of under-the-radar sports like sailing, fencing, beach volleyball, and water polo, to advocate to admissions committees for the students' acceptance; those coaches in return received lavish kickback payments.
[66] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Aristocracy of Culture," translated by Richard Nice, *Media, Culture, and Society* 2, no. 3 (1980): 252.
[67] Jennifer Hargreaves, "Theorising Sport," in Jennifer Hargreaves, ed., *Sport, Culture and Ideology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 12.

The answer requires a wander into early 20th century mass media. I maintain that during the early cinema era (1890-1915) football was not easily translatable to film. The expanse of the field—100 yards long by 50 yards wide—requires multi-camera coverage and long lenses, while the action is unpredictable and sporadic. Luke McKernan explains that similarly, "the problems of dramatising a full football [soccer] or cricket match on film were not solved to any degree until the 1920s by the then well-established newsreel companies, when large camera teams, greater camera capacity, and a greater idea of judicious camera position to capture the drama inherent in the games was realised and recorded."[68] The coverage of America football in newsreel films starting in the 1920s helped dramatize and elevate college football into a mass appeal sport following World War I. However, even though American tackle football had not achieved a widespread following as a spectator sport in the early 20th century, games between prominent Ivy League universities like Harvard, Yale, and Princeton constituted meaningful public events that took place in enormous open-air stadia, drawing crowds in the tens of thousands. Display films such as American Mutoscope Company's *Yale Football Team at Practice* (1896), James H. White's *Great Foot-Ball Game Between Annapolis and Westpoint* (1899), and Thomas Edison's *Chicago-Michigan Football Game* (1904) signaled the rising interest in college football at the turn of the century.

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[68] Luke McKernan, "Sport and the First Films," in Christopher Williams, ed., *Cinema: the Beginnings and the Future,* (London: University of Westminster Press, 1996), 114.

These documents of popular football teams and contests were part of an initial burst of topical single-subject short films made for individual viewing in Kinetoscope parlors, and later, projection for group audiences in vaudeville theaters and nickelodeons. Edison, whose New Jersey-based Black Maria film studio was within proximity of the elite Northeastern universities that dominated American football in its formative period, was among the earliest purveyors of football media. As described earlier, his 1903 film *Princeton and Yale Football Game* established a structural template and temporality for cinematic documentation of the sport, which highlighted the display of the gameplay. A similar approach can be seen in his *Chicago-Michigan Football Game* recap film, recorded November 12, 1904 at the University of Michigan's Ferry Field. The six-and-a-half-minute reel (captured at 20 frames per second) begins with a frontal view of pre-game images of uniformed players, filmed in medium-long shot. A group of ten men stare austerely at the camera as it pans unsteadily across them, hands on hips. The film then cuts to a wide shot, also taken from the sideline at field level, of what is presumably the game's opening kickoff. The same action then occurs a second time. The cause of the false start and do-over is unclear. In the background, we see the grandstands at Ann Arbor's Ferry Field packed with people. An elliptical edit reframes a scrum of men collapsing on the player who received the kick. From this scrum an injured played is helped off the field while the camera continues to roll. From this very opening play the physical risks baked into the game are revealed, which impose a temporary halt to the

game's brisk summarization. Less than a minute later, following a Méliès-like series of jump cuts that seem to materialize a touchdown—another injury, this right in front of where the camera is positioned—disturbs the recap. Eventually, the woozy player is helped to his feet, clutches his head, and wanders about. His predicament is quickly dissolved by a burst of shots that show a mass of bodies moving to-and-fro across the gridded field, but it is difficult to discern and describe exactly what has happened.

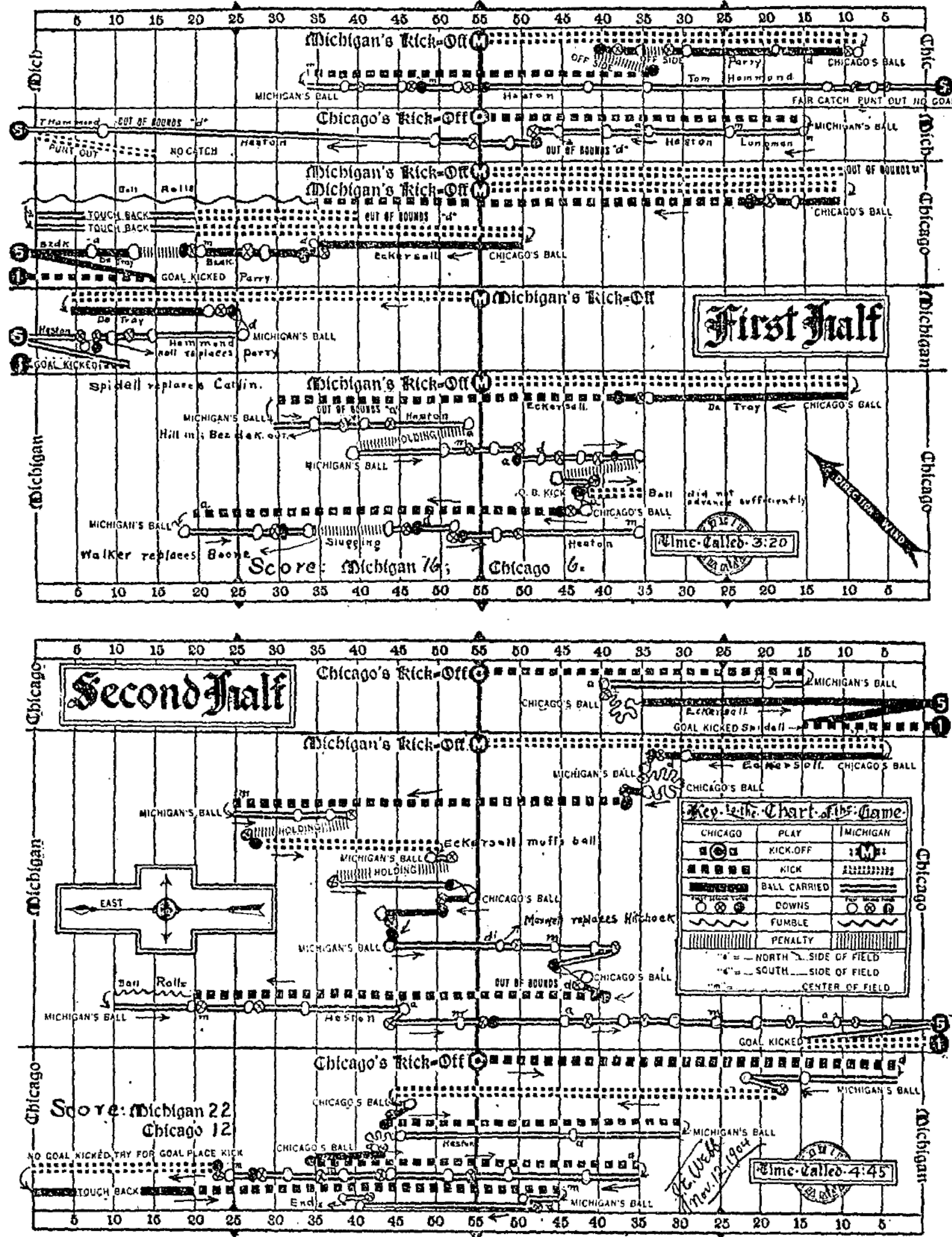

FIGURE 15. "Diagram of Chicago-Michigan Football Game," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 13, 1904, A2.

As football's first radio broadcaster Graham McNamee explained in 1926, "Anyone who has ever attended a gridiron game and tried to pick out football, play, and player from an entangled mass of twenty-two young men, who are trying to mask their maneuvers, can realize something of the problem presented."[69] The point being, even for the most trained observers, football during this time frame was a highly abstract visual subject. The action was often confusing and difficult to read, with most plays terminating in a pile-up of undifferentiated bodies. (Until 1915, athletes didn't wear numbers on their uniforms, which added to the difficulty of telling players apart and underscoring the need for multiple cameras and close-up shots, as well as an understanding of strategy and the nuances of plays and formations). Without extrapolating too much from this rudimentary film that represents a medium and sport in shared incunabulum, I surmise that football, unlike most other sports, *requires* a narrative accompaniment to fully realize its potential as entertainment. That football would achieve its popularity in an era that witnessed the invention of the newsreel film, which established the sports highlight while adding narrational annotations and intertitles; and the codification of the narrative feature, which transformed sporting stars into cultural icons and celebrities, seems more than incidental. It is also telling that *Chicago-Michigan Football*

[69] Graham McNamee, *You're On the Air* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1926), 143.

Game, like many of these earliest football recordings, spends considerable time panning around the stadium, focusing our awareness of the impressive crowd and attendant excitement as if to compensate for what the gameplay itself seems to lack as far as spectacle.

FIGURE 16. Promotional poster for *One Minute to Play* (Sam Wood, 1926). Note that Red Grange, “The Nation’s Idol!” is featured above the film’s title and with Grange’s name in a much larger font.

Hollywood Football: Narrative, Celebrity, and Public Culture

In the 1920s, an era of economic prosperity fueled the expansion of the American moving picture industry. The rising wages of America's growing middle class meant increased leisure spending and time for mass entertainments like movies and organized sports. Film-going soared during the decade, giving rise to a movie theater construction boom in industrialized cities and towns. The creation of the factory-based Hollywood studio system and its strategy of vertically integrating film production, distribution, and exhibition reshaped moviemaking into a powerful corporate enterprise. Meanwhile, the development of the Hollywood star system, which minted a first generation of silent movie stars, "provided a forum for the general public to develop more intimate, visually informed relationships with an array of public personalities."[70] Public demand for information and gossip about movies and their star performers was in part satisfied by the proliferation of Hollywood fan magazines like *Photoplay, Film Fun,* and *Screenland,* which extended film culture beyond the space of the cinema. These publications repositioned fandom as occupying a place between production and consumption, drumming up buzz and attendance, and contributing to the foundation of today's celebrity culture.

[70] David L. Andrews and Steven J. Jackson, "Introduction: Sport Celebrities, Public Culture, and Private Experience," in David L. Andrews and Steven J. Jackson, eds., *Sport Stars: The Cultural Politics of Sporting Celebrity* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 3.

The 1920s has also been described as the Golden Age of American (male) sports. The roaring twenties witnessed the growth of baseball as the national pastime, while boxing, horse racing, basketball, and college football gained status as spectator sports with the power to attract mass audiences. To accommodate this surge of interest, a sports stadium building boom led to the construction of more than two dozen college stadiums across the US during the decade, including the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, and iconic professional venues like Yankee Stadium and the third iteration of Madison Square Garden in New York City. The doubling of university enrollment between the end of World War I and the Great Depression also created a larger built-in fanbase for intercollegiate sports. As increased attendance spurred more expansive media coverage in the mainstream press, in combination with the flowering of niche publications targeted towards fan subcultures, sporting celebrities developed into cultural personalities with crossover appeal. America's film studios took note. As David Andrews and Steven Jackson point out, "In the 1920s Hollywood began to recognize the importance of sports heroes such as Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Red Grange, and Jack Dempsey, incorporating these figures into small-budget pictures that drew on the celebrity status of the athletes."[71] For example, the 1926 low-budget feature *One Minute to Play*, starring football great Red Grange,

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[71] Ron Briley, Michael K. Schoenecke, and Deborah A. Carmichael, "Sports in Film: Cultural and Historical Representations of Athletic Competition on the Screen," in Ron Briley, Michael K. Schoenecke, and Deborah A. Carmichael, eds., *All-Stars and Movie Stars: Sports in Film and History* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 3.

capitalized on the halfback's established fame and following to attract viewers. The silent drama was a significant box office success, grossing $750,000 against a budget of less than $100,000, and helped usher in a parade of narrative football films.[72] Daniel A. Nathan notes that during the 1920s and 1930s, "football films were so successful that Hollywood made more than 50 of them" in the span of a decade, including "eight in 1932 alone."[73] Oriard's *King Football* lists 93 football movies made between 1921 and 1940—an output of nearly five per year.

Nicknamed "The Galloping Ghost," "The Wheaton Iceman,"[74] and the "Illinois Flash," Harold "Red" Grange was one of the most popular and most publicized American athletes of the early 20th century. Prior to joining the NFL's Chicago Bears, Grange was a star running back and three-time All-American for the University of Illinois. In his three years at Illinois (1923-25), Grange ran for 31 touchdowns in just 20 games. Dubbed a "touchdown factory" for his scoring prowess, and possessing "the shiftiest hips in football," Grange's play sparked the imagination of influential sportswriters like Paul Gallico, John Kieran, Damon Runyon, and Grantland Rice, all of whom used evocative visual language to

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[72] Robert Cantwell, "Sport Was Box-Office Poison," *Sports Illustrated*, September 15, 1969, 116.
[73] Daniel A. Nathan, "'I'm Against It!' The Marx Brothers' *Horse Feathers* as Cultural Critique, or, Why Big-Time College Football Gives Me a Haddock," in Ron Briley, Michael K. Schoenecke, and Deborah A. Carmichael, eds., *All-Stars and Movie Stars: Sports in Film and History* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 47.
[74] While growing up in Wheaton, Illinois, Grange delivered ice in the summers to help support his family, which earned him the Iceman moniker.

render, and often exaggerate, Grange's on-field exploits. "This man Red Grange of Illinois is three or four men, and a horse rolled into one for football purposes," Runyon opined in one postgame recap. "He is Jack Dempsey, Babe Ruth, Al Jolson, Paavo Nurmi and [famous American thoroughbred] Man o'War. Put them all together. They spell Grange."[75] Grange's play against the University of Michigan on October 18, 1924, a game in which he recorded a 95-yard touchdown on the opening kick-off, four rushing touchdowns, a passing touchdown, and two defensive interceptions, garnered national attention and famously inspired this poetic description:

> **"Red" Grange, of Illinois**
> *A streak of fire, a breath of flame,*
> *Eluding all who reach and clutch;*
> *A gray ghost thrown into the game*
> *That rival hands may rarely touch;*
> *A rubber bounding, blasting soul*
> *Whose destination is the goal*.[76]

The New York Times hailed Grange's performance against Michigan as one of the greatest ever seen on a football field: "A flashing, red-haired youngster, running and dodging with the speed of a deer, gave 67,000 spectators jammed into the new $1,700,000 Illinois Memorial Stadium the thrill of their lives today… an

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[75] Damon Runyon, "Penn Trampled Under Flying Feet of Red Grange, Score 24-2," *The Tampa Tribune*, November 1, 1925, 83.
[76] Grantland Rice, "The Sportlight," *The New York Herald Tribune*, October 24, 1924, 16.

exhibition that set the dumbfounded spectators screaming with excitement."[77] A nation's idol was born, both on the field and in the imagination.

FIGURE 17. Intertitle from *Pathé News* newsreel, circa 1926.

While still in college, Grange became one of the first high-profile amateur athletes to sign with an NFL team, joining the Chicago Bears. The contract was arranged by his notorious agent—the Champaign, Illinois movie theater operator and sports promoter, C.C. "Cash and Carry" Pyle. Though Grange had completed his college eligibility a week prior, he had not yet graduated (a loophole that Pyle and the Bears exploited), which caused a mini scandal. Aside from the unusual timing of his signing, Grange's interest in playing pro football

[77] "67,000 See Illinois Beat Michigan, 39-14," *The New York Times*, October 19, 1924, S2.

was itself noteworthy. At the time, professional football was considered an inferior product to college football, drawing comparatively small crowds; most college stars bypassed the NFL entirely to pursue other (usually better paying) careers outside of sports. Jay Berwanger, who was recognized as the most outstanding player in college football in 1936, turned down the opportunity to play professional football over a salary dispute. Instead, he became a foam-rubber salesman. Further, "pay for play" was considered a crass violation of the amateur spirit. Grange's entry into the NFL in 1925 was thus treated as a groundbreaking event, bringing newfound publicity to a floundering pro football venture. Football historian Ronald A. Smith affirms that the NFL received a new level of press coverage when Grange joined the Bears, which reset the terms of its relationship to the college game. "Clearly, having the pros feed off the colleges was more important than having the colleges benefit from the pros," Smith notes, an extractive feeder-system that was formalized with the creation of the NFL draft in 1935.[78]

Upon signing with the Bears, Grange suited up for the final two games of their 1925 regular season slate. His first game with Chicago drew 36,000 spectators. Before Grange's signing, the team's average home attendance was 6,500. Two days after the end of the season, the Bears embarked on a barnstorming tour across the Midwest and Northeast, playing 8 games in 11

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[78] Smith, "American Football," 10.

days. (This is an astonishing schedule; due to its grueling physical nature, football teams typically play only once a week). Grange's contract called for a 50/50 split of the gate receipts, which proved extremely rewarding for the player and the league. The exhibition games drew sold out crowds—unprecedented for the NFL at the time—culminating in an audience of 73,000 spectators and more than 100 sportswriters at New York's Polo Grounds and immediately transforming public perception of the National Football League. Then just 12 days later, a second barnstorming tour, from Miami through the South and ending on the West Coast, added another nine games between December 25, 1925 and January 31, 1926.[79] Thus, to begin his pro career, Grange played in 17 of 19 contests over a period of 67 days, the last 12 games with a badly injured arm. Moreover, the tour, which took the Bears to 17 cities, provided pro football with attention from coast to coast while generating huge profits for Grange and NFL owners alike.

Grange's extraordinary athletic performance (and endurance), his mass mediated "Galloping Ghost" persona, and the public visibility that his games generated, lent a measure of respectability to pro football. His combination of skill and marketability made him football's first media celebrity. In October 1925, he was the first gridder to appear on the cover of *Time Magazine*. Upon the conclusion of his college tenure *The New York Times* called him "The most

[79] Chris Willis, *Red Grange: The Life and Legacy of the NFL's First Superstar* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

famous, the most talked-of and written about, most photographed and most picturesque player the game has ever produced."[80] He parlayed his on-field bona fides, iconic image, and bankability as a box office draw into a portfolio of advertising endorsements, including Red Grange-branded footballs and candy bars and a Red Grange doll, the vaudeville act "C'mon Red," and a series of on-screen roles. In addition to the 1926 college football drama *One Minute to Play*, Grange starred in the 1927 race car feature *Racing Romeo,* and the 1931 adventure serial *The Galloping Ghost.* Perhaps more significantly, he was a regular attraction in the newsreel films of his time, which as Andrews and Jackson note, "mythologized Grange's pyrrhic exploits to the estimated 60 million Americans then visiting movie houses each week."[81]

One Minute to Play is noteworthy for its intertextual mapping of Grange's public identity onto a fictional narrative, lending authenticity and intrigue to an otherwise ordinary sports drama. Based on a story by Byron Morgan and directed by Sam Wood, *One Minute to Play* tells the story of high school halfback phenom Red Wade (Grange) who aspires to play college football against the wishes of his wealthy father. In addition to sharing the same first name and position as Grange, the film's main character dons the familiar number 77 that Grange wore in real life and is likewise renowned for his sensational running

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[80] William D. Richardson, "Grange Turns Pro; Illinois Wins 14-9," *The New York Times*, November 22, 1925, S1.
[81] Andrews and Jackson, "Sport Celebrities, Public Culture, and Private Experience," 6.

ability. After getting mixed up in a fight on his way to the University of Claxton, "one of the finest colleges in the state" and a football powerhouse, Wade—"a fine specimen of healthy young manhood"—inadvertently ends up at nearby Parmalee College instead. Impressed by the school's charming campus and smitten by co-ed Sally Rogers (coincidentally, the sister of the Parmalee football coach), he elects to enroll there. Despite promising his football-hating dad that he would give up the "rough and ungentlemanly" game to focus on his studies, Wade is coerced by Sally and the rest of the Parmalee student body to suit up. When his father inevitably learns the truth and threatens to withdraw a large endowment to the college if his son continues playing, Red sits out Parmalee's season finale against archrival Claxton. However, the elder Wade—attending the game only to confirm his son doesn't play—is won over by the sport and the exuberant atmosphere. A quick father-son reconciliation ensues, and Red takes the field for the game's final minute, leading Parmalee to a come-from-behind victory and securing the affection of his love interest.

Although *One Minute to Play* follows a common, by then familiar, sports movie pattern, Grange's screen charisma and the film's box office success proved that athletes could capably headline Hollywood motion pictures. In his review for *The New York Times*, Mordaunt Hall praised Grange's performance as "pleasingly natural… He has an ingratiating appearance, and the idea that he is

actually a football player adds to the thrill of the gridiron story."[82] *Motion Picture Magazine* likewise called attention to Grange's natural presence: "He is not handsome or polished or any of those things, but he behaves with an unaffected ease that would put some of our seasoned leading men to shame. And he is modest and thoroughly likable."[83] Grange biographer John M. Carroll asserts that "Grange's debut in *One Minute to Play* helped pave the way for a new type of Hollywood actor, the football idol."[84] The film's marketing strategy took advantage of Grange's mythologized persona, which, by September 1926, traversed newspapers, magazines, commercial products, branded merchandise, newsreels, radio broadcasts, and now a Hollywood production. Earlier that year Grange garnered cross-country attention during the Chicago Bears barnstorming exhibition tour, securing his status as a cultural phenomenon. His ability to fill sports stadiums was even cited in the promotion for *One Minute to Play*, with the impressive box office returns from Grange's New York and Los Angeles games peppering the film's print advertisements. David Chapman notes that "This was the first time that all the ballyhoo that 1920s advertising could conjure had been put into action for a football film, and it proved to be very effective."[85] Likewise, Grange was an ideal advertising vessel. Young, physically strong, conventionally

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[82] Mordaunt Hall, "The Screen," *The New York Times,* September 6, 1926, 16.
[83] "*One Minute to Play*," *Motion Picture Magazine*, August 1926, 63.
[84] John M. Carroll, *Red Grange and the Rise of Modern Football* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 131-32.
[85] Chapman, "Football Warriors," 230.

attractive, humble yet comfortable in the limelight (and ready to cash in), he was the embodiment of American white male culture and a symbol of speed, power, and virility. A star running back in an era of crude and unsophisticated passing offenses, his thrilling open-field runs were perfectly suited for newsreel distillation and replay. The injuries that marred Grange's professional career, stripping away his quickness and dexterity and limiting his effectiveness, did little to diminish his fame, which stemmed from an alchemical combination of athletic talent, good timing (as football and sports journalism were both blossoming at the moment of his peak), and astute marketing. "The Galloping Ghost" was a media-made legend perfectly suited for the moment.

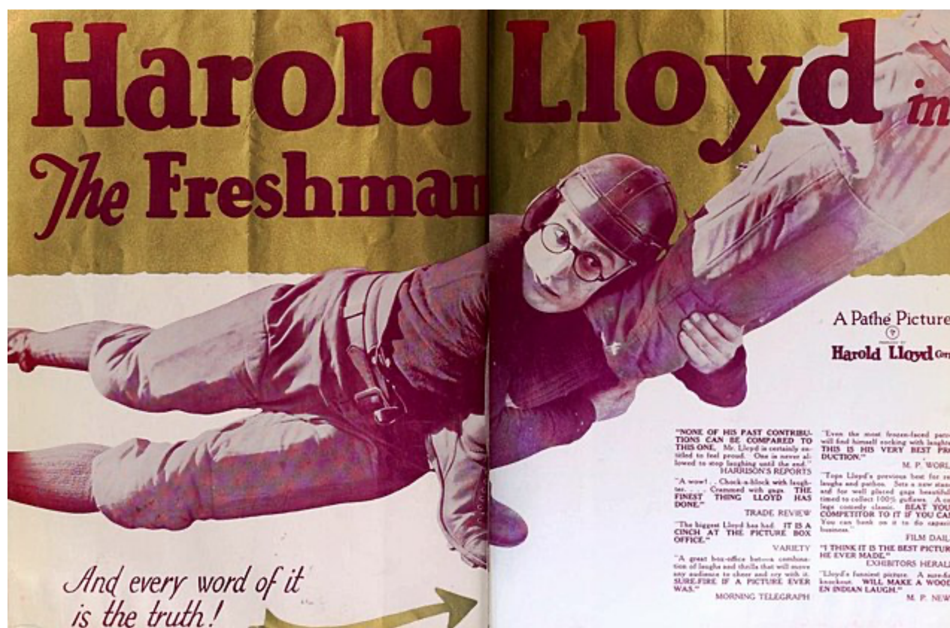

FIGURE 18. Two-page magazine advertisement for *The Freshman* (Sam Taylor and Fred Newmeyer, 1925). From *The Film Daily,* August 23, 1925.

Grange's larger than life presence, as constructed by and amplified in the national press and the newsreels that "brought images of Grange to theaters in every state in the union," also served as a marketing inspiration for the 1925 college comedy *The Freshman*. Produced by and starring the silent film star Harold Lloyd, *The Freshman* was a critical success and Lloyd's biggest commercial hit, earning an estimated $2.6 million (with a budget of $300,000). "In what must be the earliest cross-marketing of football and cinema," Michael Oriard observes, "ads in Chicago newspapers invited moviegoers to 'Compare the two Super Harolds,'" juxtaposing an image of Lloyd with an "identical pose of Grange in one of his most reprinted photographs." Notably, "Harold Grange drew customers to see Harold Lloyd, not the other way around."[86]

By the mid-1920s, the football film was a recognizable popular genre. Many of these narrative features adopted similar patterns and recycled plots and themes. For instance, to win the social acceptance of his peers and/or the affection of a female love interest, an underdog male outsider must overcome a series of obstacles and/or misunderstandings by proving himself capable on the field; often at significant bodily peril. In this vein, *The Freshman* tells the aspirational story of Harold "Speedy" Lamb (Lloyd), an incoming, working-class college student who yearns to be a campus celebrity at fictional Tate College. In preparation he learns a series of college cheers as well as a jig popularized in a

[86] Oriard, *King Football*, 127.

made-up movie, *The College Hero*, which Lamb performs every time he introduces himself. He also studies and attempts to emulate the previous year's most popular student and football captain, Chet Trask. "You see," Lamb is told, "you can never be as popular as Chet Trask unless you play on the football team." Upon arriving at Tate, public mishaps and embarrassments instantly ensue. Lamb is duped by The College Cad into taking the Dean's chauffeured car from the train station, monologuing in front of and then buying ice cream for the entire student body (thereby burning his savings), and later hosts the school's annual Fall Frolic; all the while being laughed at and made fun of behind his back. Lamb is convinced that his best chance at redemption (and thus popularity) is via success on the football field. His attempt to win a spot in the line-up, however, becomes the source of further humiliation, but also, in the end, his means of triumph.

FIGURE 19. Starting from the bottom: Harold Lloyd in *The Freshman.*

The Freshman contains two extended football sequences. Both represent the sport as a theater of cruelty and abuse. In the first, Lamb interrupts the varsity practice, seeking a try-out. As the head coach—"so tough he shaves with a blow-torch"—gives a fiery speech, Lamb naively wanders in, setting off a chain of comic events. Because of his good-natured ineptitude, Lamb poses a disruption to the smooth functioning of the practice and so must be physicality punished. For hours he is made to serve as a human tackling dummy for the entire team and a patsy for the coach's rough demonstrations. As a reward for surviving the violent ordeal, Lamb is adopted as the team's water boy (a subtle

emasculating indignity) while being led to believe that he's made the squad as a substitute player.

FIGURE 20. Harold Lamb "seeing double" in *The Freshman.*

The Freshman's climactic "big game" marks the film's second football sequence. After his team has run out of healthy players, and under threat of forfeit, Lamb is let onto the field, where he salvages a win for Tate College. The on-field action was filmed at the University of California, Berkeley's majestic Memorial Stadium, which opened in 1923, during halftime of a contest between UC Berkeley and Stanford. A crowd of nearly 90,000 spectators served as background extras, adding a dash of grandeur and pageantry to the proceedings. As more and more injured Tate players are carried off the field on stretchers,

Lamb convinces his coach—despite being informed that his place on the team is a joke—to put him in. On the ensuing snap, Lamb is seemingly knocked out while at the bottom of a scrum. As he's being carted away, he suddenly comes to and jumps back into the game, where he continues to be relentlessly trampled and tossed about like a ragdoll. At one point, still reeling from an apparent concussion, he begins seeing double. A moment later, he lines up on the wrong side of scrimmage. However, despite not knowing the rules of football or where to line-up, or what to do from play to play, Lamb rallies his team. Trailing 3-0 deep into the final quarter, he first pulls off a chase down tackle, forces a fumble, recovers the ball, then races 90 yards in the opposition direction, evading and dragging defenders into the endzone for the winning touchdown as a pistol signals game over. With his fantastical final run Lamb's dream of becoming the college hero is actualized. Yet, the fact that he does not wear his team's uniform—he is forced to give the sweater off his back to a teammate whose jersey was torn during play—while conducting his victorious exploits suggests that he still doesn't really belong. Lamb is too weird, too eccentric, too individual, to be assimilated into football's melting pot. Although he has finally achieved his dream of authentic popularity, the film's final image shows him alone, separated from the team, and content to dwell on the note of affection left for him by his romantic interest, Peggy, the only person who showed Lamb any care throughout the film.

The Freshman's satirizing of football culture, the game's physical abusiveness, and the figure of the sadistic coach contribute to the discourses around college football's commercialization and the game's violence. Early in the film, a title card announces "The opening of the Fall term at Tate University – a large football stadium with a college attached." Another title card introduces "Football practice – where men are men and necks are nothing." In *The Freshman*, as in American culture at large, tackle football is presented as the ultimate test of manhood, which Lamb's nebbish appearance and mild-mannered nature threatens to subvert. "I'd like to play on your football team if you don't mind," Lamb says to the hard-driving coach. Lamb's politeness infuriates and flummoxes the coach, who doesn't know what to do with a player who is so doggedly willing to accept embarrassment and abuse. Throughout the film, Lamb is subjected to relentless public humiliation and brutality. These abuses—an extended hazing ritual that runs almost the entire length of the film—are the engine of the film's plot machinations, and the source of its slapstick comedy as well. Although *The Freshman* is clearly a parody of both college life and football's macho culture, the film also upholds, as Seán Crosson argues, "the importance of the sport for the assertion of character and proving one's masculinity."[87] Pointing out the film's social and economic context, David Chapman maintains that *The Freshman*, as a product of post-World War I

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[87] Seán Crosson, *Sport and Film* (London: Routledge, 2013), 46.

industrialization, "clearly illustrates the insecurity that afflicted a rapidly modernizing and urbanizing population, and it does so through the medium of the most 'manly' of all sports."[88] In this sense the nerdy, bespectacled Lamb/Lloyd can be seen as a parallel to the almost comically undersized but similarly persistent working-class protagonist of the college football drama *Rudy* (1993), Daniel "Rudy" Ruettiger. The two unlikely gridiron heroes, and their even more unlikely "success stories," are expressions of the myth of the American dream, and the idea that anyone can become anything with enough grit, hard work, and determination, regardless of one's identity or circumstances. This fantasy of self-actualization remains at the core of American football's appeal, concealed in the rhetoric of competitive meritocracy.

[88] Chapman, "Football Warriors," 226.

Grantland Rice's Sportlights

One Reel Every Other Week

The Short Pictures That Have Made a Real Sensation

Never have one reel pictures been received with more real enthusiasm by exhibitors, reviewers and public alike than these Sportlights.

Nothing like them has ever been done before. A man who KNOWS sports from every angle, who is a nationally known authority, the country's most famous Sporting Editor, has shown that athletics and outdoor sports are more interesting than fiction, more thrilling than drama.

For sheer beauty and action you have never seen anything like them. For instance, just take a look at "Gridiron Glory," a recent and timely release.

Produced by J. L. Hawkinson

Pathépicture

TRADE MARK

FIGURE 21. An advertisement for Grantland Rice's bi-weekly newsreel series for *Pathé News.* From *Exhibitor's Trade Review* (Nov 1924 – Feb 1925).

Football Goes to The Movies: Sport as Spectacle in American Newsreels

In the 1920s, the cinema newsreel industry brought images of college (and later professional) football to mass audiences both domestically and abroad. Newsreel serials were first introduced to American moviegoers in the summer

1911, beginning with the French-owned Pathé News series *Pathé's Weekly*. The first all-sound newsreel, released by *Fox Movietone News* on October 28, 1927 in New York City, included highlights of the annual Army-Navy football game.[89] The newsreel genre blended topical nonfiction footage, staged action, re-enactments, and archival material with newspaper-style headlines, and following the introduction of sound film, declamatory narration and brisk music. The tightly edited ten-minute packages, comprising six-to-ten distinct segments, were released twice a week into motion picture theaters as lead-ins to feature films. Hollywood's takeover of the mainstream film distribution and exhibition business, the movie house construction boom that followed World War I, and the industry's block-booking practices, insured a large viewing public for the newsreels. "By the mid-1920s, newsreels were shown weekly in 85 to 90 percent of the 18,000 movie theaters in the country," Oriard explains. "By the mid-1930s, weekly attendance of 108 million at the movies meant a comparable audience for newsreels, with each reel seen by an estimated 20 million."[90] Over a six-decade span, the major newsreels, including *Pathé News* (1910-1956) *Hearst Metrotone News* (1914–1967; renamed *News of the Day* in 1936), *Paramount News* (1927-1957), *Fox Movietone News* (1927-1963), and *Universal Newsreel* (1929-1967) shaped national discourse while blurring the lines between information and entertainment.

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[89] Gamache, *A History of Sports Highlights,* 51.
[90] Oriard, *King Football,* 50.

Sports content was a regular newsreel feature from the very start. Earlier moving image representations of sport, including precinematic scientific studies such as *Pferd und Reiter Springen über ein Hindernis (Horse and Rider Jumping Over an Obstacle* (Ottomar Anschütz, 1888) and Kinetoscope rehashes like Edison's 1904 *Chicago-Michigan Football Game*, opened a gateway for sport's entry into the news media frame. However, due to the immobile nature of the cameras and other technical limitations, the sports cinema of the silent era had a staged, fantastical quality. Shot from ground level, such films were made with hand-cranked machines resulting in uneven motion. Industrial advances in camera, lens, and film stock technologies, in addition to the standardized routines, aesthetics, and heavily condensed structure of the newsreel form, enabled the modern sports highlight. The highlight honed the raw material of the sports actuality film, minimizing technical inconsistencies, shifting the angles, and smoothing the motion. The increased pictorial realism was complemented by the introduction of sound, which added an immersive audiovisual polish. In his critical genealogy of the sports highlight, historian Raymond Gamache explains that "Newsreels built on the advances of film actualities by nationalizing sports within an ideology of hegemonic masculinity, by refining audio commentary, and by increasing the sense of spectacle in capturing the activity of cheerleaders and fans."[91] Iain Adams notes that "The enthusiasm of the vast

[91] Gamache, *A History of Sports Highlights*, 15.

crowds was accentuated in the newsreels which, by the 1920s, were widely popular and audiences felt that no cinema programme was complete without them."[92]

Among popular American sports, football was ideally suited for newsreel treatment. College football, with its enormous outdoor stadia, boisterous crowds, cheerleaders, marching bands, card sections, and dynamic on-field action, offered some of the most photogenic content of any sport, and as importantly, a sense of ceremony and spectacle. From a technical standpoint, football offered clearly delineated action. Unlike a baseball or a golf ball, the football itself was large and darkly colored and thus easier for newsreel cameramen to follow. Further, American football's geography and structure benefited from the enhanced capabilities of newsreel coverage. The scope of the field, and the number of players on either side of the ball, required a wide angle, top view treatment. Usually this meant filming with a camera high up at midfield that panned with the action. And unlike more continuously flowing sports like soccer, basketball, and hockey, football is a start-and-stop game that is more easily condensable. Each snap of the football sets off a short self-contained episode, averaging five seconds in length, with a clear beginning and end. But in contrast to a golf stroke or a tennis volley, a football play is less visually

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[92] Iain Adams, "A Century of British Readings of America through American Football: From the Fin de Siècle to the Super Bowl," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 34, nos. 1-2 (2017): 105.

repetitive and has the potential to branch in many directions, offering a wide range of potential highlight material.

FIGURE 22. *Hearst Metrotone News* 02-208-08: "Trojans Conquer Stanford Eleven," October 25, 1930.

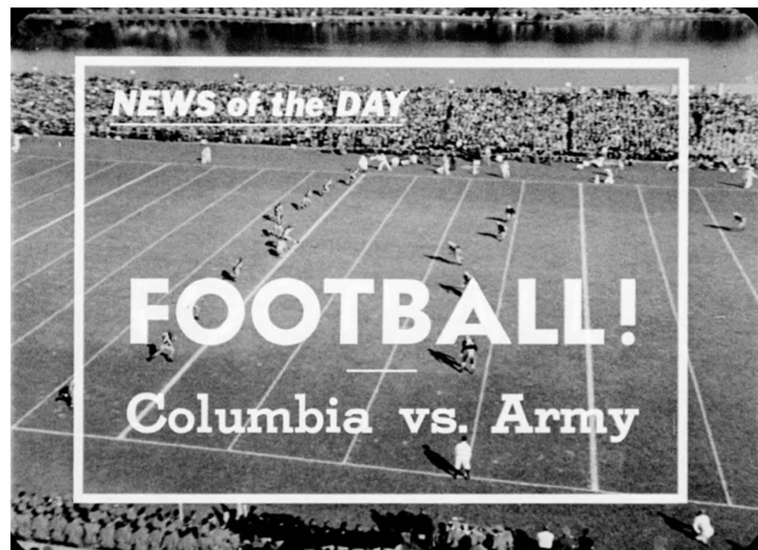

FIGURE 23. *News of the Day* 10-207-05: "Columbia Beats Army, 20-18, in Thriller," October 10, 1938.

Two segments from Hearst's *Metrotone News*/*News of the Day* illustrate football's development as a newsreel subject across the 1930s. "Trojans Conquer Stanford Eleven," from October 25, 1930, demonstrates the pattern of a typical football segment. The title card's subhead, "Huge crowd at Palo Alto sees warriors from So. California U. score triumph," establishes the setting. The first image we see is a high angle wide shot of the Stanford marching band, with accompanying music, crossing the field. The audience is still settling into position. The camera position remains the same as we jump cut from the pregame festivities to the opening kickoff. By then, all the attendees have taken their seats; the background is now teeming with fans. As the ball is kicked off by Stanford to the University of Southern California (USC), offscreen a male announcer describes what is happening in a low-key play-by-play style. A closer shot now shows both teams at the line of scrimmage though it's unclear how much time has transpired between the two plays. When the ball is snapped, it's revealed that Stanford is now punting to USC, which indicates a significant ellipsis, since just moments ago, we saw USC receiving the ball. The very next shot finds Stanford with the ball, facing the opposite direction, and on USC's side of the field. Stanford's offense runs a reverse, gaining 12 yards. The following two shots depict USC with the ball near the Stanford goal line. On the second play, USC runs the ball into the endzone. The referee's signaling of touchdown is

the last thing we see, and the only scoring play included in the two-minute segment. At no point do we ever learn what the score is. The only sound, besides the opening march and the radio-like narration, is of ambient crowd noise, and the occasional collective reaction to the plays unfolding on the field. Context is kept to a minimum. The slowly paced document unites a handful of mostly random plays, save for the touchdown at the end, but we don't learn much about what transpired outside of the opening title card.

In "Columbia Beats Army, 20-18, in Thriller," from October 10, 1938, we are immediately thrown into the action. The offscreen commentator is excitedly summarizing the game in flowery narrative prose: "And here's the story of the lion that went up the Hudson to twist the tale of Army's mule" we hear over a wide shot of a kickoff. The following shot reframes the action more tightly at the line of scrimmage. "First quarter, Army's ball. Woodrow Wilson's around right end. [This is Woodrow Wilson Jr., son of the former US president.] Biff, bang, he's around Columbia's tacklers like a comet. Perfect blocking clears his way. 55 yards and he's over for a touchdown. Army leads 12 to nothing." The segment cuts to a reaction shot of ecstatic cadets, filmed from a position embedded in the stands (suggesting the use of a second camera) and enhanced by the cheering on the soundtrack. Back to the gameplay: We see Columbia's quarterback (and eventual NFL star) Sid Luckman, moving his team down the film and into the endzone across a sequence of shots that is briefly interrupted by a cut-in of a cheering crowd filmed in a wide shot. It's now the second quarter and it's

Columbia 6, Army 12, we're told. A quickly paced montage of action, alternating wide and medium-wide shot types, complements the animated voiceover account of the contest's back-and-forth flow. A staged close-up of Luckman, the game's biggest star, is occasionally inserted before highlights of his long passes. Cutaways of impassioned spectators, who at one point prance onto the field, and the sound of their cheers and boos, add to the sense of anticipation and help transform a standard intercollegiate match-up into a dazzling display. The segment closes with Columbia "snatching victory from defeat" via a last-minute touchdown.

The pattern of the football newsreel segment described in the second example, which remained remarkably consistent across several decades, corresponds to today's televisual treatment but in a digest form. Extreme wide shot stadium exteriors and location sound establish the environment and provide scale. An opening kickoff signals the start of gameplay. Close-ups establish who the stars are. Supplementary b-roll of marching bands and raucous crowds build atmosphere and excitement. An offscreen commentary frames the narrative and keeps us informed throughout, locating us in the action, updating the score, and providing additional detail and color. In the end, a winner is confirmed by the visual evidence of a touchdown, which brings a satisfying end to the segment.

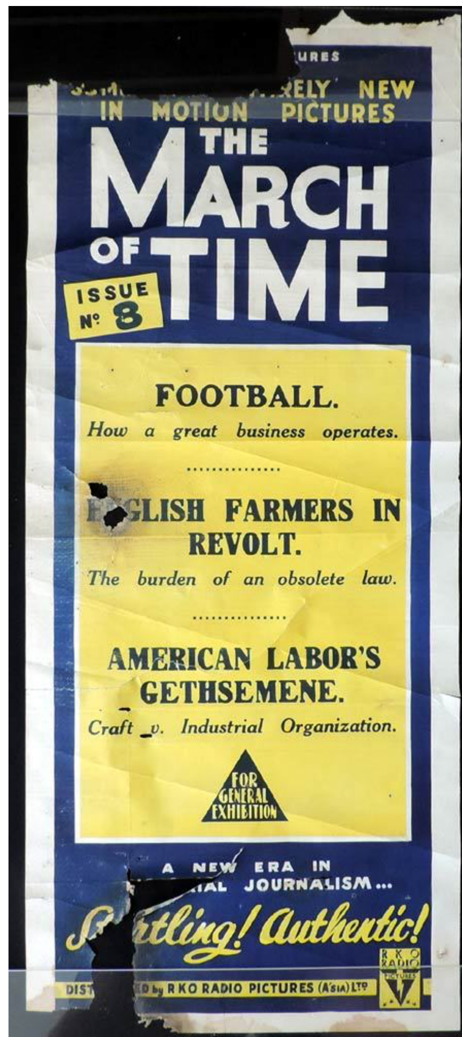

FIGURE 24. Advertisement for the September 30, 1936 episode of *The March of Time*, with topics including the Church of England's tithe law, the United Mine Workers split from the American Federation of Labor, and the business of college football.

One distinctive quality of mainstream newsreels is their heightened treatment of everyday reality. This effect is produced through a blend of stylistic and narrational practices. Newsreel commentary, for instance, tended to be highly energetic but primarily descriptive; interpretation and editorializing were kept to a minimum. By adopting an uncritical, apolitical, nonpartisan pretense

studio newsreel films were designed to appeal to the widest possible audience. Their silences, in terms of who was included and what stories were told, reveal the hegemonic imperatives of American mass media. A variant of the major newsreels, *The March of Time* (1935-1951), sponsored by Time, Inc. and distributed in theaters by RKO Radio Pictures from 1935-1942, then 20th Century Fox from 1942-1951, offered an alternative approach. Representing, in its words "a new era in pictorial journalism," *March of Time* featured longer episodes and segments, increased dramatic reenactment, interpretive interviews, and a more subjective perspective. As the newsreel historian Raymond Fielding explains, "A cinematic *agent provocateur*, the *March of Time* turned over a lot of rocks, both at home and abroad, and illuminated the creatures it found beneath them. The demagogues and quacks whom they attacked in the 1930s may seem like obvious targets now, but they didn't seem so then. They were popular, powerful, frightening people, and the *March of Time* stood entirely alone in theatrical motion picture circles as a muckraker."[93] In addition to its exposés of fascist threats and its extensive World War II coverage, the program also reported on subjects like domestic politics, organized labor, and economic issues. For instance, a segment titled "The Football Business," from its September 30, 1936 episode, examines the commercialization of college football. At the outset, narrator Westbrook Van

[93] Raymond Fielding, *The March of Time, 1935–1951* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 87.

Voorhis intones: “This autumn, 40 million football fans are packing huge stadia from coast to coast in the greatest season the game has ever had. And amid the music and the cheers is heard a new and jarring note. Radio announcers sorting their descriptions of thrilling runs with unseasonable ballyhoo of breakfast foods, washing machines, oil, and gasoline.” The film’s observation about the intrusion of advertising into sports media is quickly dropped, though. Going against the grain of popular opinion, the episode proceeds to critique the hypocrisy of college sports, which financially benefit from the labor of student athletes while punishing them for accepting gifts from alumni boosters, or “honorary positions on state payroll and absurdly overpaid odd jobs.” The segment cites the example of Harvard team captain Bob Haley, who was barred from the team for receiving “unapproved” financial help. “If it is necessary for a boy to undergo extreme risks of limb and yes, life, why not reimburse him in a substantial and regular business manner. Not seduce him as it were by subterfuge,” MIT Professor George Owen argues in the film. “Why shouldn't the players share in the profits of the game?” The fact that this question is still being asked today, nearly a century later, says much about the economic structure of big-time college football and its uneven distribution of power.

Segments that directly take up issues concerning race, or that give space to non-white perspectives, are rarely found in newsreels films of the 1920s and

1930s.[94] Though this is hardly surprising, numerous Black athletes had achieved public visibility during that era; from heavyweight boxing champs like Jack Johnson and Joe Louis and basketball teams like the Harlem Globetrotters and the New York Renaissance; to track and field athlete and Olympian Jesse Owens; to NFL pros Fritz Pollard, Paul Robeson, and Bobby Marshall (prior to the league's tacit segregation from 1933-1946).[95] Although Joe Louis appears regularly in newsreels through the 1930s, he was often shown in private settings rather than kicking ass in the ring. Meanwhile, Black football players are almost nowhere to be found. Minoritized subjects, Gamache writes, "were marginalized in most newsreel coverage of sports."[96] In his analysis of popular film, the educator and cultural theorist Henry Giroux asserts that the "emergence of mass visual productions in the United States requires new ways of seeing and making visible the racial structuring of white experience."[97] In the tradition of other American mass media forms, newsreels construct whiteness as an unmarked

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[94] This would change with the launch of *All-American News*, the first newsreel series created specifically for Black audiences, in 1942. For more on *All-American News*, see Joseph E.J. Clark, "'Canned History': American Newsreels and the Commodification of Reality, 1927-1945," PhD diss., Brown University, 2011. As Clark writes, "At a time when the newsreels produced by the major Hollywood studios all but ignored black America, *All-American* filled a crucial niche in the American moving picture industry. Just as importantly, this new offering held out a promise to African Americans that the achievements and contributions of their community would finally be represented and acknowledged on film," 219.

[95] This history is documented in Chelsea Stark-Jones's four-part audio documentary, *Blackballed*, produced by *The Ringer,* 2023. Available online at: https://open.spotify.com/show/2D5GOMcLru0w74urmWkMIs

[96] Gamache, *A History of Sports Highlights*, 16.

[97] Henry A. Giroux, "Racial Politics and the Pedagogy of Whiteness," in Mike Hill, ed., *Whiteness: A Critical Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 295.

norm and assume a white gaze. At the same time, difference is unacknowledged (or treated as a marker of villainous otherness, as with anti-Asian World War II propaganda). When race *is* invoked, such as in a *News of the Day* segment from 1938 titled "Colored Gals Get Football Fever," it is done so to spread demeaning racial stereotypes and hackneyed tropes. "Take a look at this game 'twixt dusky warriors" we are implored at the start of a football game between two Norfolk, Virginia high schools, Booker T. Washington and St. Joseph. "Until you've seen Afro-American football, you ain't seen nothin.'" In the commentary the Black female fans and cheerleaders shown on the sidelines, dressed in clothes and uniforms that were common for any American highschoolers of that time, are overtly sexualized and characterized as minstrels. "The losers [St. Joseph] have a red hot mama that keeps the crowd a-sizzling, and every time her man makes a couple of downs she starts a ragtime chorus." References to watermelon, coon hunting, and fried chicken are sprinkled into the narration for good measure. The segment ends with the commentator telling us that "The game might be going on yet, only the referee had such a hard time telling the players apart that he called the game on account of darkness." The overtly mocking tone of the piece suggests that African American success on the playing field, like African American advancements in other segments of society, presented a threat to white normative masculinity and "national culture," which American football was the ultimate expression of.

Across the Great Depression, the Second World War, and the early decades of the Cold War, newsreels were a dominant form of news media that contributed to and maintained America's top-down, centralized monoculture. Although its roots can be traced to the silent era's cinema of attractions, the sports highlight, as a distinct media form and news frame, came to fruition in the newsreel films of the 1920s and 1930s. The flourishing popularity of college football during this period, which produced large enthusiastic crowds, and the game's internal mechanics, patterns, vigorous action, and cavalcade of white male bodies, made football an attractive newsreel subject for the Hollywood studios. Newsreels in turn helped further the game's national appeal while drawing out its spectacular and narrative aspects. Oriard argues that "the newsreel's most significant impact on American culture may have been its contribution to the quasi-mythic power of football and baseball, and to a national self-image in which sport had a central place."[98] The newsreel's purpose and audience would eventually be usurped by television, beginning in the 1950s. With television, "newsreels lost their hold on viewers, who increasingly watched sporting events as they unfolded on their home sets."[99] However, the newsreels presentation of football established a successful technical and aesthetic formula that would be adapted by live coverage of the sport. It also provided a model for

[98] Oriard, *King Football*, 51.
[99] Gamache, *A History of Sports Highlights*, 16.

NFL Films' documentary approach, which wedded together storytelling and sports highlights in a more epic and telegenic fashion.

FIGURE 25. Advertisement for debut of *NFL Action*.
From *The Baltimore Sun*, March 21, 1967, C15.

Listening Between the Lines: *They Call It Pro Football*

For more than 50 years, NFL Films' epic histories have been key episodes within the larger narrative of American professional football. Oriard notes that "NFL Films always emphasized telling stories: from the beginning, the Sabols did not

merely record football highlights but told stories about pro football in a self-consciously epic mode."[100] The early documentaries of NFL Films, including epic histories like *They Call It Pro Football* and *Big Game America*, used modern production methods and narrative techniques to enhance and promote the game for a new generation of viewers. These films, shot on 16mm color stock using slow-motion cameras, which could capture 250 frames per second, and 600-millimeter telephoto lenses for close-ups, were bolstered by voice-of-god narration and stirring musical compositions. Distributed via network television, they helped signal boost American football during a period of social and technological upheaval. Michael L. Butterworth argues that "the first decade of NFL Films productions—a period that overlaps directly with the Vietnam War—can be interpreted as a response to the crisis of a confusing war in the late 1960s and early 1970s."[101] Television critic Matt Zoller Seitz, meanwhile, describes NFL Films as "the greatest in-house P.R. machine in pro sports history… an outfit that could make even a tedious stalemate seem as momentous as the battle for the Alamo."[102] The studio's primary objective was to reframe a popular, uniquely American tradition as a national myth through the instruments of mass communication.

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[100] Oriard, *Brand NFL*, 16.
[101] Butterworth, "NFL Films and the Militarization of Professional Football," 207.
[102] Matt Zoller Seitz, "The Super Bowl's Bloated, Chaotic Spectacle," *Salon*, February 7, 2011, https://www.salon.com/2011/02/07/super_bowl_10/

NFL Films' prototypical epic history, *They Call It Pro Football* originally aired on CBS the week of March 17, 1967, as the debut installment of *NFL Action,* the company's first-ever off-season series (FIG. 25). The 30-minute show was sponsored by American Express in 24 major US markets. *NFL Action* was also the first regular half-hour sports program to be shown on network television in prime time. *NFL Action,* and by extension, *They Call It Pro Football,* thus marked the beginning of continuous year-round TV coverage of an American sport. To conclude this chapter, I examine how voice is constructed and how it functions in *They Call It Pro Football*.

Analyzing *They Call It Pro Football's* formal and rhetorical techniques reveals how the treatment of voice, mainly through scripted narration "from above" (voiceover) and "on-the-side" commentary, circumscribes a (potential) plurality of voices into a distinct, unified message: NFL football as a heroic ideal of American masculinity, which privileges humility, compliance, virility, and whiteness. Listening outside the lines, for the grain of the voice and the subtext of what is spoken, and attending to the seams of the films' construction, I build on ideas from Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, Mladen Dolar, and Claudia Rankine to speculate on the over-voice and undertones of NFL Films. This analysis is framed within a historical consideration of NFL Films' industrial objectives and creative aspirations, its promotional utility, and its elaboration of a new,

cinematic sports language as well as the racial discourse that is produced in NFL Films' epic histories.[103]

I contend that NFL Films' traditional productions are distinguished largely through their audio strategies and aural cues, which blur the boundaries of action and narration. In NFL Films' tele-films, ocularcentrism is overturned. The company's sound recording practices (placing wireless microphones on players and coaches and boom microphones on the sidelines to pick up aural details, crowd noise, etc.), which are meant to bring the spectator closer to the gameplay, help to fashion a gripping acoustical environment that is further layered though stentorian voice-over and stirring orchestral music. In place of the shot/reverse shot structure of classical cinema, NFL Films' *audio* techniques suture the viewer, allaying the sense of distance opened by tele-vision and restoring continuity to fragmented game action.[104] These techniques are exemplified in the NFL Films ur-text, *They Call It Pro Football*.

Written and produced by Steve Sabol, *They Call It Pro Football* features the first pairing of narrator John Facenda's resounding baritone voice and

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[103] The sports media scholar Travis Vogan classifies epic histories as one of NFL Films' five primary genres, along with highlights, biographies, follies, and chalkboard programs, which often overlap in the same production. Vogan, *Keepers of the Flame*, 25, n191.

[104] In psychoanalytic film theory, the term "suture" refers to how classical Hollywood cinema constructs a subject-position for the viewer by concealing the gaze of the camera (mainly through continuity and shot/reverse shot editing), thereby "stitching" them into the world of the film and at the center of the narrative. My concept of suture as it applies to NFL Films' televisual media products is informed by the apparatal theories of Jean-Louis Baudry, Mary Ann Doane, Pascal Bonitzer, and Kaja Silverman.

composer Sam Spence's lush, symphonic music—two of the company's most indelible stylistic trademarks. Facenda would become NFL Films' most familiar vocal persona. However, at the time of *They Call It Pro Football*'s broadcast, he was not a nationally known figure. Unlike Ed Sabol's 1962 film, *Pro Football's Longest Day,* which used a well-known ABC Sports announcer (Chris Schenkel) as its narrator, Facenda's was a voice without a face or a profile. For most audiences, his voice carried no intertext references and no associations beyond those of the trope, only the trace of authority.

A local radio and television broadcaster, Facenda made his mark as Philadelphia's first late-night news anchorman, beginning in 1948. Ed Sabol, who lived in the Philadelphia suburbs, heard in Facenda "a trained professional voice," one "whose personality [didn't] intrude or obtrude on the listener."[105] Ed Sabol jokingly called Facenda's voice the "voice of doom." In his manifesto critiquing American football, Steve Almond described Facenda's "flair for gravitas" as falling "somewhere between Captain Kirk and Darth Vader."[106] But Facenda's voice also had a stately resonance. Steve Sabol likened it to the "voice of Dunkirk." Moreover, his delivery was smoother, deeper, and more melodic than the sportscasters of his era. Facenda's lack of national profile, and his anonymity within the world of sports media, contributed to his omniscience as a

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[105] William Barry Furlong, "Sabol Plays Film Game into Sports Millions," *Washington Post*, May 18, 1976, D1.
[106] Steve Almond, *Against Football: One Fan's Reluctant Manifesto* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2014), 18.

vocal presence. His voice was at a distance from the NFL action presented on screen.

Conversely, the dramatic emotional effect that is conveyed through those images is molded and amplified by the music of Sam Spence. The Munich-based American composer wrote hundreds of pieces for NFL Films over a 24-year collaboration that stretched from 1966 to 1990. Over that time, Spence's percussive action themes and whimsical melodies became part of the NFL Films repertoire and helped separate its productions from more news-like treatments of sports highlights. According to Travis Vogan, Spence's "original scores, recorded with a sixty-five-piece orchestra, to emphasize the beauty and violence of America's Game… placed the sport into a cinematic register."[107] Spence's emphatic but playful soundtracks were a synergetic complement to Facenda's dulcet narration, adding dramatic and cheery flair to the voiceover's forceful stentorian tone. Spence's arrangements were at once fresh and familiar. "I wanted music that would speak to the passion of the game and that would also be contemporary," Steve Sabol explains. "Sam took hummable melodies, like British drinking songs, Irish ballads and Israeli wedding music, and updated them."[108]

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[107] Vogan, *Keepers of the Flame*, 24.
[108] Quoted in Brian Wise, "Music of the Spheres," The *New York Times,* September 11, 2005, 14.

Like many of the studio's canonical works, *They Call It Pro Football* was written by Steve Sabol. The verbose Sabol, the most prevalent voice throughout the body of NFL Films, was a ready-and-willing interviewee, fabulist, and "a banquet of sound bites."[109] His approach to scriptwriting, however, was more minimalist. "In film words are like medicine," he claimed in a 1974 interview. "If you have just the right amount, they'll help you. But an overdose can kill you. So you really have to be careful. You should only say what's necessary, and that's all."[110] Freed from the standard of journalistic objectivity, language came to be used in NFL Films' productions as an accent, as a device for tone, texture, and exaggeration. Rather than as an instrument for conveying information, narration is used rhetorically and poetically, and as a complement to the visual depiction. As Sabol explained, "We let the film [images] tell the story. The text [narration] has to tell *more than* the story the film tells."[111] This *more than* amounts to a mythic surplus—an intangible evanescent sensation. An NFL Films program is an invention overlaid atop reality, a mix of actuality and fantasy. Nonetheless, in their own promotional materials NFL Films (which was also a production company-for-hire) boasted of their ability to record "sports drama with exacting reportorial detail." And that "TV stations throughout the country show

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[109] Lomartire, "NFL Films Frozen in Time," 7D.
[110] Quoted in Skip Myslenski, "A Conversation with Ed and Steve Sabol," *PRO*, August 19, 1974, 11A.
[111] Quoted in Furlong, "Sabol Plays Film Game into Sports Millions," D1. Emphasis added.

documentary reports of NFL game action created by NFL Films."[112] In other words, their films professed to serve a documentary function while also deliberately exceeding the boundaries of documentary and crossing over into folklore. As the movie critic Ben Yagoda wrote, "NFL Films has tapped into our national penchant for melodrama and made pro football into perhaps the most popular ongoing serial in America."[113]

The limited use of on-screen, first-person testimony in the early hits of the NFL Films catalog is instructive. Talking head interviews have been part of documentary filmmaking since the 1930s and 1940s, when the method first became incorporated into liberal and leftist nonfiction cinema along with a range of other vocal strategies, including offscreen commentary.[114] By the end of the 1960s the talking head device, adapted from the sync sound technology of narrative "talkies," had become a familiar rhetorical strategy in documentary practice. The film scholar Michael Baker asserts that "talking heads begin to complicate the didactic qualities of 'voice of God' narration" during the time of World War II. Over the next two decades their increased use marked "a shift from scripted performance, to expert testimony (in support of the central

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[112] "NFL Films score for you," promotional brochure, Ralph Wilson, Jr. Pro Football Research and Preservation Center, Pro Football Hall of Fame, Canton, Ohio.
[113] Ben Yagoda, "Not-So-Instant Replay: NFL Films Sells the 'Grandeur' and the 'Glory' of Pro Football," *New York Times Magazine*, December 14, 1986, 68.
[114] Charles Wolfe, "Historicizing the 'Voice of God': The Place of Voice-Over Commentary in Classical Documentary," *Film History* 9, no. 2 (1997); reprinted in Jonathan Kahana (ed.), *The Documentary Film Reader: History, Theory, Criticism* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 267.

argument of the film), to unscripted response."[115] NFL Films' carefully constructed hagiographies sought to contain and celebrate official accounts within the obscured frame of its parent corporation, whereas coterminous multi-voiced, witness-participant documentaries such as Emile de Antonio's *In the Year of the Pig* (1968) splintered or chipped away at the notion of a static, unified, or fully knowable reality.

The highlighting of images over words was a means of fashioning a guileless sensibility targeted at the common fan. The films, contrarily, are laden with stylized prose. Sabol was fond of writing in sentence fragments that conveyed a muscular but affable impression, a preference that he imparted to his staff. "When we have people come in for the first time to work here, I tell them I want them to read Robert Louis Stevenson, Edgar Allan Poe, and Rudyard Kipling." These literary models were held up for their accessibility, narrative clarity, and insights into the human condition. "All those guys communicate to the masses, yet still have a certain intellectual richness." Sabol continues. "Then I have them read Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemingway because of a certain brevity they have in expressing themselves… Words can contaminate a whole film. If you're not going to add something to the film in your script, you shouldn't say anything at all."[116] The films' gestures towards modern literature (Stein is

[115] Michael Brendan Baker, "*Dresden Story* and the Emergence of the Talking Head in the NFB Documentary," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 17, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 3.
[116] Quoted in Mike Rathet, "A Conversation with Steve Sabol of NFL Films," *Gameday* 14, no. 6 (1983): 16A.

explicitly paraphrased in 1974's *Championship Chase*) and other "high culture" sources were double-edged. NFL Films sought artistic credibility through reference and allusion. Vogan points out, via Bourdieu, that "A commercial institution's capacity to claim its products as inspired artworks rather than mere commodities can set it apart from, and situate it as superior to, its competition."[117] But often these citations were used to serve ironic ends, such as in its parody segment "A Farewell to My Arm," which riffs on the troubles of Philadelphia Eagles' quarterback Randall Cunningham in the prose style of Hemingway's World War I novel *Farewell to Arms* (1929). Sabol's tendency to invoke prominent modernists like Stein and Hemingway and draw upon their formal techniques for inspiration, while stripping away the historically and politically rooted substance of their work, is symptomatic of NFL Films' approach to representing the past.

In NFL Films' epic histories, the scripted text usually takes the form of a voice from above, in the films' expressive, disembodied narration, sometimes reinforced by a voice "on the side," such as Sabol's pre-film, direct address intros in which he explains to the viewer the importance of what they're about to see; or the unrehearsed, in situ comments of coaches. In a 2007 DVD release of the film, Sabol notes that *They Call It Pro Football* has been described as "the *Citizen Kane* of football movies" but neglects to mention the source of the quotation:

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[117] Vogan, *Keepers of the Flame*, 106.

himself.[118] This move towards fabrication and hyperbole in place of unembellished details and facts was common for Sabol, a filmmaker who embraced Grierson's notion of documentary as a vehicle for the "creative treatment of actuality."[119]

They Call It Pro Football begins with an extradiegetic introduction by the broadcaster and former NFL placekicker Pat Summerall. Acting as an informed insider-expert, Summerall discloses that *They Call It Pro Football* has won a multitude of honors, including the grand prize at the Cortina Film Festival and first prize at the Sports Film Festival in Oberhausen, Germany. "In doing so," Vogan notes, "he stressed the documentary's status as a honored part of film culture (as well as NFL Films' position as the producer of reputable film productions) despite its appearance on a TV show."[120] The introduction serves to legitimize the film artistically and anchors it within the world of cinema, distinguishing it from, and elevating it above, the realm of the televisual, which Sabol derided as one of "sitcoms and news."[121]

A montage of defamiliarized, phantom game action, deftly edited by Yoshio Kishi, follows Summerall's preface. Accompanying the sound of a ticking

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[118] Quoted in Steve Silverman, "The Keepers of the Flame: Q&A with Steve Sabol," *Pro Football Weekly,* October 7, 1990, 39.
[119] Sabol cited Grierson's definition as a rationale for dramatic distortion: "The kind of documentaries we do are spontaneous cinema, meaning we photograph exactly what happens. But then they're also a creative treatment of reality, meaning that we'll varnish the truth a little bit just to make it more interesting. Especially in sports, because sports is just a game." Quoted in Levy, "Sudden Death Sabol Reels Again," 103.
[120] Vogan, *Keepers of the Flame*, 102.
[121] Quoted in Lomartire, "NFL Films Frozen in Time," 1D.

clock are details of an empty football field—yard markers, goal posts, rows of stadium bleachers—framed at diagonal angles. A whistle blows and an unseen kick launches a ball into the air to the cheer of an invisible crowd. The effect is a concise audiovisual distillation of the game's essence, a sound-image poem that is later extended and reinforced with lyrical description at the end of the film. An ultra-brief encapsulation of the early history of the game, supported with sepia-toned black-and-white—thus distinguished as archival—footage comes next. Here, Facenda's forceful, measured intonation is heard for the first time: "It was a game a handful of spectators came to see: A tug of war, 22 nameless men grappling in the mud; they called it 'pro football.'" The elision of historical detail is conspicuous and emblematic. "A handful of spectators," "22 *nameless* men," an unspecified "they." No further description of who was watching, playing, when, or where, is provided. We do not learn *who* called it pro football. The voice obliges our trust: This is all you need to know.

'Voice of God'
You may not know the face, but surely you know the late John Facenda as 'The Voice of NFL Films,' or his other nickname, 'The Voice of God.' **7D**

FIGURE 26. NFL Films' narrator John Facenda. From Paul Lomartire, "NFL Films Frozen in Time," *Palm Beach Post*, January 30, 1999, 1D.

Facenda's narration bears the hallmarks of the classic documentary "voice of God," a term Sabol himself was fond of using to describe his favorite vocal talent. As defined by Charles Wolfe, "Disembodied, this voice is construed as fundamentally unrepresentative in human form, connoting a position of absolute mastery and knowledge outside the spatial and temporal boundaries of the social world the film depicts… stentorian, aggressive, assuming a power to speak the truth of the filmic text, to hold captive through verbal caption what the

spectator sees."[122] This effectively summarizes the style of voiceover used by NFL Films during its formative period. A carryover from the newsreel narration of wartime series like *March of Time* and *Why We Fight* (1942-1945), the voice of *They Call It Pro Football* seems to belong to no *specific* body. Unlike *Pro Football's Longest Day* narrator, the sportscaster and television stalwart Chris Schenkel, Facenda's was, crucially, a voice without a face or a profile. At the time, his voice carried with it no intertext references and no associations beyond those of the trope. It is certainly understood, though, as a white male voice. Its anonymity, as Claudia Rankine observes about whiteness, is the source of its authority.[123] Cloaked in a type of invisibility that whiteness permits, a speaking invisibility, it's a voice from elsewhere, omniscient, detached from the material world being visualized.

I propose there are three levels of meaning at work in the vocal register of NFL Films' epic histories: *What is said*, through voiceover, on-screen commentary, and interviews; *what is heard*, outside of the text's significance (the tone and texture of the speech, or what I call the *over-voice*); and *what is unheard* (i.e. what is not said or not meant —the unspoken, underlying, or implied meaning, what I term the *undertone*). I contend the over-voice of *They Call It Pro Football*, in the form of Facenda's performance of Sabol's script, effectively

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[122] Wolfe, "Historicizing the 'Voice of God,'" 264.
[123] Rankine comes to this observation via Jayson Musson's Hennessy Youngman character in *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014).

stands in for what is said and masks what is unheard. In his essay "The Grain of the Voice," Roland Barthes identifies a split between language and voice, between structure and effect, the *grain* being the voice's unique, unintentional expressive potential: "the body in the voice as it sings."[124] This remainder, which exceeds linguistic signification, bridges the gap between the body of the performer and body of the listener. Although Barthes writes specifically about the singing voice, I believe his insights can be applied to *voiceover* —another form of heightened vocal performance—as well. One hears in Facenda's voice something beyond, or rather before, the meaning of the words. It is a voice *without* a bodily aspect. To me it lacks the grain Barthes identifies and favors in Charles Panzera's operatic singing. I suggest Facenda's style is more akin to Barthes' paradigmatic counterexample, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, a baritone lauded for his technical mastery. With Fischer-Dieskau, Barthes describes, "I seem only to hear the lungs, never the tongue, the glottis, the teeth, the mucous membranes, the nose. All of Panzera's art, on the contrary, was in the letters, not in the bellows."[125] Perhaps this explains why the label "voice of God" attaches easily to Facenda's delivery. Its "professional," polished, even quality represents "a flattening out of technique," in Barthes's words, "*into perfection*: nothing is left but pheno-text." [126] In Julia Kristeva's definition, the pheno-text is "language that

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[124] Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image – Music – Text*, translated by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 188.
[125] Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," 183.
[126] Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," 189. His emphasis

serves to communicate, which linguistics describes in terms of 'competence' and 'performance.'"[127] It is a signifying superstructure; a surface whose meaning—the more slippery "geno-text"—must be uncovered. It is, borrowing from Mladen Dolar, a voice and nothing more.

For Dolar, the voice exists at "the intersection of presence and absence," in between the body and language, the subject and the other, biology and culture.[128] This "object voice" (as he puts it) can be registered in different ways, including through its linguistic qualities, like timbre, accent, and intonation. More importantly, the object voice is *resistant* to linguistic totalizing and articulation. Intonation, for instance, points to what is beyond signification in language, to the uncanny, strange, and mysterious. It makes us aware of the voice, distinct from the voice's message, and can turn the message into its opposite, such as when spoken with irony. But as Dolar contends, "Usually one hears the meaning [of the vocal utterance] and overhears the voice." [129] I believe this formulation becomes inverted in NFL Films' epic histories, particularly those narrated by Facenda. This voice, and not the image, nor the script, is the primary location of meaning. I would go a step further to say, in some instances, the voice *is* the meaning, manifesting what Dolar identifies as a problem of the voice, that being: "The aesthetic concentration on the voice loses the voice precisely by

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[127] Julia Kristeva, "Revolution in Poetic Language," in *The Kristeva Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), edited by Toril Moi, 121.
[128] Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 55.
[129] Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 4.

turning it into a fetish object."[130] I contend Facenda's voice is such a fetish object—a lack epitomized by a surplus. In a way, his voice and the power it connotates *is* the film's meaning.

FIGURE 27. A college marching band spells out N.F.L. in *They Call It Pro Football* (John Hentz, 1967).

Returning to *They Call It Pro Football*: Following the brief historical capsule described above, we then jump forward to the filmic present, to the first AFL-NFL Championship Game, retrospectively known as Super Bowl I, played January 15, 1967. Sync sound verité footage, shot in vivid color (which has the effect of distancing it from the preceding archival "originary scene"), of pregame

[130] Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 4.

action in and outside the Los Angeles Coliseum establishes a feeling of verisimilitude, of being there. An energetic montage of on-field pageantry—college marching bands, cheerleaders in satin cowboy outfits and toy guns, mascots, dance teams, a jetpack-enabled stunt performer—build up the scene and the spectacle. Suggested, but unsaid: this is no ordinary game, and it symbolizes the modern transformation of pro football, its surpassing of college football in national importance (one college band even forms the letters NFL on the field) (FIG. 27), and the arrival of NFL Films as an author of the game and the league. Birds and balloons are released; Spence's triumphant score arrives with an overlay of opening credits.

The pregame ceremony concluded, Facenda's commanding voiceover takes over again, with a striking evocation: "It starts with a whistle and ends with a gun… This is *pro football*, the sport of our time." These were apparently the first words that Sabol ever wrote for Facenda and they articulate a long-running conjunction between football and military service, which are joined through a shared vocabulary and regiment—from whistles and training to combat (i.e. gameplay).[131] This link between American football and military imagery and discourse would become a hallmark of NFL Films, as the Sabols sought "to portray NFL football the way Hollywood portrays war."[132] The title of

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[131] Jack Craig, "NFL Films: Picture-Perfect Story," *The Boston Globe*, November 7, 1993, 51.
[132] Glen Macnow, "That Championship Season," *Sports Inc.*, August 22, 1988, 33.

Ed Sabol's first commission for the NFL, *Pro Football's Longest Day*, is a play on the World War II epic, *The Longest Day* (1962). Three decades later, while promoting a collaborative Gulf War project between NFL Films and the US Department of Defense, Steve Sabol acknowledged an inherent synergy: "I don't want to say that war is the same as football but our talent as filmmakers can very easily be transferred to that sort of venue," adding that "Football is obviously the military's sport of choice… President Bush even called [the First Gulf War] 'his Super Bowl.'"[133] If not equal, war and football were, for the Sabols, cornerstones of American identity and history; subjects worthy of veneration that could be served using the same language.

At this point in the film, we are transported back in time to the preseason, to the labor of training camp as expressed through grueling practice footage. Players plow into tackling sleds and one another, grunt, scrimmage fiercely, and sprint through obscure-looking obstacles as coaches observe and impart advice. Like many of NFL Films' epic histories and highlight films, the seasonal arc of an NFL year—an apprenticeship beginning in the heat and splendor of mid-summer, peaking in autumn as conditions become more treacherous, and culminating in an early winter showdown between the last teams standing—is thematized in the structure of the film: the outline of a hero's journey.

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[133] Quoted in "NFL Films Tackling Job of War Documentary," *Associated Press*, March 28, 1991.

FIGURE 28. “Cool, swift, and precise”: Baltimore Colts quarterback Johnny Unitas in *They Call It Pro Football*.

Following the preseason montage, we’re next presented with a résumé of position groups, “disciplined professionals,” Facenda emphasizes, “each man a specialist.” This taxonomy, set to energetic music, comprises the bulk of the film’s 25-minute running time: Beginning with a long section on The Quarterback, continuing through The Runners, The Linemen, The Linebackers, The Pass Catchers, and The Defensive Backs. With a few scattered exceptions, only the quarterbacks are identified by name (Fran Tarkenton, Bart Starr, John Unitas et al.). The majority are subsumed into a litany of catchphrases and metonyms (“the hands of combat, the hands of pros” [linemen], the “search and destroy” men with “the face of” and “the action of the tiger” [linebackers], the

"men on the run," "the last line of defense"). Quarterbacks, all of whom are white, are singled out for their unique styles, identities, and cunning. Unitas is "cool, swift, and precise," a "fierce competitor with a flair for surprises" (FIG. 28). Starr: "an exponent of the calculated risk." Implicit is the suggestion that quarterbacks have intellectual capabilities and intangible qualities that separate them from the other positions, which are more reliant on purely physical attributes. "Second only in importance to the mind and arm of the quarterback," Facenda instructs, "is the instinct and legs of the runners." In counterpoint to the quarterbacks, running backs are referred to as "spinning, dancing dervish(s)," "racehorse halfbacks," and "locomotive fullbacks" that embody "the speed and the fury," depicted in a montage of broken tackles, dekes, and open field dashes set to up-tempo jazz.

Recalling Stuart Hall's professional code analytic, in this sequence there is ample use of technocratic terms like "professional," "discipline," "training," and "specialist." The film's positional taxonomy emphases football's divisions of labor and the machine-like nature of on-field coordination. Although they're often *described* as folk heroes and athletic marvels, the players are often *depicted* as somewhat more anonymous and interchangeable, and this is echoed by the cool, distant quality of the voiceover itself. Adding to this sense of anonymity and interchangeability, in *They Call It Pro Football*, the players don't speak, except in one instance. Leading into the section on halfbacks, a camera zooms in on Chicago Bears' star Gale Sayers. "Give me 18 inches of daylight, that's all I need,"

he proclaims. This brief remark is set in contrast to the effusive, flowing quality of Sayers's non-verbal, on-field performance; a compilation of long, zig-zagging runs, many filmed in slow motion, which heightens their artfulness. By giving little opportunity for the players to speak on-screen, the film implies a racialized split between the intellectual and reflective, and the physical and instinctual, embedded in the persona of Sayers. Sayers, who was known for his shyness, doesn't need to say much because his play speaks for itself; or rather, it defies description.

FIGURE 29. Coach Vince Lombardi at the chalkboard in *They Call It Pro Football*.

The only other staged, non-candid speaking role in *They Call It Pro Football* belongs to Green Bay Packer coach Vince Lombardi, who diagrams a

running play for the camera (FIG. 29). Success on the field is a result of this highly bureaucratized, codified, and rehearsed coordination, the film infers, even more so than the virtuosic talents of Sayers, Tarkenton, and Jim Brown. Coaches, particularly noted disciplinarians like Lombardi, are granted a special place in the NFL Films pantheon, which extends to the programming surrounding the game. Coaches are presented as both unassailable authority figures *and* colorful entertainers; off-the-cuff showmen whose raw, unscripted outbursts and occasional gaffs give the game its human face. (This continues today, as retired coaches such as Jimmy Johnson and Tony Dungy occupy central positions on pre- and post-game shows, where they are still referred to as coach, and whose opinions are privileged.) In *They Call It Pro Football* this is expressed through a 90-second sequence of banter between Philadelphia Eagles' coach Joe Kuharich, wired for sound, and the referees, punctuated by cut-ins of booing and cheering fans. Kuharich yells, cajoles, smiles, and jokes. Surrounded by immense, unspeaking men who are veiled behind helmets and a layer of armor, he's the only person in the film who seems to be enjoying himself at all. Then, as if to remind us of the game's seriousness, Facenda interjects to the swell of Spence's oompah music: "A call. The ball is snapped, and play continues, a drama of man-on-man and a race against the clock. It's precision, persistence, power… It's called *pro football*," Facenda reminds us.

Adapting the basic framework of *Pro Football's Longest Day*, *They Call It Pro Football* formalizes the style and structural template of NFL Films' epic

histories, which often track a single football season, year-in-review fashion. Mirroring the year's natural cycles and varieties of weather and landscape, football is portrayed as synonymous with America. The last five minutes of the film emphasize this point while calling back to the post-opening-credit montage: Starting with a windswept set of goalposts framed within an empty field at night, a repeated archival clip of "early football" accompanied by the same verbal caption ("So they call it pro football"), proceeding to a geographical montage that implies a unified nation. "They play it under the autumn moon," Facenda intones, "and the heat of a Texas afternoon," as snare drums begin to snap. "In the ice bucket chill of a Wisconsin winter, in the snow, fog, and wind." After a quick mix of fan reaction shots, watching, sleeping, cheering, the camera then moves behind the scenes, the voice gliding along with it, and into the post-production booth where a telecast is being produced, and the press box. "Millions more sit at home before TV sets, pursuing the elusive magic of the golden game," we're told. Interspersed shots of sideline chatter and an offensive huddle links the action on the field with the in-person spectators and the TV and radio audiences, again underscoring a networked nation brought together by the occasion of Sunday football. The montage of game footage concludes with a swirl of bodies, a touchdown plunge, and the sound of a gun, reinforcing the martial connection. One final slow-motion sequence, set to a heroic musical crescendo, ends on a receding bird's-eye-view of the NFL logo at midfield, filmed from helicopter, a "view of God" that visually echoes its "voice of God," a voice from above.

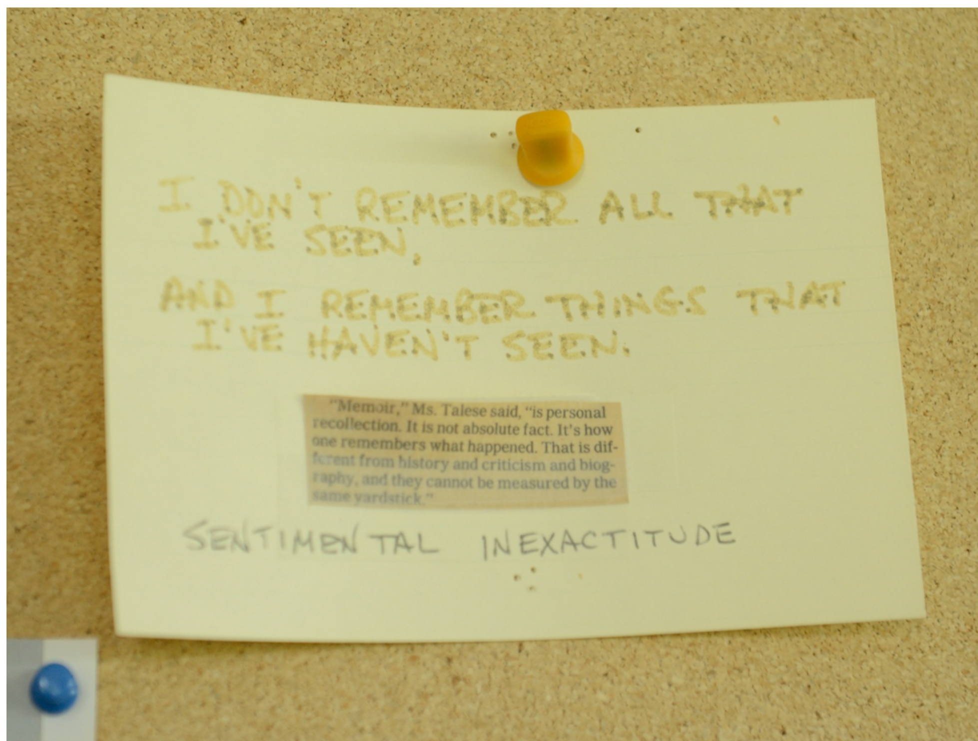

FIGURE 30. In pursuit of "sentimental inexactitude." Notecard on Steve Sabol's office bulletin board, NFL Films, Mount Laurel, New Jersey.

Conclusion

The impressively seamless artifice of today's televisual football presentations is a testament to more than a century of technical innovation, synergy, and commercial advances. As the earliest moving image documents of the game reveal, football did not make for an immediately thrilling film subject. Nor was it easily adaptable as a media sport. Unlike boxing, which took place in tightly confined spaces that allowed for easy arrangement of lights and cameras, football was performed outdoors in large stadia, often under inclement

conditions during fall and winter months. As Dan Streible and others have convincingly demonstrated, boxing and early cinema were made for each other—boxing films helping to popularize cinema, cinema legitimizing the pugilist sport.

Similarly, tackle football and televisual media seem to have been made for each other. It is no accident that football has been America's most successful television product for decades. The sport's scale, violence, and weekly nature makes it an enticing spectacle and must-watch TV for tens of millions of Americans. In an era of on-demand availability and streaming, football has kept pre-scheduled, linear television relevant and financially sustainable. As much as television has benefited football, football has benefited television.

The aesthetic and technical aspects of the storytelling and visual and aural components of a football telecast have been carefully honed over the past century. The relationship between narrative and football has a rich tradition that dates to the early 20th century. Beginning in the 1920s, feature films like *The Freshman* and *One Minute to Play* translated college football stories into box office success. Taking advantage of the iconic status of its leading man, Red Grange—in his time, a luminary on par with legendary baseball slugger, Babe Ruth—*One Minute to Play* merges the real-life footballer, his "Galloping Ghost" star-text, and his on-screen character into a fluid amalgam of reality and projection. Through his varied off-field portfolio, in addition to his coverage in newsreels, radio broadcasts, and the mainstream press, Grange became

football's first transmedia star. His transition from college stardom to the pros brought newfound attention and respect to the flailing National Football League. Leveraging his popularity to put seats in seats across the NFL nation, he became one of the first American athletes to truly cash in on their fame.

In parallel with and often preceding narrative features, film newsreels of the 1920s and 1930s served the American public's appetite for mediated imagery of real-life sports and celebrity athletes. The sports calendar, with its reliable seasonal smorgasbord of pre-scheduled events, was perfectly tailored to newsreels' standardized routines and operational aesthetics. In adapting the sports actuality film into a recuring segment, newsreels gave birth to the modern sports highlight. As newsreels were emerging as a powerful, wide-reaching communication form in the pre-television era, college football was coming into its own as an exciting spectator sport with a fervent and committed fanbase. Through its regular deployment of football highlights across a half century, newsreels were instrumental in further elevating the game's popularity and central place in the national culture. The newsreel packaging of tightly edited, lightly dramatized and narrated highlights that stir the emotions, transformed the fields of sports journalism, broadcasting, and documentary filmmaking, creating a template for the sports media products of subsequent decades.

The traditional documentaries of NFL Films—sponsored industrial films that often rose to the level of inspired artworks—evince a synthesis of narrative storytelling and compressed newsreel actuality. The company's flagship

production, *They Call It Pro Football,* indexes NFL Films' evolving modernism through its first half-decade. What began with a lightly dramatized but nonetheless comprehensive and factual highlight film—*Pro Football's Longest Day*—quickly gave way to a more elliptical, varnished treatment. As Steve Sabol notes, "In the first three years, we had been afraid of missing a play. Now we changed."[134] *They Call It Pro Football* inscribes that change, establishing a playbook for future productions. The irony is that, for as groundbreaking as *They Call It Pro Football* may have initially looked to sports documentary and television audiences, it was quite old-fashioned in terms of its rhetorical strategies. Despite its many formal innovations and storytelling flair, NFL Films was and remains a producer of promotional films and an elaborate documenting apparatus and audiovisual archive. These imperatives require that the voice of NFL Films be a uniform institutional one, regardless of the source of speech. This over-voice works to flatten rather than disseminate the voices of its players—a heterogeneous workforce with tenuous job security, under constant threat of injury and replacement. In films like *They Call It Pro Football,* narration heightens the split between the body and language, obfuscating through aesthetic pleasure, diverting the viewer with technical virtuosities, like the company's abundant use of slow motion, to overlook what's left out. "It's the mythology of the sport," Steve Sabol emphasizes, that is most important.[135] "We

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[134] Quoted in Craig, "NFL Films," 51.
[135] Quoted in Levy, "Sudden Death Sabol Reels Again," 103.

don't deal with issues like drugs and strikes and gambling… I'm not saying those issues are not important, but we view football as the toy department of life."[136] This approach, while immersive and aesthetically thrilling, denies NFL players identity and position as embodied, fully subjective participants in a labor process mediated through audiovisual representation and transfigured as spectacle. Although "The actuality of football is the source of its cultural power," Oriard writes, "media-made images of that reality are all that most fans know."[137]

This century's data-driven turn in sports management and analysis has added a further layer of abstraction and distance, as athletes' bodies become increasingly perceived as data points and profiles to be atomized, parsed, and controlled. I maintain the consequences of this disembodiment are not yet fully understood or appreciated. As the cases of many former players who have suffered from the brain disease known as CTE, such as longtime Pittsburgh Steeler center Mike Webster, have made clear, an NFL career may eventually leave one struggling to speak, or speak intelligibly.[138] This is in part why Colin Kaepernick's 2016 protest and its subsequent iterations, as well as the scene of Damar Hamlin's on-field collapse in 2023, bear such resonance. These reifying images present a challenge to a system that indulges escapism and identification

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[136] Quoted in Macnow, "That Championship Season," 33.
[137] Oriard, *Brand NFL*, 14.
[138] Mark Fainaru-Wada and Steve Fainaru, *League of Denial: The NFL, Concussions, and the Battle for Truth* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2013).

with the romantic *spectacle* of football over an empathetic response to on-the-ground realities; and to an ideology that NFL Films' epic histories creatively mask with an object voice. Following Rankine's observation that the invisibility of whiteness is the source of its authority, I content that the NFL broadcast over-voice is a cipher of institutional power and a mask of that power.[139] In a way, this voice is not only the carrier of televised football's ideological messages. It is the message.

Throughout the body of NFL Films, coaches, and other less tangible voices of authority—such as the narrator John Facenda—speak profusely. The company's use of authoritative voiceover, as a dominant storytelling trope, impels us to disregard the fact that their products' primary purpose is to advertise and enrich the league and its corporate partners and sponsors; thereby obscuring the game's social, political, and labor conditions. As Theodor Reik observes about psychoanalysis, what is spoken in the process of treatment is not the most significant thing. More important is to listen for and recognize what speech conceals, and what silence reveals.[140]

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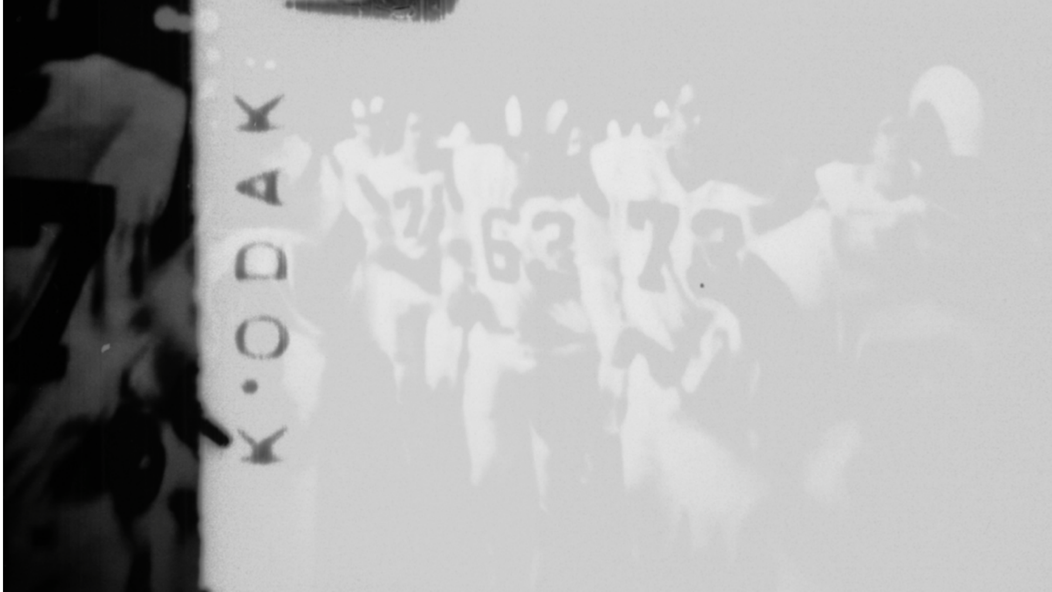
[139] In this context, it's worth noting that only one-fifth of current NFL broadcasters are Black. Very few have high-profile assignment, and only two announce play by play. See Andrew Lawrence, "The NFL is 70% Black, So Why is Its TV Coverage So White," *The Guardian*, January 31, 2019, http://www.theguardian.com/sport/2019/jan/31/nfl-tv-coverage-racial-demographics-super-bowl

[140] Theodor Reik, *Listening with the Third Ear: The Inner Experience of a Psychoanalyst* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983) [1948].

FIRST TIMEOUT

Ghosts of Empire



Link to video: https://vimeo.com/186408817

Working with rephotographed, hand-processed source footage from the 1967 NFL Films "ur-text," *They Call It Pro Football*, and utilizing photochemical characteristics and concepts—fog, grain, over- and under-exposure, focus, and latency—this sketch-film attempts to develop a formal language for expressing the unseen effects of traumatic brain injury and long-term disease. Audio testimonies from retired NFL running backs Tony Dorsett and Thomas Jones provide first-person accounting of the clinical symptoms and lived experience of

CTE (Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy)—the brain disorder caused by repeated sub-concussive head injuries, and football-induced concussions.

CHAPTER TWO

Double Moves: Reifying and Resisting Racial and Cultural Myths in American Football Film and Media

> Right now this country is in an era of what I call de-mythology. In sports journalism, people would rather find out what's wrong with something. I feel that's looking at the seams rather than the material.
>
> – Steve Sabol[141]

> In a pluralistic society, myths—especially where they rely on the subordination of particular groups in society—are inevitably political and cannot enforce or sustain a uniform scheme of mythic reconciliation.
>
> – James Snead[142]

In *White Screens, Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side*, James Snead develops the concept of "mythification," a process of film coding that communicates commonly accepted myths about race through on-screen interrelationships between white and Black characters. Focusing on classical Hollywood cinema, Snead explains "American films do not merely feature this or

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[141] Rathet, "A Conversation with Steve Sabol," 16A.
[142] James Snead, *White Screens, Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 4.

that debased black image or this or that glorified white hero in isolation, but rather they *correlate* these images in a larger scheme of semiotic valuation. For the viewer, the pleasure of recognizing this ranking displaces the necessity of verifying its moral or actual validity."[143] American football offers a fertile site for applying Snead's analytic, given the sport's racial narratives, bifurcated demographics, and history of raced positions and bodies. Historically, positions with the most decision-making and leadership responsibility, such as quarterback, center, middle linebacker, and safety, were reserved for white players (a method known as "stacking"). Beginning in the mid-1970s, National Football League teams used the Wonderlic I.Q. test to assess the mental aptitude and problem-solving ability of college prospects. The exam, which has long been criticized for its underlying cultural and racial biases, was finally eliminated from the draft process, five decades later, in 2022.[144] The NFL's practice of "race norming" set lower cognitive baselines for Black players for the purpose of evaluating brain injury claims. Race norming, also known as ethnic adjustment, is a process of manipulating test scores to account for the race or ethnicity of the test-taker. The NFL's use of neurological race norming, developed in the 1990s and employed until 2021, meant that Black players were presumed to have less cognitive impairment from their injuries, and thus received less compensation in

[143] Snead, *White Screens, Black Images,* 4.
[144] Robert O'Connell, "Without the Wonderlic, the N.F.L. Finds Other Ways to Test Football I.Q.," *The New York Times*, March 2, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/02/sports/football/nfl-wonderlic-test.html

concussion-injury settlements compared to their white counterparts. The Black feminist anthropologists Tracie Canada and Chelsey Carter argue that race norming should be understood as a continuation of the afterlife of slavery, concluding: “Through this system, as Hortense Spillers suggests, the bodies of these Black players are reduced from their full humanity to merely flesh. We must continue to examine anti-Blackness in its full extent in order to keep Black bodies from harm, injury and, most importantly, a premature death, as we continue to live in slavery’s afterlife.”[145]

The pernicious myth of white intellectual superiority continues to inflect the ways in which athletes are thought of, evaluated, and discussed. A case in point: talented Black quarterbacks like the University of Alabama’s Jalen Milroe are still encouraged to change positions.[146] As the cultural critic Gerald Early points out in his essay “Donovan McNabb, Rush Limbaugh, and the Making of the Black Quarterback,” “*Who* plays high-level sports has as much meaning as *how well* he or she plays. And so even in this arena of pure merit creeps the specter of racial preference. Were whites given racial preference before in how the position was defined to support white supremacy,” Early asks, “or are blacks being given preference now in the cheerleading for them to succeed at it to prove that they

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[145] Tracie Canada and Chelsey R. Carter, “The NFL’s Racist ‘Race Norming’ Is an Afterlife of Slavery,” *Scientific American,* July 8, 2021, https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-nfls-racist-race-norming-is-an-afterlife-of-slavery/

[146] Kennington Smith III, “Alabama QB Jalen Milroe Says Former OC Bill O’Brien Suggested He Switch Positions: ‘That’s Motivation,’” *The Athletic*, December 28, 2023, https://theathletic.com/5166527/2023/12/28/jalen-milroe-bill-obrien-alabama/

are as good as whites?"[147] The racist suggestion that Donovan McNabb, the Philadelphia Eagles' former Pro Bowl quarterback, was receiving favorable media coverage because he was Black—made by ultraconservative radio host Rush Limbaugh *while working as a paid commentator for NFL partner network ESPN* in 2003—set off a media firestorm that ended in Limbaugh's resignation. His punditry on ESPN's *Sunday NFL Countdown* pregame show, though short-lived, is just one instance of the NFL's prevailing double move: to display and benefit from African American prowess on the football field while maintaining a white supremacist hegemony. The NFL's stenciling of "End Racism" at the back of end zones beginning in the 2020 season, while continuing to allow the use of racist team names, logos, and antics, is another such example of the league's cynicism.

Almost 20 years after the controversy involving Limbaugh and McNabb, *The Undefeated* declared 2019 "The Year of the Black Quarterback," citing the recent successes of Patrick Mahomes, Lamar Jackson, and Russell Wilson.[148] This season (2023), half of the NFL's 32 teams started a Black quarterback for a least one game. Jackson, quarterback for the Baltimore Ravers, won his second Most Valuable Player award in 2023. Several of the year's other leading candidates

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[147] Gerald L. Early, *A Level Playing Field: African American Athletes and the Republic of Sports* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 151. Emphases added.
[148] Jason Reid, "Welcome to the Year of the Black Quarterback," *The Undefeated*, September 2, 2019, https://andscape.com/features/welcome-to-the-year-of-the-black-quarterback/

were also Black quarterbacks. Absent from this flourishing of African American talent, however, is the blackballed Colin Kaepernick. Kaepernick's on-field protest of racist state violence—registered as refusal to stand at attention for the playing of the national anthem—helped invigorate a new era of athlete activism. Kaepernick's gesture—and subsequent expulsion—begs the question: what is the value of Black lives to the US sports/media complex? This cuts to the heart of professional football, a lucrative, white-owned and controlled industry that relies on a 70% Black/non-white workforce (a workforce that has extremely limited job security, dangerous labor conditions, and an average career length of three years). Meanwhile, after decades of obfuscation by the NFL, football's undeniable connection with traumatic brain injuries and degenerative brain disease has opened a new set of questions. Fewer children are playing the sport, but will Americans ever stop consuming football? If not, who remains to fulfill this insatiable appetite and what does this reveal about the NFL's economic and racial structures? Does the rise of the Black quarterback signal improved equity, or might it be predictive of what *The Atlantic* deemed "The White Flight from Football"?[149]

This chapter examines how American film and media of different stripes—from mainstream dramas and tele-documentaries to artist-made

[149] Alena Samuels, "The White Flight from Football," *The Atlantic*, February 1, 2019, https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2019/02/football-white-flight-racial-divide/581623/

video—reify and resist tackle football's cultural and racial myths. Using an interdisciplinary framework of visual studies, cultural history, and textual film analysis, I argue these objects evince complex mythologies regarding white and Black masculinities and homosociality. I begin this analysis in American mass media of the 1960s and 70s. Following on the heels of *I Spy* (NBC, 1965-68), the first American network drama to feature a Black actor in a lead role (Bill Cosby, alongside white co-star Robert Culp, as secret agents masquerading as trainer and tennis pro, respectively) (FIG. 32), NFL Films produced the character-driven documentary *Big Game America.* Like *I Spy, Big Game America* is structured around an interracial dyad: the (white) quarterback "Dandy" Don Meredith, and his (Black) defensive counterpart, Jim Marshall. You see similar subject positioning in NFL Films' 1972 verité documentary *Pro Football: Pottstown, PA*; in which the story of an enigmatic Black pass-rusher is subordinated to that of a brash white quarterback. This technique of mythification (i.e. reliance on raced character types) reappears throughout the corpus of American football cinema, via the structural juxtaposition of white and Black players and coaches. *Remembering the Titans* (2000), set in the world of early-1970s Virginia high school football, showcases two such Black/white couplings: Head coach Herman Boone (Denzel Washington) and his reluctant assistant Bill Yoast (Will Patton), and defensive stars Julius Campbell (Wood Harris) and Gerry Bertier (Ryan Hurst). Through the resolution of their initial distrust and racialized antagonisms, these men lead their team through a process of the racial

transcendence over the course of the film/football season, resulting in, of course, on-field success as well. This is one of the most durable themes of the American football movie. The sports media scholar Thomas P. Oates asserts that "From *Brian's Song*, to *Wildcats* (1986), to *Remember the Titans* (2000), and *The Express* (2008), football teams have been framed as spaces where racial strife can be overcome, as teamwork, shared affection, and a commitment to excellence transcend regressive social norms."[150] What is the function of this now-familiar, feel-good narrative, of overcoming racial difference to succeed on the gridiron? Beyond laying a path to box office success, what does it tell us?

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[150] Thomas P. Oates, *Football and Manliness: An Authorized Feminist Account of the NFL* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 104.

FIGURE 31. Promotional poster for *Brian's Song* (Buzz Kulik, 1971).

Complicating this paradigm, the docufictional *Brian's Song*, based on real-life Chicago Bear teammates Gale Sayers and Brian Piccolo, offers a gentle queering of football's construction of manliness while subtly maintaining the sport's racial order (naturalized/unacknowledged hegemonic whiteness). This "tender true story" subverts expectations of American football as a spectacle of

violent aggression, focusing instead on moments of affection, vulnerability, and kinship between its two protagonists. Shifting to more recent times, the 2019 collage-essay *Marshawn Lynch: A History*, centers the nonconformist running back Marshawn Lynch, whose selective mutism recalls the taciturn Sayers. However, unlike Sayers, whose silence stemmed from introversion, Lynch chooses silence as a tool of resistance and parody. Significantly, *Marshawn Lynch: A History* disposes of the Black-white subject dialectic and narrative of racial transcendence common to mediated football texts, opening a space for new possibilities.

FIGURE 32. *TV Guide*, March 25-31, 1967, cover.

Pro Football and/as American Mass Culture of the 1960s and 70s

In *Pigskin Nation: How the NFL Remade American Politics,* Jesse Berrett argues that "Pro football became America's game in the sixties."[151] Throughout the decade, mass media and politics helped propel pro football to the center of American culture. The 1958 NFL Championship Game, held at New York's Yankee Stadium, is often cited as an inflection point in pro football's rise to mainstream prominence.[152] Pitting the hometown New York Giants against the Baltimore Colts, the 1958 finale was the culmination of decades of technological advancements and audience cultivation. Following World War II, NFL games began to appear on regional television stations, but those telecasts were limited to major centers. The NFL Championship Game was first telecast in 1948—establishing a precursor to Super Bowl Sunday. However, the program's reach was limited, as only about one percent of American households owned a TV set at the time. The first coast-to-coast broadcast of the league's culminating event occurred in 1951 on the DuMont Television Network, to a much larger audience. After DuMont went out of business in 1955, NBC assumed its place as the broadcast home of the NFL's Championship Game. As football was broadening its

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[151] Jesse Berrett, *Pigskin Nation: How the NFL Remade American Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 1.

[152] For an unpacking of this cultural narrative, see Daniel A. Grano, "The Greatest Game Ever Played: An NFL Origin Story," in Thomas P. Oates and Zack Furness, eds., *The NFL: Critical and Cultural Perspectives* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015), 13-39.

television footprint, television's audience was growing exponentially. By 1958 more than 80 percent of US households had a TV set. As a result of this expanding viewership, it is estimated that approximately 40 million viewers tuned into the Colts' 23-17 overtime victory, bearing witness to what has been dubbed the "Greatest Game Ever Played." The contest provided a star-making platform for emergent Colts quarterback Johnny Unitas, who further cemented his status as the face of the NFL the following season by winning league MVP. With his crewcut hairstyle, stiff playing manner, and on-field proficiency, Unitas was an embodiment of 60s-era Republicanism.

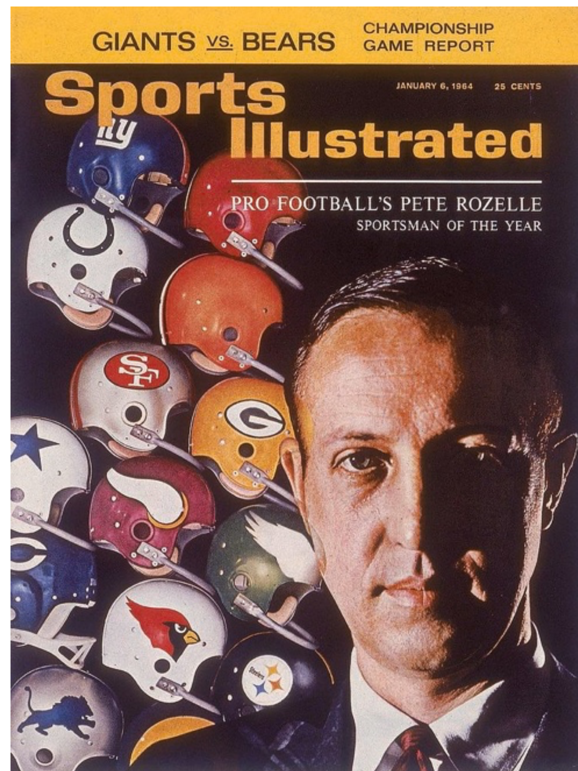

FIGURE 33. NFL commissioner Pete Rozelle on the cover of the January 6, 1964 issue of *Sports Illustrated* magazine.

Pro football's growth as a spectator sport was felt at the ticket booth as well. According to the NFL historian Michael MacCambridge, "Attendance, which had averaged 23,196 for the sixty games of 1949, increased every year during the '50s, and by 1959, the league was averaging 43,617 for its seventy-two games."[153] By the turn of the 1960s, pro football was primed for a breakthrough. Pete Rozelle's surprise election as NFL commissioner in 1960, following Bert Bell's death in October 1959, was a major factor in pro football's evolution as the most popular spectator sport in America (FIG. 33). Only 33 years old at the time, the enterprising Rozelle was uniquely equipped to steer the NFL through its initial television age. With his background in public relations, Rozelle was attuned to the potential of the NFL's brand identity; with his Madison Avenue connections, he had the juice to realize it. Meanwhile, the passage of the 1961 Sports Broadcasting Act (SBA) "was critical to the explosion of television sports in the 1960s."[154] The SBA provided the major professional sports leagues including the NFL an antitrust exemption that allowed them to package the broadcasting rights for all their member teams into a single agreement. As Victoria E. Johnson points out, until the SBA, "individual teams would each

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[153] MacCambridge, *America's Game,* 101.
[154] Victoria E. Johnson, "Everything New is Old Again: Sport Television, Innovation, and Tradition for a Multi-Platform Era," in Amanda D. Lotz, ed., *Beyond Prime Time: Television Programming in the Post-Network Era* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 117.

negotiate their own, local telecast deals within their own market."[155] Rozelle's most significant accomplishments in his nearly 30-year tenure as commissioner demonstrate his ability to navigate mass media practices and interests. Not only did he help secure the NFL's first national television contract, spearhead revenue sharing, and devise the mega-event-style Super Bowl; he was also the guiding force behind the creation of NFL Properties (the league's merchandising and licensing arm) in 1963 and NFL Films in 1964, and the brokering of a merger agreement with the rival American Football League in 1970. Together, these actions positioned the NFL at the forefront of American team sports and set the stage for pro football to overtake baseball and college football as the most watched sport on US television.

MacCambridge outlines pro football's advancement "into the broader general media [during the] 1960 season" via the CBS News documentary *The Violent World of Sam Huff*, which aired October 30, 1960; the *Life Magazine* December 1960 cover story, titled "The Great Spectator Sport: Pro Football Breaks Away for Big Gains"; and *Sports Illustrated*'s (est. 1954) increased coverage of pro football at the turn of the decade.[156] Produced for the CBS anthology series *The Twentieth Century* (1957-1966) and hosted by Walter Cronkite, *The Violent World of Sam Huff* centers on the eponymous New York Giants linebacker. Huff was among the first NFL stars to garner mainstream

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[155] Johnson, "Everything New is Old Again," 117.
[156] MacCambridge, *America's Game*, 158.

publicity, appearing on the cover of *Time Magazine* in November 1959 alongside the banner "Pro Football: Brawn, Brains & Profits." Essentially a workplace documentary, *Sam Huff* offers an unvarnished look at the vocation of pro football. Routine training camp practice footage and preseason action is enlivened by audio from Huff's on-body microphone (an innovation that NFL Films would later utilize to great effect) and accompanied by talking head segments. A scene of Huff—"football's man in the middle" per Cronkite—in his West Virginia hometown briefly draws a parallel between the dangerous and grueling labor of coal mining and playing football. Elsewhere, the commentary keys on the game's collection of specialized trades (passing, catching, punting, blocking, etc.) and departments (offense, defense, special teams), meetings, detailed instruction, and obtuse jargon. The players' health is framed as an investment. More than a game but not yet a televisual spectacle, football of the early-1960s is presented as big business. "What will do the most to make you smarter and tougher," Cronkite concludes, "is that paycheck beckoning to you from the distance. That's pro football, and that's the violent world of Sam Huff."

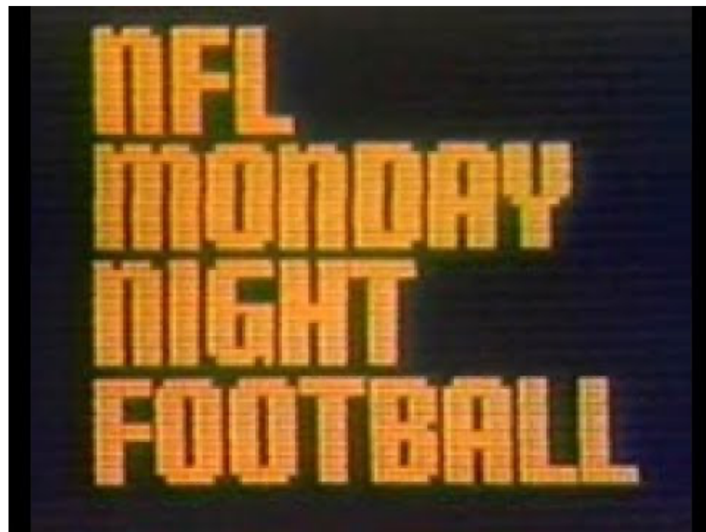
Whereas *Sam Huff* focuses directly on the athletes' experience and perspective as workers, *Life Magazine*'s lavishly illustrated feature from December of the same year highlights the fan point-of-view while its accompanying photo array emphasizes the game's daring physicality and punishing collisions. "The pro version of the old college spirit has a ferocious quality and runs the gamut from salty tears to apoplectic glee," the article

observes. "But the pro alumni are far more knowing spectators than any campus rooters… They also employ a highly technical vernacular that has become fashionable."[157] Indexing pro football's ascension as a spectator sport, the NFL began appearing on the covers and in the pages of *Sports Illustrated* (*SI*) with increased regularity in the 1960s. NFL subjects appeared on the weekly magazine's cover four times between 1954 and 1959; from 1960 to 1969, that number jumped to 64. The extended coverage of pro football in popular magazines wasn't limited to *SI*; *Sport, Esquire,* and *Look* all devoted greater attention to the NFL across the decade. A common denominator in this fast-growing mainstream interest was the notion that professional football was the sport of its time and a contemporary expression of American cultural values.

William Friedkin's 3M-sponsored 1965 television special *Pro Football: Mayhem on a Sunday Afternoon* exemplifies this tendency. Produced by David Wolper for the American Broadcasting Corporation, *Mayhem on a Sunday Afternoon* picks up where the Cronkite-hosted *Violent World of Sam Huff* left off—at the threshold of a new fall football season—but adds additional layers of drama, history, and spectacle to the portrayal. "This quiet Sunday afternoon will end in violence," the narrator (actor Van Heflin) begins over images of the Cleveland Browns team bus enroute to their opening game. "For these men, violence is a day's work." An equivalence between the fields of war and football

[157] "Fans Go Ga-Ga Over Pro Football," *Life Magazine* 49, no. 23 (December 5, 1960): 113.

is established at the outset: “Here on 14 Sundays in autumn, a classic battle rages. Professional football is a 60-minute war, fought between two small, well-trained armies. It’s a battle not only of brute strength but of complex strategy. For the men who play it, a compelling challenge. For the fans who watch it, an exciting spectacle. Today it’s a multimillion-dollar business,” Heflin continues. A few moments later we see a human skull tossed onto the grass pitch, described as the first football. The incongruity is striking. *Mayhem* aired on November 15, 1965, during a period of intensified fighting and US troop escalation in Vietnam. A month earlier antiwar protests drew over 100,000 people in cities across the country and around the world. But *Mayhem*’s celebration of the game’s violence and rhetorical presentation as a war proxy seems deliberately ignorant of the real war unfolding coterminously. In a sequence about the NFL’s amateur draft, the commentator explains that “In the pro football industry, men are the raw material.” One could say the same thing about the US war machine, which drafted approximately two million American men into service between 1964 and 1973.



FIGURES 34 and 35. Top, left to right: Howard Cosell, Don Meredith, and Frank Gifford in the *Monday Night Football* broadcast booth (ESPN Images); intro graphic from debut *MNF* telecast.

As Johnson explains, sports television started to flourish throughout the 1960s "in direct correlation with the consolidation and burgeoning national

success of the NFL."[158] The launch of *Monday Night Football* (*MNF*) on September 21, 1970 signaled a key moment in the crossover of popular culture and sports programming in prime time. The scheduling of sports content in television's evening block was itself nothing new. After beginning as a radio program, *The Gillette Cavalcade of Sports* aired on Friday nights from 1944 to 1960 on NBC television. Broadcast from Madison Square Garden, the show featured a variety of sports but was best known for its focus on boxing. The DuMont Television Network had experimented with Saturday night football games in 1953 and 1954, predating *MNF* by more than 15 years. Although CBS and NBC dabbled with airing preseason games and the occasional regular season contest at night, ABC was the first network to successfully harness pro football's potential as a prime-time entertainment form.

Under the guidance of ABC Sports president Roone Arledge, who rose to prominence as a producer for ABC's long-running anthology series *Wide World of Sports* (1966-1998), *MNF* played a significant role in the narrativization of pro football. The program was pitched towards a broad national viewership, rather than regional audiences of hardcore enthusiasts. Prior to the creation of *MNF*, Arledge noted that "football had the potential for drama and heroics and maybe… an appeal for viewers beyond the dyed-in-the-wool fans."[159] In practice, this meant creating a broadcast that would appeal to fans, non-fans, and anti-

[158] Johnson, "Everything Old is New Again," 117.
[159] Roone Arledge*, Roone: A Memoir* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 100.

fans alike, including both women and men. To this end, *MNF* cultivated storylines and a more polished aesthetic treatment, which included more cameras, more replays, bigger personalities, and more glitz. The prominent sports journalist and ABC broadcaster Howard Cosell was brought on to provide quippy analysis, and the booth was expanded to include three commentators instead of the typical two. As Travis Vogan notes, to help maintain its appeal to non-fans, *MNF* "augmented its broadcast team with accoutrements designed to draw and hold a crossover viewership," including regular visits from celebrity guests like actors Burt Reynolds and John Wayne, California governor Ronald Reagan, and musician John Lennon.[160]

One of the primary attractions of *Monday Night Football* was its halftime highlights package. Filmed and edited by NFL Films and live narrated by Cosell, the feature "was crucial to retaining the audience" for the game's second half and required a huge outlay of resources.[161] After the completion of each Sunday afternoon's games, NFL Films' camera crews would race to the local airports under police escort, rendezvousing in Washington, D.C. with their footage for processing. (D.C. was chosen because its airport had the fewest schedule disruptions on the eastern seaboard.) Over the next 24 hours, from Sunday evening to Monday night, the footage (approximately 100,000 feet, or over 45

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[160] Travis Vogan, *ABC Sports: The Rise and Fall of Network Sports Television* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 108.
[161] Craig, "NFL Films," 51.

hours, per week) would be developed, printed, edited, scripted, and scored. The finished highlight reels, including the MNF package, and game films (over 100 total) were then rushed back to the airport for shipment to 40-plus cities.[162]

As the NFL was becoming a national obsession as a result of its distribution via broadcast television and the league's associated properties, merchandise, and increased media coverage, popular nonfiction books and novels set in the world of professional football began to appear with regularity. George Plimpton's *Paper Lion: Confessions of a Last String Quarterback* (1966), Dan Jenkins's satirical comedy *Semi-Tough* (1972), *North Dallas Forty* (1973), written by former Dallas Cowboys receiver Peter Gent, and Roy Blount Jr.'s *About Three Bricks Shy of a Load: A Highly Irregular Lowdown on the Year the Pittsburgh Steelers Were Super but Missed the Bowl* (1974) turned the football book into a prosperous literary genre. *End Zone*, Don DeLillo's 1972 novel about a disillusioned college football player and his obsession with nuclear war, makes tangible connections between the opaque bureaucratic systems of military and football jargon. "DeLillo's book, oversupplied with symbols of militarization and violence, makes every contemporary interpretation of football's significance into a joke," Berrett writes, "but in doing so he endorses the meaning making that they represent."[163] These publications offered an inside view of the game and a less varnished account of football's excesses and the consequences of its

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[162] Yagoda, "Not-So-Instant Replay," 68.
[163] Berrett, *Pigskin Nation*, 23.

violence. Three were later adapted as studio motion pictures, beginning with *Paper Lion* in 1968, which starred Alan Alda as Plimpton; *Semi-Tough* in 1977, with Burt Reynolds, Kris Kristofferson, and Jill Clayburgh; and *North Dallas Forty* in 1979, with Nick Nolte in the central role.

The 1970s was a golden era for the merger of gridiron and silver screen, a tradition dating back to silent era films like *One Minute to Play,* starring Red Grange, and Hollywood football melodramas of the 1940s, such as *Knute Rockne, All-American* (1940). Football pros were everywhere in the cinema of the 70s. During the decade, retired football players such as Fred "the Hammer" Williamson, Bernie Casey, and the celebrated Cleveland Browns running back Jim Brown emerged as Blaxploitation stars. In 1973, an all-Black biker film titled *The Black Six*, featured six NFL pros—Lem Barney, Carl Eller, Gene Washington, Willie Lanier, Mercury Morris, and "Mean" Joe Greene—in leading roles. New York Jets quarterback and counterculture figure Joe Namath likewise appeared as a reluctant outlaw in the 1970 biker film *C.C. and Company.* After appearing as himself in 1968's *Paper Lion*, Detroit Lions' defensive tackle Alex Karras launched a successful second career as a character actor and television personality. Elsewhere, Hall of Fame linebackers Ray Nitschke and Dick Butkus appear as sadistic prison guards in the popular football comedy *The Longest Yard* (1974); numerous Los Angeles Rams, including Deacon Jones, have cameos in the 1978 Warren Beatty sports dramedy *Heaven Can Wait*. And the 1977 action thriller *Black Sunday,* directed by John Frankenheimer, directly

intertwines football and Cold War politics in its conspiracy narrative. *Black Sunday*'s climactic sequence, of a championship football game being attacked by terrorists, including the scene of a Goodyear blimp crashing into a stadium, were filmed during and following Super Bowl X in Miami, the same event that is documented in *TVTV Goes to the Super Bowl*.

The relationship between American football and American politics was unofficially ratified in the 1960s and 1970s. American presidents from Theodore Roosevelt through Richard Nixon and Donald Trump have used their public appreciation of football to score political points, and many played the game in college. Dwight Eisenhower started at running back and linebacker for the Army football team in 1911-12. "John F. Kennedy and his brothers had long been identified with football," MacCambridge points out, noting that all four played at Harvard.[164] JFK was a member Harvard's junior varsity team his sophomore year, while Reagan and Nixon were undersized back-up linemen at small private schools (Eureka College and Whittier College, respectively). Reagan later starred as Notre Dame player George "The Gipper" Gipp in *Knute Rockne, All American,* further enhancing his football credentials. Unlike Reagan, whose football success was a fantasy that he exploited for political gain, Gerald Ford was a starting center for the University of Michigan and prior to his career in politics, served as an assistant coach for the Yale football team while attending law school. The

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[164] MacCambridge, *America's Game*, 159.

intrinsic links between football and the military—from the game's conquest structure to its borrowed vocabulary of "field generals," "trenches," "blitzes," and "long bombs"—made the sport a useful tool for promoting American patriotism, and a political instrument. During the newsreel era (1911-1967), the annual Army-Navy football contest received special attention, with segments roughly twice as long as regular games.[165] "Not for nothing did football come to be termed the 'Establishment Game'; not for nothing was the presidential briefcase holding nuclear missile launch commands called 'the football,'" writes journalist Susan Faludi.[166] In 1966, the NFL became the first major professional sports league to send players on a goodwill tour to Vietnam; the initial group included Johnny Unitas, Sam Huff, Frank Gifford, and Willie Brown. "From 1966 until the removal of forces in Vietnam in 1973, players spent up to three-and-one-half weeks visiting remote firebases, aircraft carriers, and other installations in Vietnam, Guam, Thailand, and Japan."[167] In 1968, the NFL began including tributes to military service as part of its Super Bowl pregame and halftime programs. This embrace of what Oriard describes as the league's "superpatriotism" has become the norm.[168] Berrett points out that "Nixon and his staff invoked football and attendance at football games at strategic junctures

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[165] Oriard, *King Football,* 51.
[166] Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Male* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1999), 157.
[167] "USO," NFL.com, April 17, 2012, https://www.nfl.com/news/uso-09000d5d82389235
[168] Oriard, *Brand NFL*, 22-23.

throughout 1969 and 1970 to build a lasting political coalition, isolate the left, and cement Republican gains in Congress."[169] Nixon, a confessed, lifelong football fanatic, also recruited NFL stars like Gale Sayers and Jim Brown to campaign for him. During this time, Buffalo Bills quarterback Jack Kemp parlayed offseason work for Barry Goldwater and Reagan into an 18-year career as a US congressman and a secretary post in George H.W. Bush's cabinet. By the end of the 1960s, professional football was firmly linked with the Republican party of Nixon and Ford.

FIGURE 36. *Big Game America* (Steve Sabol, 1969).

[169] Berrett, *Pigskin Nation*, 7.

Expanding the Field: *Big Game America*

Narrated by the actor Burt Lancaster, NFL Films' 1969 documentary *Big Game America* presents the game of football as a metaphor for the American nation, and more precisely, America of the technologically interconnected television age. (In one of Lancaster's more memorable lines, "Sundays became an electronic orgy of plugged in passes and turned-on touchdowns."). Reiterating and expanding upon the epic history structure established by NFL Films' *They Call It Pro Football* two years earlier, *Big Game America* weaves site specific interviews with NFL stars Jim Marshall and Don Meredith into a historical succession of stories of the great men and great teams of the league's past. This great man treatment of history is in keeping with NFL Films' mission to preserve the mythological past and create enduring archetypes. Here, players such as Jim Thorpe ("Bright Path"), John McNally ("Johnny Blood"), Red Grange ("The Galloping Ghost"), and Sammy Baugh ("Slingin' Sam") are fashioned as folk heroes rather than mere gridiron successes. The nicknamed personae elevate the individuals from the social conditions of their lifetimes by making them larger-than-life icons. The league's builders—owners and coaches—are treated with the utmost reverence and selective memory. The Washington Commanders' (née Redskins) George Preston Marshall, the last NFL owner to sign an African American player (in 1962, more than 15 years after the league's reintegration), is celebrated for recognizing that football "should be entertainment…

accompanied by good music" and being the first to establish a team song.[170] The same Lombardi chalkboard sequence from *They Call It Pro Football* is repeated intact, but in black-and-white rather than color. Five years into existence, NFL Films was already applying an archive effect to its own past.

FIGURE 37. Compositing effect from the opening title sequence of *Big Game America.*

Big Game America premiered in September 1969, on the Monday leading into the NFL's regular season. It was broadcast from coast-to-coast, in a coveted 10pm EST timeslot; created as a one-off special to celebrate 50 years of pro

[170] In 2020, following decades of pressure from Native American activists, and more recently, backlash from the team's corporate sponsors, the Washington NFL franchise dropped its racist Redskins' name and logo. In 2022 the team became known as the Commanders.

football. *Big Game America*'s primetime positioning is indicative of NFL Films' ascension across the 1960s. Two years prior, NFL Films' flagship production, *They Call It Pro Football* premiered as an episode of a syndicated, magazine-style weekly show (*NFL Action*) that bounced around the TV schedule. With *Big Game America*—a stand-alone, hour-long prestige film narrated by a movie star—NFL Films was both modelling and capitalizing on the changing nature of the country, its social and cultural shifts, and pro football's surging popularity. The film's pop-influenced, cine-graphic opening sequence, which utilized split screens, freeze frames, chroma-keying, and traveling mattes, demonstrate the studio's persistent technical adventurousness and understanding of contemporary advertising and the coming psychedelic 70s (FIG. 37).

Big Game America was released in the fall of 1969, into a moment of immense turmoil, protest, and change. The previous year saw the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy; an outbreak of civil unrest that led to riots in 125 cities; armed confrontations between the Black Panthers and the police; the signing of the Civil Rights Act; Tommie Smith and John Carlos's raised fist protest at the 1968 Summer Olympics; the escalation of the anti-Vietnam War movement, which reached its breaking point in the violent clashes between protestors and the police and military during the Democratic National Convention in Chicago; and the election of Richard Nixon. A few months prior to *Big Game America's* debut, the Stonewall riots in New York City sparked the beginning of the modern gay rights movement in the US. During this period the

Women's Movement was also gaining visibility and momentum. Actions such as the feminist protest of the Miss America pageant in August 1968, led by the New York Radical Women group, helped bring second wave feminism and its call for gender equality into mainstream consciousness.[171] In November 1968, Shirley Chisholm became the first Black woman elected to the US Congress, where she gave voice to the discrimination facing women in the workplace and the need for equal rights for women. Meanwhile, the formation of the revolutionary Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA), an intersectional socialist coalition for women of color, and publications such as Frances M. Beal's 1969 pamphlet, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," gave expression to the emerging domains of Black and transnational feminisms.

Racial protest broached athletic spaces as well. Led by the sociologist and civil rights activist Harry Edwards, the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR) proposed a Black athlete boycott of the 1968 Summer Olympics. The goal of the boycott was to bring international attention to the problem of racial inequality and discrimination in the United States. While the plan was abandoned after less than two-thirds of the OPHR membership voted against boycotting the 1968 Mexico City Games, the group's organizing activity laid the groundwork for Smith and Carlos's indelible protest. Of equivalent and

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[171] Roxane Gay, "Fifty Years Ago, Protesters Took on the Miss America Pageant and Electrified the Feminist Movement," *Smithsonian Magazine*, January 2018, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/fifty-years-ago-protestors-took-on-miss-america-pageant-electrified-feminist-movement-180967504/

entwining importance, their gesture, which followed from an earlier Edwards-led Black athlete revolt at San José State College, inspired additional often less visible actions. In October 1969, 14 African American football players were dismissed from the University of Wyoming football team for calling out racial injustices; a history that is detailed in Darius Clark Monroe's 2018 documentary short, *Black 14*. Likewise, in 1974, Black student athletes at the University of New Mexico boycotted spring practices to protest the lack of racial diversity on the school's baseball team and other discriminatory acts, including the manipulation of athletic scholarship money.[172] Books such as Edwards's *Revolt of the Black Athlete* (1970), Dave Meggyesy's *Out of Their League* (1970), and Jack Scott's *Athletic Revolution* (1971) helped spark a radical sports movement of the 1970s. Much of Scott's critique was directed towards the financial exploitation of college student athletes and the "quasi-militaristic manner" of coaches and administrators.[173]

In *Big Game America,* there is almost no acknowledgment of the social and political context in which the film was conceived, photographed, and edited.

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[172] This protest action is documented in the journalistic documentary *Blessing in Disguise: UNM Athletic Boycott* (1974), written, produced, and narrated by Cal Harrison.
[173] As Tim Elcombe details, Scott had a short-lived tenure as Oberlin College's Athletic Director from 1972-1974. Among his programmatic reforms, Scott "eliminated admission fees for Oberlin athletic events, tripled funds made available to the women's programme, reconfigured athletic facilities and department office allocations, provided students with voting power to hire new coaches and opened the Oberlin College athletic and recreational facilities and programmes to the community." Tim Elcombe, "Reformist America: 'The Oberlin Experiment' — The Limits of Jack Scott's 'Athletic Revolution' in Post-1960s America," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 22, no. 6 (November 2005): 1069.

“People love football,” Steve Sabol asserted, “because it gives them a chance to escape history rather than relive it.”[174] The only nod to the country’s shifting racial, sexual, and gender dynamics is a brief segment highlighting the league’s African American stars. “When the drums of World War II disappeared,” Lancaster tells us, “pro football changed its beat. Sunday’s wars became Sundays with soul.” This statement collapses nearly 25 years of history and political struggle—coinciding with the last decades of the Jim Crow Era, during which African Americans and other people of color encountered fierce resistance to equal citizenship—into a faux-picture of NFL progressiveness. The then-Redskins, one of the NFL’s signature franchises, integrated not by choice but through public pressure and the interventions of league commissioner Rozelle and President Kennedy.

The offscreen narration in this section focuses mainly on the physical profiles and measurable traits of a handful of players: “Young black men from small Negro colleges in the south and the west came to the game in a steady stream,” the voiceover tells us. “There were mountains like 240-pound Marion Motley, number 76. And molehills like five-foot, four-inch Buddy Young, number 22. Willie Gallimore, number 28, could run 100 yards in 9.6 seconds, and at times it seemed as though he could do this sideways and backwards as well as forward… Bobby Mitchell, number 49, was strong, quick, and could change

[174] Quoted in Rathet, “A Conversation with Steve Sabol,” 16A.

directions like a fish. Runners like Mitchell and Gallimore added a new dimension to the old art of carrying a football." The film omits the fact that many of the NFL's first wave of Black stars, such as Kenny Washington and Jim Brown, came from elite, urban universities. The shortage of historical detail or nuance, in this sequence or elsewhere, is typical of the apolitical character of NFL Films' writing and filmmaking. The company's output bears a distinctively conservative stamp, in line with the political brand and rhetoric of its parent company, a fact that is only partly obscured by NFL Films' documentary artistry and innovation.

FIGURES 38 and 39. Don Meredith (top) and Jim Marshall in *Big Game America.*

The interviews with Jim Marshall and Don Meredith further reveal the NFL's power disparity. Although *Big Game America* is organized in such a way that the two men are meant to be perceived as equal opposite numbers—star passer and star pass rusher—on the path towards an inevitable showdown, we see and hear more of Meredith throughout the film. Meredith, who is white, speaks almost twice as many words on-screen and is permitted to speculate at length on the nature of the game and his own unique qualities and skills. This is then backed up by the testimony of his white former teammate Peter Jent (who would later write the autobiographical football novel, *North Dallas Forty*)*.* "You don't know why, but you just consider him exceptional," Jent explains. "Meredith has that inner something that comes out into the other ballplayers and they feel

it. They follow him. He is a real leader." Marshall, who is Black, doesn't have an equivalent advocate in the film, and his interview segments are comparatively shorter. Much of his talking takes place on the practice field rather than in a living room, where Meredith's interview is set, and is of a technical nature. In contrast to Meredith's leadership and ineffable football intelligence or "inner something," Marshall is described and self-described in mostly instinctual, corporeal terms. "You have to be," he says, quoting former player Harry Gilmer, "agile, mobile, and hostile." "He's a hunter," Lancaster tells us, "for action, for excitement, and for challenge." We then watch as Marshall steers a team of sled dogs through a Midwestern winter landscape. In other words, Marshall is implicitly associated with physicality and nature, unlike Meredith, who is identified with intelligence and culture.

Meredith clearly has the more prominent role in the film, which reflects his privileged racial, positional, and geographical status: the white quarterback of the Dallas Cowboys, "America's team" (a nickname originated by NFL Films) who would go on to have a long career as an analyst on *Monday Night Football*. Marshall, on the other hand, was a consistently excellent but underappreciated defensive end for the Minnesota Vikings. Despite a 20-year NFL career, including a record 270 consecutive games played (most ever for a defensive player), Marshall has been immortalized in highlights as "Wrong Way Jim," for having accidentally returned a fumble 60-yards in the wrong direction. We first see Meredith on a boat while being photographed for a fashion shoot, peering out to

sea. “You’re really looking Don. Beautiful Don. That’s the shot Don,” the photographer commends over and over between clicks of the shutter. Off-screen, Lancaster adds: “He’s not a hunter, he’s a lover.” Praised for his indefinable mystique, Meredith is afforded a leading man treatment throughout the film.

The implementation of its embedded commentators, Meredith and Marshall, represents an attempt to bring more reality into the company’s epic mode. In this sense, *Big Game America* seems to be aware and adoptive of the transformations that were taking place in documentary practice in the independent New American Cinema and internationally. Lancaster’s vocal performance contributes to the effect. In contrast to John Facenda’s resonant baritone in *They Call It Pro Football*, Lancaster’s voice is decidedly low-key and *unmemorable*. It is not a “voice of God” but a soft, relatable, down-to-Earth voice—a voice that initial audiences also had a face and points of reference for. Casting an Academy Award-winning movie star like Lancaster in a film titled *Big Game America* was a signifying gesture for how popular the game had by that point become: NFL football, an entertainment on par with Hollywood motion pictures. Unlike the relatively anonymous Facenda, Lancaster was a celebrity personage with an intertextual tie to the game, having played the titular character of the 1951 biopic *Jim Thorpe – All-American*. This detail likely bolstered his credentials to speak as an expert on football, and on Thorpe, whose entry into professional football in 1915 as an already-famous Olympian helped legitimize the pro game on the national scene.

A film like *Big Game America*, which focuses on the historical and modern idols of the NFL and its legendary contests in pursuit of "the heroic image of its time" invites listening for what is not being said, for who is not being celebrated (i.e. the omissions), and for explication of the unheroic aspects of the game. Dave Meggyesy's 1970 memoir *Out of Their League* provides an interesting counter-text, or undertone, to the discourse of *Big Game America.* Meggyesy was a St. Louis Cardinals' linebacker for seven seasons, spanning 1963 to 1969 and coinciding with the period documented in the film. During his career, he became disillusioned with the NFL and began to question the "role football was beginning to play in the national imagination,"[175] the very thing that *Big Game America* seeks to glorify. He connects his turn towards radical politics and his anti-war activism with Rozelle's decision, in concert with CBS executives, to play regularly scheduled NFL games two days after President Kennedy's assassination in November 1963. In the process of thinking through the meaning of such a decision, Meggyesy, who is white, writes that it became "impossible not to see football as both a reflection and reinforcement of the worst things in American culture. There was the incredible racism which I was to see close up in the Cardinals' organization and throughout the league. There was also the violence and sadism, not so much on the part of the players or in the game itself, but very much in the minds of beholders—the millions of Americans who watch

[175] Dave Meggyesy, *Out of Their League* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 144. First published in 1970 in Berkeley, California by Ramparts Books.

football every weekend in something approaching a sexual frenzy. And then there was the whole militaristic aura surrounding pro football, not only in obvious things like football stars visiting troops in Vietnam, but in the language of the game… It is no accident that some of the most maudlin and dangerous pre-game 'patriotism' we see in this country appears in football stadiums."[176]

Like Colin Kaepernick, Meggyesy came to perceive standing at attention and saluting the flag during the playing of the national anthem before games as an act of complicity. "Every time I even looked at it," he wrote, "I saw only a symbol of repression, so I decided to protest."[177] His is specifically the kind of voice that NFL Films expunges from the record. Like the Star-Spangled Banner and the American flag, a recurring visual motif throughout *Big Game America*, the film's voiceover (narrated by Lancaster, a white actor who twice performed Native American characters, including Thorpe and the warrior Massai in 1954's *Apache*) enacts a symbolic function: as a floating signifier of colonialism, domination, and subjection of the corporal body.

[176] Meggyesy, *Out of Their League*, 146-147.
[177] Meggyesy, *Out of Their League*, 246.

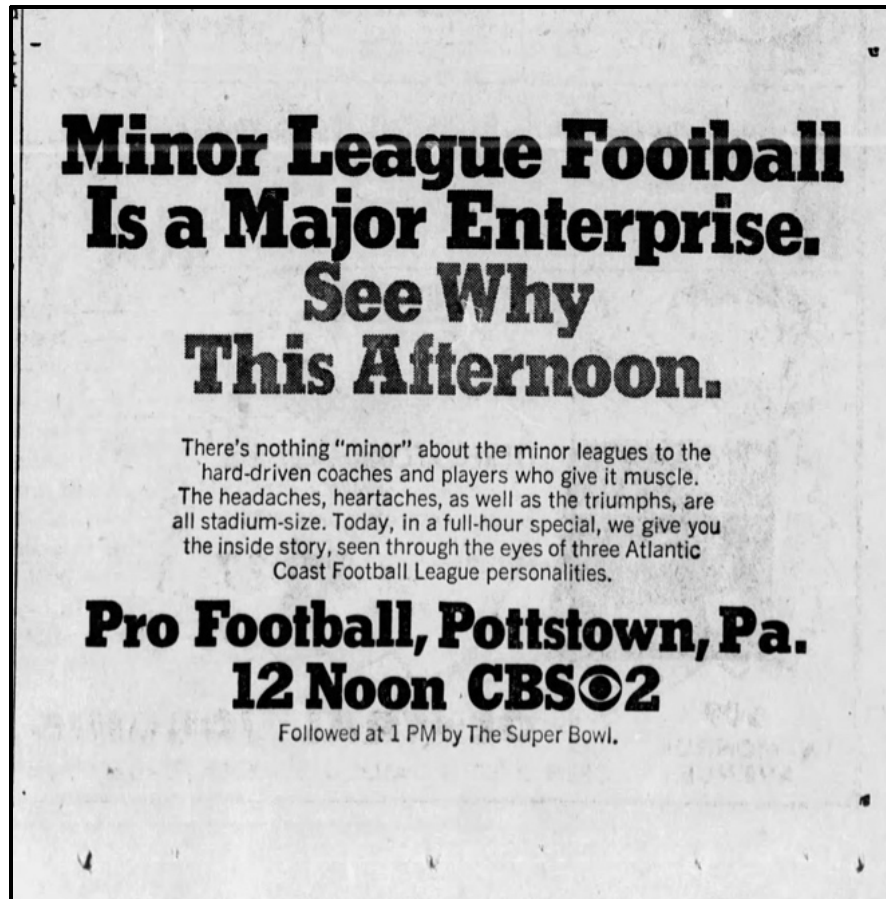

FIGURE 40: Advertisement for *Pro Football: Pottstown, PA.*
From *Green Bay Press Gazette,* January 16, 1972, C2.

"Defeat stalks every man": *Pro Football: Pottstown, PA*

Pro Football: Pottstown, PA is one of NFL Films' more extraordinary endeavors: a documentary portrait of the minor-league Pottstown Firebirds. Shot over the course of what would turn out to be the team's final season, the film debuted on CBS on January 16, 1972, as the prelude to Super Bowl VI. This high-profile timeslot was a sign that NFL Films had, by the early 70s, secured mainstream prominence. Like *Big Game America*, *Pottstown* is structured around the figures

of a white quarterback and a Black defenseman. Conversely, the film's small-town milieu provided license to reference social and political issues, and to represent the game in a more realistic, less romanticized manner; all the while contained within a working-class environment and thus separated from the exalted world of the NFL. The film nonetheless adheres to a status quo hierarchy. The brash, confident quarterback, James "King" Corcoran is a self-styled "poor man's Joe Namath." He drives a Lincoln to away games rather than riding the team bus, flaunts his car phone (an expensive luxury in the 1970s), and struts around town in flamboyant attire (FIG. 41). His counterpart, Joe Blake, is rendered as an enigma and a malcontent in the eyes of his coach. Blake's attempts to express himself through poetry—to speak in a uniquely individual way—is linked to both the countercultural moment and his racial identity via a Jimi Hendrix poster that adorns Blake's apartment (FIG. 43). In *Pottstown*, Blake is positioned as a double outsider. In contrast to football's more traditional masculinist traits, Blake is presented as sensitive, emotional, talkative, and creative—differences that aren't easily assimilated into the team structure and that instead threaten to disrupt it.

FIGURES 41-44. Pottstown Firebirds teammates James "King" Corcoran (top row) and Joe Blake in *Pro Football: Pottstown, PA* (Phil Tuckett, 1971).

Pottstown stands apart from other NFL Films productions of the period in several ways. First, it does away with Sam Spence's familiar orchestral music in favor of an electronic pop soundtrack by Tony Luisi and gospel music by the Philadelphia Bible Tabernacle Choir. Luisi's score feels more contemporary and at times more dissonant than the dramatic big band compositions of Spence. Likewise, the film eschews Facenda's booming narration for Dave Capps's more matter of fact, journalistic delivery. Without Facenda and Spence, *Pottstown*

doesn't sound like a typical NFL Films documentary. Visually, *Pottstown* is distinct as well. The customary super slow motion is reserved for a single montage during the climactic championship game. Throughout the film, dramatic embellishments are minimized. "I look at it as the antithesis of what we usually do, building up players as supermen and stadiums as golden edifices of sport," the director, Phil Tuckett explained.[178] The film's more naturalistic feel is enhanced by Steve Sabol's cinematography, which foregrounds the eastern Pennsylvania mill town location. Much of the gameplay is filmed under stadium lighting. The higher contrast nighttime visuals distinguish *Pottstown*'s football scenes from the autumnal-hued daytime palette of most NFL games. Unlike a lot of NFL Films footage, which is often captured through long telephoto lenses from considerable distance, in *Pottstown* the camera feels nearby to the action, creating an intimate impression. At one point the Firebirds' coach even turns to Sabol's lens and asks, "You like the game, Steve?" The stakes of the film, and the class politics of its subject, are more pronounced, too. Players—except for quarterback Corcoran—ride the (decidedly no-frills) team bus 11 hours to their next contest. The coach offers "merit award" bounties, such as $5 for a big hit, to motivate his players, whose gameday checks are $100; in contrast to a weekly NFL paycheck, which averaged around $1500-2000 at the time. During the

[178] Quoted in Murray Crass, "Pottstown Is Site of a Football Movie… Starring Reality," *The New York Times*, January 9, 1972, S5.

championship finale, a factory looms in the background—a solemn reminder of what potentially awaits on the other side of the pro sports dream.

FIGURES 45 and 46. Pottstown Firebirds' coach Dave DeFilippo (top) on the sidelines during the championship game; the Firebirds' office.

Pottstown's blue-collar setting is established during the film's opening moments. A string of leisurely-paced shots tracks a turquoise station wagon through the rolling hills of rural Pennsylvania at the cusp of fall, eventually arriving at a modest storefront. Window lettering announces this as "Office of the Pottstown Firebirds. Farm team of the Phila. Eagles." A folksy pop tune imbues the sequence with the sentimental tone of *Brian's Song*, released only a couple of months prior to *Pottstown*'s debut, and which begins in a similar fashion. At this point we are introduced to the film's central character, the Firebirds' coach and general manager Dave DiFilippo, whose gregarious personality is evident the moment he steps into the office. But DiFilippo's casual charisma is offset by his obsession to win. "Let me get this one thing perfectly clear: This is *not* minor league football," he says while preparing an effervescent antacid. "This is a professional league; I'm a professional coach." His burning aspiration: an undefeated season.

Pottstown was filmed in 1970, against the background of the escalating civil rights, anti-Vietnam war, and women's rights movements, which were themselves shaped and intensified by the proliferation of TV in American homes through the 1960s. In May of 1970, violent anti-war confrontations at Kent State and Jackson State Universities led to the killing of student protestors by law enforcement officers; that same month the US invasion of Cambodia spurred a

demonstration of 100,000 people in Washington D.C. Unlike most NFL Films' productions, contemporary political conditions are directly referenced in *Pottstown.* In one noteworthy scene, King Corcoran dials a friend from his car phone as the camera rolls. "I just had to call you Jay," Corcoran explains while traveling from Pottstown to Norfolk, Virginia for an upcoming game. "The funniest thing just happened to me. I was driving down here, and I picked up some hippie cats that were just coming back from that demonstration in Washington, you know? So I started talking to these guys and they're telling me about how they just came back from Washington D.C., how they just got out of jail. They were in it for two days. One kid hasn't eaten in two days, man. [Laughs.] They have 25 cents between them. These guys—they had nothing, man. And they're telling me all the things that are wrong with this country… we ought to do this, we ought to do that, they ought to stop doing this. I say, hey you guys, I say, hey listen man, *I'm King Corcoran*. I grew up in Jersey City. I come from nothing. This is a great country. Look at me. These guys say, 'Oh you're a capitalist, you're a capitalist.' I say hey, man, take a look at yourselves and take a look at me: who's right and who's wrong?"

Is Corcoran, in this moment, speaking for the filmmakers? Rather than trying to understand the motivation of the (unseen) protestors, or to draw a connection between American football and militarism, the anti-war movement is used as an occasion for the promotion of American values (capitalism, individuality, meritocracy, bootstrapper exceptionalism, etc.) and imperialism.

In his critical analysis of the work of NFL Films in the context of the Vietnam War, scholar Michael L. Butterworth contends that "from 1965 to 1975 NFL Films can be understood rhetorically as a constitutive element in the mythology that sustains militaristic ideology in the U.S."[179] This mythology is supported by NFL Films' narrative devices, such as the deployment of character types (the autocratic coach, the swaggering QB, the eccentric defensive stalwart) and its images of heroic physicality, which join together power, control, and dominance through force within a seemingly collaborative system that rewards personal ingenuity and submission to masculine hierarchy. In this sense football serves as a model for the American social structure. "More than simply giving viewers contact with the 'reality' of the game," Butterworth asserts, "NFL Films functioned rhetorically to help viewers navigate a world that felt as though it were being blown apart."[180] In *Pottstown*, political unrest is acknowledged but at the same time minimized. More than a distraction from the failures of the Vietnam War and ascending challenges to white patriarchal masculinity, football—from the glamorized NFL to the hard-edged minor leagues—is established as a place where American strength can be symbolically reclaimed and collectively observed. Commenting on the fans' relationship to the game in the decades following the Second World War, Faludi claims that "Football was a workingman's way of resisting being sidelined, even as he sat in the stands. Here

[179] Butterworth, "NFL Films and the Militarization of Professional Football," 207.
[180] Butterworth, "NFL Films and the Militarization of Professional Football," 208.

he might still believe himself a central 'player' in one of his culture's central dramas."[181]

FIGURE 47. Pottstown linebacker Harold Wells being carried off the field.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of *Pottstown* is the way it depicts violence. Unlike in other canonical NFL Films productions, it's not rhetorically celebrated or aestheticized through slow-motion. Its inscribed, rather, through raw, intense footage, which, the film intimates, is crucial to the game's popular appeal. In this way, *Pottstown* is closer to gritty 70s-era narrative films like *The Longest Yard*, *Rollerball* (1975) and *Slap Shot* (1977), which portrayed collision

[181] Faludi, *Stiffed*, 158.

sports in an increasingly violent, graphic, and vulgar manner, than to *They Call It Pro Football* or *Big Game America*. In *Pottstown* we see players fighting on the field, images which are typically excised from most NFL-branded products. One Pottstown defender, concussed and bloodied, is carried off the field on a stretcher and loaded into the back of an ambulance (FIG. 47). "In Norfolk, the Firebirds had enough madmen for the fight and enough athletes for a victory, a victory that did not come without pain," the narrator informs us. "Linebacker Harold Wells spent six years in the NFL. On a Saturday night in Norfolk, Virginia he experienced his most violent moment." As the ambulance pulls away, the sound of a siren and softly focused flashing lights bring the scene to a close.

This occurs near the midpoint of *Pottstown*; we never hear of Wells again. The film then cuts to a scene of Corcoran and his kids playing football on the sand in front of their Jersey Shore beach house. The contrast of a motionless Black man being driven away in an ambulance into the dark of night with an energic, sun-filled montage of Corcoran and family frolicking on the beach as we're apprised of his professional and material successes, is an apt distillation of the film's racial politics. The white quarterback, King Corcoran is a figure of attention and privilege. However, returning to Snead's rubric, Corcoran's heroic coding is communicated in part through his pairing with Joe Blake, represented as a strange loner who doesn't appreciate or maximize his own physical gifts. Corcoran is in many ways the real-life embodiment of the fictive white movie athlete as described by David J. Leonard: "undersized, lacking talent (good

genes), hard working, disciplined, coachable, over-achieving, virtuous, and respectful of authority, family, tradition, team, and community."[182] For his perceived apathy, Blake is singled out for criticism and discipline. During a meeting with DiFilippo, Blake is levied an indefinite suspension for repeated lateness and scolded for his bad attitude. "I want to make you the best," the coach tells him. "You need regimentation—if you don't have it Joe, quit. Right? Just quit. Go out and be an actor or something. I don't know what the hell you want to be." Blake's assumed indifference to the tenets of "professionalism"—which DiFilippo interprets as a lack of total commitment—signifies a threat to the covenant of the team, and more importantly, the coach's ambition of a perfect season. The fact that we see Blake playing with a cast on his arm throughout the film indicates that he is someone who values the team's success over his own comfort, safety, and long-term able-bodiedness, despite DiFilippo's complaints.

However, the ending of *Pottstown* is marked by a reversal of fates. Reinstated for the Atlantic Coast Football League's championship game, Blake helps lead the Firebirds to victory with his inspired play and is named defensive MVP. Afterwards, in an emotional postgame speech, he praises coach DiFilippo for motivating his success. As Blake is effectively redeemed, the buoyant church

[182] David J. Leonard, "'Is This Heaven?' White Sporting Masculinities and the Hollywood Imagination," in C. Richard King and David J. Leonard, eds., *Visual Economies of/in Motion: Sport and Film* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 167.

hymn “Heaven Belongs to You (If You Live Right),” sung by Philadelphia’s Bible Tabernacle Choir fades up on the soundtrack, joining the jubilant celebration. Corcoran, on the other hand, is resigned to the sidelines; having been benched for the final game after disobeying a play call in the previous contest. As his team rejoices around him, Corcoran is depicted alone in freeze frame. In voiceover we hear him (retrospectively) reflecting on his future and hinting that he might just quit football. Paralleling Blake’s redemption arc, Corcoran’s arrogance, on display throughout the film, is the catalyst of his downfall, transforming him into a pariah. However, as with Blake earlier in the film, Corcoran’s demotion seems unrelated to his performance and more like a punishment for his momentary failure to follow orders. Although *Pottstown* overturns our expectations in the end, the archetypes of the honorable, hardworking athlete who conquers tremendous obstacles to achieve success, and the fallen hero who is cast out for putting self ahead of team, are maintained. Blake and Corcoran simply switch places; order is upheld.

The structuralist notion of myths, as “narratives that endure because they resolve—by venting latent social contradictions—conflicts that otherwise remain troublesome,” is inadequate, Snead contends, because they fail to acknowledge the role that reader/viewer identification plays in the conveyance of meaning. Rather than dissolving social contradictions through a rebalancing of binary opposites, Snead suggests instead that “modern myths precisely illustrate social *divisions*, exposing audience fantasies that are anything but communally

shared."[183] In *Pottstown*, DiFilippo's unfulfilled dream of an undefeated season, expressed at the film's outset, is deflected, narratively, by the Firebirds' championship victory and Blake's triumphant comeback. However, we can also read the team's missed opportunity at perfection as a portent for the team's economic downfall, one that is suggestive of the larger collapse of American manufacturing across the 1970s. That this account, of a minor league outfit's final season, debuted as an appetizer to the Super Bowl, the most lavish (and lucrative) expression of American cultural power, is itself a uniquely American story: a doubleheader pitting the haves and have-nots.

FIGURE 48. James Caan and Billy Dee Williams as Chicago Bear teammates Brian Piccolo and Gale Sayers in *Brian's Song* (Buzz Kulik, 1971).

[183] Snead, *White Screens, Black Images,* 4. His emphasis.

“A sad sweet song of youth and death”: ***Brian’s Song***

Male homosocial love is the animating drive of the docufictional film *Brian’s Song*, produced as an ABC Movie-of-the-Week in 1971. Starring Billy Dee Williams and James Caan as real-life Chicago Bear teammates Gale Sayers and Brian Piccolo, *Brian’s Song* was based on a chapter of Sayers’s 1970 autobiography *I Am Third*.[184] The telefeature premiered on November 30, 1971, and was viewed by 20 million American households, making it the most watched made-for-TV movie of its time. ABC used its signature sports television property, *Monday Night Football* as a vehicle for marketing the movie. Travis Vogan notes that *Brian’s Song* was programmed as a complement to *MNF,* premiering one night after a Monday night telecast of a Bears game in Chicago. “Beyond taking advantage of *Monday Night’s* renown,” Vogan writes, “*Brian’s Song* reflected the prime-time football broadcast’s emphasis on building story lines by stressing the ‘human drama’ that the NFL harbors beyond the field.”[185] This human drama was accentuated in the promotional materials for *Brian’s Song,* which advertised the film as “a true story about love.” The production received 11 Emmy nominations, winning awards for best overall drama or comedy (single program), outstanding achievement in editing, cinematography, and writing

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[184] Gale Sayers and Al Silverman, *I Am Third* (New York: Viking, 1970). The title is drawn from Sayer’s credo: “The Lord is first, my friends are second, and I am third.”
[185] Vogan, *ABC Sports*, 114.

(adaptation), and best supporting actor in a dramatic role (Jack Warden, for his turn as George Halas, the Bears legendary founding owner and coach). In addition, Williams and Caan were both nominated for their lead performances. *Brian's Song* was also awarded a 1971 Peabody for television entertainment and was so successful in drawing a small-screen audience and critical praise that it received a brief theatrical release the following spring. According to *New York Times* TV critic John J. O'Connor, President Nixon was among the movie's many fans: "'Believe me, it was one of the great motion pictures I have seen,' Nixon is reported to say, while refuting its perceived corniness."[186]

By centering on the friendship that develops between Sayers and Piccolo as they help each other through individual hardships—for Sayers, a serious knee injury, for Piccolo, a testicular cancer diagnosis—the hetero-male weepy offers a gentle unsettling of football's construction of manliness; emphasizing tenderness, vulnerability, weakness, and kinship. *Brian's Song* also epitomizes Snead's mythification paradigm, through its pairing of the quiet, reserved Sayers, who is Black, and the convivial, outgoing Piccolo, who is white. At the film's outset Sayers is the coveted new prospect, having arrived at training camp as the fourth overall pick in the 1965 NFL Draft, regaled for his athletic gifts. Piccolo, on the other hand, is a tenacious, undrafted underdog. As Sayers explains it, "Like all free agents, [Piccolo] was a long shot to make it in the pros. But he hung in

[186] John J. Connor, "'Brian's Song' Is Proving to Be a Film Phenomenon," *The New York Times*, January 28, 1972, 91.

there with determination and guts and he turned out to be a helluva football player."[187] The two men shared the same position—running back—which added a competitive wrinkle and foundation of understanding to their relationship.

Brian's Song begins with a pan down from a blue sky—a nod to the heavens and foreshadow of Piccolo's death—to a tree-lined roadway bearing the overhead banner "HOME OF CHICAGO BEARS TRAINING CAMP." On the soundtrack, "The Hands of Time," the film's musical theme composed by Michel Legrand, arouses a melodramatic affect. A lone taxicab proceeds through the frame and enters what appears to be a Midwestern college campus.[188] As the cab continues its loop through the bucolic grounds, passing by a giant pond and stately red brick buildings, an offscreen voice (actor Jack Warden, as Halas) delivers a succinct prologue: "This is the story about two men, one named Gale Sayers, the other Brian Piccolo. They came from different parts of the country, they competed for the same job. One was white, the other Black. One liked to talk a lot. The other was shy as a three-year old. Our story is about how they came to know each other, fight each other, and help each other. Ernest Hemingway said that every true story ends in death. Well, this is a true story." At this moment, Sayers, having arrived at the Bears practice field, exits the cab wearing a sportscoat and tie. An errant punt bounces to Sayers, establishing a premise for

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[187] Sayers, *I Am Third*, 63.
[188] The training camp scenes were filmed on location at St. Joseph's College in Rensselaer, Indiana.

his meet-cute with Piccolo. After the two men introduce themselves, Piccolo proceeds to aggressively tease Sayers for his shyness, and they exchange a series of playful looks. Piccolo then feeds Sayers misinformation about their coach's hearing ability, setting up his teammate to later appear foolish. As Sayers departs to find Halas, Piccolo eyes him up and down in an admiring, vaguely desiring, way. Here Piccolo's gaze is sutured to that of the audience, evoking James Baldwin's and bell hooks's critiques of the white gaze and the racialized power of looking.[189] The scene concludes with the film's opening credits, which appear overlaid images of Piccolo in his Bears uniform, rejoining the practice, and Sayers in business attire, making his way to the coach's office. Notably, Williams receives second billing to Caan, signifying Snead's point that mythification is expressed through semiotic hierarchies: "For the viewer, the pleasure of recognizing this ranking displaces the necessity of verifying its moral or actual validity."[190] The movie's title, its billing of Caan as first lead, and the way it establishes Piccolo as the main protagonist (and Sayers as the subject of Piccolo's gaze) in these early moments via formal choices, belies the fact that Sayers was the genuine football star and "author" of *Brian's Song*.

The story that unfolds follows many familiar beats of the Hollywood sports movie while also mixing in elements of romantic melodrama and

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[189] See James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work* (New York: Dial Press, 1976); bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992).
[190] Snead, *White Screens, Black Images,* 4

romantic comedy. The teleplay was written by William Blinn, based upon Sayers's 20-page account of his friendship with Piccolo from Sayers's autobiography. Blinn, who later created the buddy cop series *Starsky & Hutch* (ABC, 1975-1979), and co-wrote the blockbuster mini-series *Roots* (ABC, 1977) and the semi-autobiographical Prince vehicle *Purple Rain* (1984), took significant liberties with the facts and temporal structure of the players' relationship and its timeframe. As Robert Carl Johnson demonstrates in his essay "*Brian's Song:* The Ordering of Experience," Blinn "had to reorder the actual experiences in significant ways."[191] In the film, Sayers and Piccolo's story unfolds over three consecutive seasons, each representing an act of the film. However, the events depicted in *Brian's Song* occurred across five seasons. The movie begins in the fall of 1965 and maps the players' first year with the Bears, ending with Sayers receiving the NFL Rookie of the Year award. The film's second act details his serious knee injury, which occurred during a game between the Bears and the San Francisco 49ers on November 10, 1968, and the difficult process of rehabilitation. (Sayers tore both ligaments in his right knee, which, at the time, was often a career-ending event). The third act focuses on Piccolo's cancer diagnosis, which transpired in November 1969, and eventual passing in June 1970. Thus, in *Brian's Song*, the 1966 and 1967 seasons are effectively deleted,

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[191] Robert Carl Johnson, "*Brian's Song:* The Ordering of Experience," *Aethlon* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1989): 28.

which compresses and tightens the plot. The result is a compact and symmetrical structure, in which the two men's fates are plotted as intersecting arcs.

Formally, *Brian's Song* was inventive in its integration of actual game footage, furnished by NFL Films, of Sayers and Piccolo in action, which is intercut with recreated sideline scenes. Johnson points out that use of real NFL highlights "heightens the veracity of the film and conveys superbly the athletic prowess of both men."[192] Numerous real-life football players and coaches also appear in the film, including Bernie Casey (as Bears cornerback J.C. Caroline) and Dick Butkus (uncredited, as himself), which bolsters the film's sense of authenticity. The integration of grainy, 16mm documentary footage into the fictional re-creations provides contrast to the somewhat stilted dramaturgy, which is elevated by the performances of Williams and Caan. The film's hybridity of fiction and actuality is, I contend, a key to *Brian's Song* success as a film and its popularity, and a quietly radical maneuver. The sprinkling of sports highlights into what is presented as a tragic love story between football stars provides cover for the exploration of a latent interracial romance between two men at a time when gay relationships could be at best be suggested on American television.

The portrayal of race in *Brian's Song* bears further consideration. As Marlon Riggs's 1992 documentary *Color Adjustment* makes clear, commercial television in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s was a predominantly white space. The

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[192] Johnson, "*Brian's Song,*" 27.

Black shows that did exist, such as *Beulah* (ABC, 1950-1953), *Amos 'n' Andy* (CBS, 1951-1953) and *Good Times* (CBS, 1974-1979) often traded in historic stereotypes. In the post-civil rights, Black Power era, American network television began to offer more complex and nuanced depictions of African American life. According to Christine Acham, during this period "African American actors and producers disrupted television's traditional narratives about blackness and employed television as a tool of resistance against mainstream constructions of African American life."[193] The figure of Gale Sayers within the predominantly white world of *Brian's Song* can be read as a disruptive textual force. His on-field success presents a challenge to the prevailing normative dominance of white middle-class masculinity in conventional sports films; a gap that cannot be overcome by Piccolo's white-coded attributes (hard work, guile, self-determination, etc.) or by the social and political forces that dictate opportunity.

Brian's Song doesn't shy away from addressing race and racism, but that discourse is often muddled and challenging to parse. Notably, Sayers and Piccolo were the first integrated roommates on the Chicago Bears. The significance of this is underlined early in the film by their (Black) teammate J.C. Caroline, who explains to Sayers: "You're going to be called an Uncle Tom by some blacks, an uppity n****r by some whites... you're gonna rock the boat Sayers, and there's

[193] Christine Acham, *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xii.

people out there that's already seasick." But at no point in the film do we ever *see* Sayers being confronted by racial animus or subjected to racist taunts. Rather, much of the film's humor comes in the form of inappropriate racialized comments directed by Piccolo to Sayers, who Piccolo nicknames "Black Magic." When Piccolo learns that Sayers donated a pint of blood to him, he jokes that it's no wonder he's "had this craving for chitlins all day." Later, when the team is gathered around Piccolo in the hospital, eating pizza, he tells Sayers "It beats ham hocks, don't it?" To motivate Sayers in his recovery from his knee injury, Piccolo uses a racial epithet as inspiration. "Can't make it, huh?" Piccolo asks his friend. "N****r. Chicken n****r," which Sayers takes in a joking spirit. Riotous laughter ensues. This conversation, which occurs in the privacy of Sayers's basement, is followed by a scene of the two men jogging alongside one another in public. As they thread their way through a park, romantic music kicks in. Slow motion close-ups of the men's faces, in isolation, and then in a two-shot, side by side, dissolve in and out. At this moment—the midpoint of the film, as their fortunes are about to soon reverse—they are equals, the film seems to be saying. This message is extended and heightened in a subsequent montage of NFL footage, in which highlights of both Sayers and Piccolo scoring touchdowns are juxtaposed, accompanied by rousing orchestral music that wouldn't feel out of place in an NFL Films documentary. The meaning being communicated here is that these two gridders have reached the peak of on-field success and/through equality, as twin halves of the Bears starting backfield.

In *Brian's Song*, the racism that Sayers faced as a Black football star in the 1960s, at the peak of the intensity of the civil rights struggle, is framed through Piccolo's experience. The only outward reference to racism comes in the form of a voice-over passage, in which Piccolo reads a fan missive over a montage of NFL footage and highlights of Sayers: "Hey, Black Magic, listen to this letter I got. 'You must have been raised by pigs to stay in the same room with one of those darkies. You must not have been taught anything when you were a boy. You must have crawled out from under some slimy rock.'" "Is that all?" Sayers asks. "Except for the usual, 'Love, Mom,'" Piccolo responds, which is followed by a laugh from Sayers. Although Piccolo's comedic side is established in the film's opening scenes, the way that racial difference, particularly Sayers's experience as a Black man succeeding in a world that is tilted against him, is used as a basis for lighthearted humor feels jarring. Did the makers of *Brian's Song* believe that audiences weren't ready for a more candid presentation of the racial discrimination that Black and other non-white professional athletes (not to mention those entire populations) experienced in post-Jim Crow America? Or is the film a reflection of the conventionality of the sports movie genre and the audiences that it caters to?

To the film's credit, for all its sentimentality, *Brian's Song* speaks to tackle football's fundamental paradox: it is a physically punishing game that depends on trust and tenderness between men. This compassion and affection, which mainly takes place beyond the view of the television cameras, is placed front-

and-center in *Brian's Song.* The love between Sayers and Piccolo, while amplified for dramatic effect and deflected through crude humor, is conveyed through the film's nuanced performances and subtle sexual codings. At the outset, Piccolo and Sayers's behavior towards one another borders on flirtatious. They see each other and act with care. Near the end of the film, Sayers, upon receiving the NFL's George S. Halas Most Courageous Player Award, dedicates the honor to Piccolo. "I love Brian Piccolo," he tells the audience of 600 fellow football pros. By providing space for men to express themselves emotionally, to admit pain and publicly declare love for one another, *Brian's Song* answers the central call of bell hooks's *The Will to Change*: to imagine and manifest alternatives to patriarchal masculinity.[194]

[194] hooks, *The Will to Change,* 33.

FIGURES 49 and 50. Will Patton and Denzel Washington as Bill Yoast and Herman Boone (top); Wood Harris as Julius Campbell and Ryan Hurst as Gerry Bertier in *Remember the Titans* (Boaz Yakin, 2000).

"You listen and you take a lesson from the dead": *Remember the Titans*

Remember the Titans, a Hollywood sports drama about a real-life Virginia high school football team and its Black head coach, set against the backdrop of Supreme Court-mandated school desegregation, centers interracial player *and* coach relationships in its narrative about transcending racial difference through teamwork, begrudging friendship, and, eventually, mutual respect. Described by the film scholar Samantha N. Sheppard as an "interracial football fantasy," *Remember the Titans* was co-produced by Walt Disney Pictures and Jerry Bruckheimer Pictures and released nationwide on September 29, 2000, five weeks before the Bush-Gore election.[195] The film earned an estimated $115,654,751 at the US box office ($136,706,683 worldwide), making it the fifth-

[195] Sheppard, *Sporting Blackness,* 11.

highest grossing American football movie of all-time, behind *The Blind Side* (2009), *The Waterboy* (1998), the 2005 remake of *The Longest Yard*, and *Jerry Maguire* (1996).

Remember the Titans is based on the story of Herman Boone's first season as coach of T.C. Williams High School in Alexandria, Virginia in 1971.[196] T.C. Williams, which was originally integrated upon its opening in 1965, had just been consolidated with two other area schools to become the only public high school in the city. The film dramatizes the T.C. Williams Titans' journey to an undefeated record, the 1971 Virginia state championship, and to racial harmony, despite heated backlash to the school's and the team's integration. At the outset, Boone is hired as an assistant to the incumbent (white) head football coach Bill Yoast. However, before the start of the season, the school board elevates Boone instead to the top position in a conciliatory, and public, gesture to the city's Black community (though we later learn of the board's intention to fire Boone as soon as he loses his first game and reinstate Yoast). *Remember the Titans* tracks their uneasy collaboration (FIG. 49) alongside the antagonistic relationship turned bromance between defensive standouts Gerry Bertier (white) and Julius Campbell (Black) (FIG. 50). The film's other major character is Yoast's white 9-year-old daughter Sheryl, represented as a precocious football savant. Although

[196] T.C. Williams High School, which ironically bore the name of the segregationist public school superintendent Thomas Chambliss Williams, was renamed Alexandria City High School in 2021, following nearly three decades of community pressure.

initially hostile towards Boone, Sheryl eventually bonds with the coach. She commends him for running a tough training camp and offers advice while they watch game film at Boone's kitchen table. The fact that her perspective frames the narrative (a voiceover by the teenaged version of Sheryl, from ten years later, opens and closes the film) is revealing of the film's white liberal politics and point-of-view.

Remember the Titans is part of a tradition of feel-good sports films, including *Glory Road* (2006), *Invictus* (2009), *McFarland USA* (2015), and *Race* (2016), among others, that uses the canvas of athletic competition to dramatize histories of racial inequality and prejudice. In another sense, *Remember the Titans* can be seen as a throwback to the sports films of the era it is set in, which often grappled with changes brought about by urban deindustrialization, the civil rights movement, and second wave feminism, but in a watered-down Disneyfied package. Like most American football narratives, *Remember the Titans* follows the arc of a football season from training camp to championship game. Friday night football contests are interposed with scenes of off-field conflict. Players fight about the placement of a Tommie Smith and John Carlos poster on a dormitory wall; a brick is thrown through Coach Boone's living room window by a disgruntled white former assistant, and so on. In his study of American sports films and their democratic themes of equality and progress, Grant Wiedenfeld summarizes the formula that *Remember the Titans* draws upon. "Typified by a dramatic structure that parallels on- and off-field plots,

Hollywood sports movies explore the ongoing tension between competitive and egalitarian values in American life." Wiedenfeld connects this thematic concern to the genealogy of the form and its correspondences with the Hollywood western as vehicles of American myth: "The modern sports genre emerges in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and the national conflict over civil rights… Where the western looked back to origins, sports movies express the prophecy of the American dream for an evolving nation," he concludes.[197] To succeed, the Titans (as a microcosm of imaginary "America") must endeavor towards greater understanding ("a more perfect union") by overcoming racial differences and personal jealousies—thus striking a balance between ideals of fairness and competition.

In *Remember the Titans*, a sense of racial difference and division is given visual expression by the film's 2.35:1 widescreen aspect ratio, which regularly isolates and intercuts close-ups of its Black and white characters; giving the impression of huge floating faces enveloped by empty space. Conversely, the film's soundtrack of 70s-era soul, rock, and folk songs often opens up gateways to dialogue, reconciliation, and bonding. For instance, the white offensive lineman Lewis Lastik's admiration for The Temptations serves as an icebreaker between the team's Black and white factions. During a tense players-only meeting, with the team of the verge of fracturing, Lastik's impromptu rendition

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[197] Grant Wiedenfeld, *Hollywood Sports Movies and the American Dream* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 4-5.

of a Black gospel tune is the bridge to common ground. Soon the entire team is clapping along, their differences dissolving in the process. As a symbol of the team's embryonic unity, the Titans develop a song and dance routine, which they perform before each game while entering the field for warm-up exercises.

Remember the Titan's training camp sequence is where we first see the team begin to overcome racial animosities to achieve a sense of camaraderie. This is instigated by Coach Boone, who insists on integrated seat and rooming assignments and compels his players to learn things about one another. For camp, the team is bussed to Gettysburg College, located 90 miles north of Alexandria, far from nosy, meddlesome parents. Following numerous frustrating practice sessions, Boone summons his players for a 3 a.m. run through the surrounding woods, ending at daybreak in the Gettysburg national cemetery. Here, Boone, surrounded by an ethereal, early morning mist and a horizon of gravestones of Civil War soldiers, delivers a speech that galvanizes the Titans. "Anyone know what this place is?" Boone begins. "This is where they fought the Battle of Gettysburg. Fifty thousand men died right here on this field, fighting the same fight that we're still fighting amongst ourselves today. This green field right here was painted red. Bubbling with the blood of young boys. Smoke and hot lead pouring right through their bodies. Listen to their souls, men. 'I killed my brother with malice in my heart.' 'Hatred destroyed my family.' You listen and you take a lesson from the dead. If we don't come together right now, on this hallowed ground, then we, too, will be destroyed. Just like they were. I don't care

if you like each other or not, but you will respect each other. And maybe, I don't know, maybe we'll learn to play this game like men." Boone's address, which draws on the racial divisions and the atrocities of the Civil War to inspire better teamwork and less fighting in practice, serves as a turning point in film. Most significantly, the speech sparks a change in Gerry Bertier, who thereafter ventures to encourage and work in partnership with Julius Campbell.

The relationship between Bertier and Campbell forms the emotional center of *Remember the Titans.* By the film's end, their love for one another feels oversentimental but earned. The two characters also exemplify Hollywood's mythification device, which informs how they are functioning on a figurative level. As Snead points out, mythification "engages audiences on the level of their racial allegiance, social background, and self-image. Film translates the personal into the communal so quickly that elevation of the dominant and the degradation of the subordinate are simultaneous and corporate."[198] Although in the story, Bertier and Campbell are depicted as on-field equals, how they are coded is revealing of the film's racial stereotyping. Bertier is the undisputed leader of the Titans: tough-minded, hardworking, and obsessively determined. Campbell, on the other hand, is rendered as a "natural talent" who succeeds by way of his physical gifts. However, his "un-coachability" and negative attitude threatens to negate Campbell's immense potential. As Bertier tells him: "You want honesty?

[198] Snead, *White Screens, Black Images,* 4.

All right, honestly, I think you're nothing. Nothing but a waste of God-given talent. You don't listen to nobody, man." "I'm supposed to wear myself out for the team?" Campbell retorts, critiquing Bertier's flawed leadership in the process. "What team? No. No, what I'm gonna do is, I'm gonna look out for myself, and I'm gonna get mine." To Bertier, this is the ultimate taboo for a football player: putting self ahead of team. However, despite their differences the two players promptly become close friends, after Bertier calls out another white player for undermining their Black teammates through a lack of effort; thereby becoming the kind of leader that Campbell can admire.

The contrast of Bertier and Campbell reflects the binary opposition of the two lead coaches. Bill Yoast is represented as a calm, benign, self-effacing, and paternal figure. When Herman Boone visits Yoast early on to ask him to remain on his staff, Yoast defers attention away from himself. "This isn't about me. I'm worried about my boys," Yoast explains, referring to his ambivalence to work with Boone. "Well, I ain't gonna cook 'em and eat 'em," Boone quips. The implication is that Yoast stays on as an assistant to safeguard the school's white players. When Bertier is seriously injured late in the film, Yost and his daughter visit him in the hospital, bearing gifts and words of comfort. Alternatively, Boone is portrayed as an ambitious, hot-tempered disciplinarian. "This is no democracy," he tells the team at their first meeting. "It is a dictatorship. I am the law." On several occasions, Yoast expresses concern over Boone's demanding style, perfectionism, and singular focus. "Coach, there's a fine line between tough

and crazy, and you're flirting with it." Yoast also calls into question Boone's motivations and self-interest. "Everything's not always about winning and losing," Yoast declares to his colleague. "Is this even about football anymore? Or is it just about you?" There is never an acknowledgement, though, that winning (and losing) for Boone and for Yoast have varying consequences. Yoast's white privilege assures his job security can withstand multiple failures, an imbalance that continues to operate in the hiring and promoting of coaches at various levels of the game.[199]

Although *Remember the Titans* is "based on a true story" the question of *whose story* looms throughout the film. Although Herman Boone is clearly the central figure, and is performed with characteristic magnetism by Denzel Washington, the film's emotional response, and "message," is orientated towards a white middle-class audience. Except for Boone, and Julius Campbell (to a lesser extent), the white main and supporting characters in *Remember the Titans* are given precedence. We are introduced to white players' family members and love interests and granted entry into their homes. Bertier's mother as well as his

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[199] See Timothy Mirabito, "Black Coaches Trying to Make It in a White-Dominated Industry: College Football and the Racial Divide," *The Sport Journal*, November 21, 2012, https://thesportjournal.org/article/black-coaches-trying-to-make-it-in-a-white-dominated-industry-college-football-and-the-racial-divide/; Robert Binion and Mark Wood, "The Racial Imbalance in College Football Coaching," *From the Rumble Seat*, March 24, 2022, https://www.fromtherumbleseat.com/2022/3/24/22989513/the-racial-imbalance-in-college-football-coaching; Gus Garcia-Roberts, "The Failed NFL Diversity 'Rule' Corporate America Loves," *The Washington Post*, October 4, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/interactive/2022/rooney-rule-nfl-black-coaches/

white girlfriend, Emma, are featured prominently in several scenes. Emma's refusal to shake Campbell's hand upon being introduced early in the film prompts her break-up with Bertier, but she experiences redemption just before the championship finale, when she acknowledges her racist attitude and offers an apologetic handshake to Campbell. Campbell's Black girlfriend, on the other hand, is briefly glimpsed in one scene but has no lines. We are not introduced to the Black players' families, nor are we taken into their neighborhoods or granted access to their inner lives, away from the team construct. We hear little about how the Black players feel about their situation. Though first string on the field, they are secondary throughout the film, which is ostensibly about the importance of cross-racial understanding and empathy. What we are left with is a story that feels displaced from its context. The film's narrative distortions—such as making every opponent an all-white school, even though all the teams the Titans played in 1971 were racially mixed—exercised for dramatic effect, undermine the real contradictions and material conditions of the place and time that the film is set in. Snead emphasizes that the device of mythification serves to replace history "with a surrogate ideology of elevation or demotion along a scale of human value. Mythification also implies identification, and requires a pool of spectators ready to accept and identify themselves with film's tailor-made

versions of reality."[200] Historical sports movies rely heavily on this inclination, leveraging our familiarity with the real events and people that they depict.

The film scholar Aaron Baker notes that the heightened realist style, emotional string-pulling, and individualist mythology of historical sports movies work together "to undermine critical scrutiny."[201] Despite its attention to faithfully reproducing a semblance of early-1970s Virginia, *Remember the Titans'* devotion to structural oppositions and a narrative of racial harmony that centers whiteness without reckoning with the vestiges of racial trauma, imbues the film with an ahistorical sensibility. The emphasis on affirming individual achievement obscures more complex social realities. In *Remember the Titans,* Herman Boone's climactic triumph upholds the myth of competitive sports as meritocracy. Paradoxically, Boone is the beneficiary of an equal opportunity hiring practice; his victorious season represents an affirmative action success story. The film's aspirational message, that by following the rules and working hard, anyone is capable of prosperity, minimizes the fact that America operates according to systems of entitlement and privilege that have historically benefitted white, straight, cisgender, able-bodied men; systems that by the 1970s, were just beginning to open to people that have been excluded. As Baker writes about Hollywood sports dramas, "the acknowledgment of social forces in

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[200] Snead, *White Screens, Black Images,* 4.
[201] Aaron Baker, "Sports Films, History, and Identity," *Journal of Sport History* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 218.

the construction of identity would make evident that the opportunity, abundance, and happiness in utopian narratives are not there for everyone to the same degree."[202] Or as Boone himself puts it, "This is no democracy."

FIGURE 51. Marshawn Lynch in *Marshawn Lynch: A History* (David Shields, 2019).

"I'm just here so I won't get fined": *Marshawn Lynch: A History*

The 2019 collage-essay, *Marshawn Lynch: A History*, centers the nonconformist running back Marshawn Lynch (FIG. 51), whose (selective) mutism recalls the taciturn Chicago Bears star and *Brian's Song* protagonist Gale Sayers. However,

[202] Baker, "Sports Films," 222.

unlike Sayers, whose silence stemmed from introversion, Lynch uses silence as a tool of resistance and parody. Significantly, *Marshawn Lynch* disposes of the Black-white subject dialectic and narrative of racial transcendence common to mediated football texts, opening a space for new possibilities and perspectives.

Directed by the author David Shields, *Marshawn Lynch* is an experimental, idiosyncratic documentary that is composed almost entirely of found footage: approximately 700 clips edited at an unrelenting, rapid pace. Quotes by prominent writers, artists, and activists like James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston, Louis Armstrong, and Stokely Carmichael structure the piece, which is organized in five loosely chronological sections. Each section corresponds to a place and period in Lynch's life, beginning in his hometown of Oakland and following his career through Buffalo, Seattle, and back to Oakland. In the early-2000s, Lynch was a standout running back for Oakland Tech High School before moving up the Bay to star for the University of California, Berkeley football team. This first section positions Lynch as part of a radical East Bay tradition, represented in a montage that encompasses Huey P. Newton and the Black Panthers, Jack London, Bruce Lee, Alice Walker, Bill Russell, Sly Stone, the Hells Angels, Angela Davis, Tupac Shakur, Philip K. Dick, the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, the Oakland Raiders—a franchise famous for embracing the role and iconography of the villain, Gary Payton, Ryan Coogler, and the Black Panther comic book hero, among others. Via archival video Shields demonstrates that even as a high school sophomore, Lynch was a focus of public attention but also an active participant

in the construction of his own emergent star persona. Early on, we see him testing out the role of trickster (an archetype referenced in a vintage clip of mythologist Joseph Campbell later in the film). In one extract, when prodded by a local TV sports host to respond, Lynch withholds, upending expectations. Here and elsewhere, he embodies Campbell's characterization of the trickster-hero as a "disruptor of programs" through his ambiguous silences. At the same time Lynch's exuberance and creativity are unequivocal. At the end of the first Oakland section a reporter asks Lynch to define his attitude. "Beast Mode," Lynch responds, "on the field." Lynch's use of "Beast Mode" alludes to the 1980s video game trope of "powering up," a term he would subsequently re-popularize and invigorate.

After three years at Berkeley, Lynch was drafted by the Buffalo Bills in the first round of the 2007 NFL Draft. He quickly gained accolades for his powerful, aggressive running style ("Run through a motherfucker face," in his words), earning Pro Bowl honors his second year. However, during his Buffalo tenure he was subject to police profiling and flagged as a "troublemaker" with "character issues" (in sports parlance, someone who doesn't follow the rules) by the local media, which threatened to derail a promising start to his NFL career. The film suggests that Lynch's personal aesthetic (gold teeth, dreadlocks, etc.) and identity (African American, Oakland background) and his eschewal of respectability politics, combined with a pervasive fear of Black boys and men contributed to his unfavorable reception. A clip of Hillary Clinton invoking the

racist “super predator” trope to demonize young people of color as possessing “no conscience, no empathy” and who “we have to bring… to heel,” is employed to point up the structural racism and implicit biases that many professional athletes contend with. After three and a half seasons in Buffalo, Lynch was traded across the country to the Seattle Seahawks. In this new city, he found a more welcoming environment and both individual and team success, including back-to-back trips to the Super Bowl in 2014 and 2015. During his time with the Seahawks, Lynch emerged as a folk hero through this high-spirited “Beast Mode” playing style—in which he steamrolls and straight-arms to the ground less-physical defenders—and his quiet, often humorous, acts of defiance off the field. “Don't talk about it, just be about it,” is how his mother, Delisa Lynch, summarized the Marshawn Lynch approach.

The scholar Peter Odell Campbell asserts that Lynch’s selective silence was a means of reversing the naturalized power relations that exist between reporters and players. At the heart of this dynamic is an expectation that Black athletes speak and behave in a compliant manner that benefits the NFL’s image, its corporate partners, and the media. If players don’t conform to that standard, they are branded as selfish (i.e. not “team players”), labeled a distraction, a “diva,” or ascribed character “red flags.” By reclaiming power over his voice and labor, Lynch “freed [himself] from the ‘racist double bind’ that is Black NFL

players' relationship with the press."[203] Required to be accountable to the media by answering every question directed their way (even when those questions are inappropriate, rhetorical, too personal, or difficult to respond to immediately after completing a game) players also face a converse expectation, to "shut up and play."

The film's title, *Marshawn Lynch: A History,* references two trajectories. On the micro level, *Marshawn Lynch* is an examination of Lynch's career as an athlete and his development as an avant-garde media personality. On a macro level, *Marshawn Lynch* maps a history of racial violence, commodification, exploitation, and rebellion. Lynch's personal experience—as framed and consumed through television and online media—provides a case study for the film's deconstruction of American racial and cultural discourse. In discussing Lynch's media persona, Samantha N. Sheppard argues that Lynch's "calculated defiance cast him within a sporting and televisual continuum of Black athletic refusal from Tommie Smith and John Carlos to Colin Kaepernick and Eric Reid to Naomi Osaka and Simone Biles."[204] Lynch's silences, in addition to his choice to issue pre-scripted answers (i.e. "I'm just here so I won't get fined") to rote pre- and post-game questions, can be interpreted as a form of resistance to the

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[203] Cited in Jenée Desmond-Harris, "Marshawn Lynch's Selective Silence Is a Power Move for Black Athletes," *Vox*, January 31, 2015, https://www.vox.com/2015/1/31/7956685/marshawn-lynch-media-race

[204] Samantha N. Sheppard, "Just 'Bout That Action, Boss": The Televisual Politics of Marshawn Lynch," *Flow Journal*, December 7, 2021, http://www.flowjournal.org/2021/12/just-bout-that-action-boss/

expectation to perform for a predominantly white sports-media apparatus. Throughout the film, Shields returns to the metaphor of *The Cat and The Hat*—a Dr. Seuss tale of revolt against authority, led by a playful troublemaker—which Lynch cites as his favorite book. Lynch's refusal to conform to the status quo exposes the "obscene underbelly" of a system designed to root out and smooth over any form of dissent or difference from the dominant (white/WASP) culture. (The NFL's draconian uniform policy and punishments for excessive on-field celebrations, designed to dampen individual expression, are similar examples of this kind of policing). Meanwhile, Lynch's subversive performance of masculinity, which is at once self-consciously hard, goofy, and emotionally vulnerable sets him apart from most NFL stars. Shield's juxtaposition of Lynch and his teammate Russell Wilson, a polished but bland company-man type, is especially striking and complex. At one point the film implies that the NFL would prefer to see Wilson (who is also lighter skinned) succeed over Lynch, leading to a disastrous decision at a key moment in the Seahawks' 2015 Super Bowl loss to the New England Patriots. Rather than handing the ball to the rugged, reliable Lynch one yard from the end zone, which would have nearly ensured a Seattle victory and Super Bowl MVP for Lynch, the Seahawks instead called for a pass. Quarterback Russell Wilson was subsequently intercepted in the game's final seconds, cementing a victory for the Patriots. If Lynch had scored the game-winning touchdown, he likely would have become an even larger national celebrity with increased endorsement opportunities.

Although such counterfactual scenarios are intriguing to consider, *Marshawn Lynch* is most effective when it exposes how the underlying values and beliefs of dominant American society are embedded in audiovisual mass culture. The film's associative montage elicits a forceful, historicized critique of institutional racism, white supremacy, and white victimhood. As the cultural critic Hua Hsu notes, "Shields's drifting approach allows him to make persuasive and even moving arguments that proceed by accumulation and association rather than by simple exposition."[205] The film's vast assembly of shards cuts sharply, unveiling assumptions that lay just below the surface. In a 1970 interview with the African American baseball player Curt Flood for ABC's *Wide World of Sports*, broadcaster Howard Cosell opines that $90,000 a year (Flood's salary at the time) "isn't exactly slave wages." To which Flood, whose legal challenge of baseball's antitrust exemption paved the way for the right to free agency, responds, "A well-paid slave is, nonetheless, a slave." During a segment of *The O'Reilly Factor,* host Bill O'Reilly comments that his guest, the Black Columbia University professor Marc Lamont Hill, "look[s] like [a cocaine dealer] a little bit." Throughout *Marshawn Lynch*, we see white politicians and media figures acting as the arbiters of American patriotism: from Ronald Reagan decrying the Berkeley free speech movement in the 1960s, to Donald Trump

[205] Hua Hsu, "The Profound Silence of Marshawn Lynch," *The New Yorker*, June 14, 2019, http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-profound-silence-of-marshawn-lynch

insisting that NFL players be fired for refusing to stand for the national anthem in protest of racist state violence, to Tucker Carlson railing against Lynch for choosing to sit for the American anthem but stand for the Mexican anthem before a game in Mexico City. Like the literary trickster figure, Lynch is an upsetting element. "He steals the show by not saying anything and dressing like the Unabomber," a frustrated white news commentator exclaims, referring to Lynch.

Unlike the other football texts examined in this chapter, *Marshawn Lynch* thoroughly interleaves and engages with its sociopolitical context. Moreover, from the very outset the film draws a clear parallel between the violent nature of tackle football, which relies heavily on the participation of Black youth, and the social violence inflicted on America's Black community by the state. As civil rights activist and one-time Justice Minister of the Black Panther Party Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin (formerly H. Rap Brown) puts it, "Violence is part of America's culture. It is as American as cherry pie." Throughout the 84-minute film we are presented with scenes of police killing unarmed Black males; images of social justice protests including Kaepernick's refusal to stand for the national anthem and Black Lives Matter demonstrations in Ferguson and elsewhere; and apoplectic responses by conversative media pundits and ideologues. Contained in these images is a history and system of racial inequity, domination, and control. As one of the Black Panthers describes, "The thing that led to the [creation of the] Panthers was what we were seeing on television every day.

Attack dogs, fire hoses, bombings." To push back against such mistreatment is to invite contempt, disdain, or more likely, fearmongering and retribution. "Oakland has a long history of being a little more militant than other movements across the country," an anonymous white newswoman endeavors to point out. Racial double standards are underscored: Where fellow East Bay native and Oakland Tech graduate Clint Eastwood is admired for his portrayal of "a silent and malevolent anti-hero cowboy" Lynch is criticized and punished with fines for failure to meet "the NFL's media obligations." In police cam footage we hear that Black people are to be feared (and, we see, pre-emptively killed) for their "violent tendencies" but white mass murderers like Dylan Roof are captured alive and treated to Burger King on their way to booking; reformable "lone wolves," temporarily gone astray but still human.

The negative and stereotypical depiction of Black youth is summarized in *Marshawn Lynch* via an excerpt from a Dave Chappelle stand-up routine: "I spoke at my old high school," Chappelle imparts to his audience, "and I told them kids straight up: if you guys are serious about making it out of this ghetto, you gotta focus, you gotta stop blaming white people for your problems, and you gotta learn how to [pauses] rap or play basketball or something… either do that or sell crack, that's your only options, that's the only way I've ever seen it work. You better get to entertaining these white people. Get to dancing!" Chappelle's joke serves to accentuate a fact about the social role of blackness, drawing a line

between the tradition of minstrelsy to modern entertainments, including spectator sports.

The writer Claudia Rankine describes *Marshawn Lynch* as “A groundbreaking documentary about a silence that isn’t really a silence.”[206] Rather, the silence is an echo through time, connecting America’s history of slavery to contemporary forms of racialized violence, microaggressions, and everyday/naturalized institutional racism. That sense of a silent echo also evokes Christina Sharpe’s 2023 autoethnography, *Ordinary Notes*. In *Ordinary Notes*, Sharpe’s personal/family history serves as fulcrum for a deep exploration of Black life in the wake of slavery’s afterlives. “I wanted to write about *silences* and *terror* and acts that hover over generations, over centuries,” Sharpe states.[207] “I was interested in small acts and determining hauntings.”[208] Or as Zora Neale Hurston is quoted in the film, “If you're silent about your pain, they'll kill you and say you enjoyed it.” Trinh T. Minh-ha, meanwhile, theorizes silence as “a means to gain a hearing. It is a voice, a mode of uttering, and a response in its own right. Without other silences, however, my silence goes unheard, unnoticed.”[209] Amplified by viral, decentralized social media networks, the

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[206] Quoted on *Marshawn Lynch: A History* website, https://www.lynch-a-history.com/
[207] Christina Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023), 26. Her emphases.
[208] Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes*, 367n18.
[209] Trinh T. Minh-ha, “III. Difference: ‘A Special Third World Women Issue,” in *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 83.

emphatic silences of Marshawn Lynch are small acts that call out the living specter of antiblackness and remind us to listen.

Conclusion

Despite its unprecedented popularity and visibility, American football is a game in crisis. That crisis is presently playing out at the intersection of race, class, geography, and political identity. According to *The Washington Post*, “boys in the most conservative, poorest states continue to play high school tackle football at higher rates than those in wealthier and more politically liberal areas.” Meanwhile, “The politicization of the concussion crisis is forging deeper divisions between those who support youth football and those who don’t,” meaning that where you live and who your parents vote for could very well determine if you grow up playing tackle football or not—and enduring traumatic brain injuries or not. Although fewer white and Black boys and teens are playing tackle football each year, more Hispanic youngsters are now taking up the game. At the college level, “the proportion of White players is declining, and that of Black players rising, at faster rates than national demographic changes.”[210] These statistics reinforce the notion that football is a matrix of political and structural inequalities that are indivisible from income disparities. This is why

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[210] Dave Sheinin and Emily Giambalvo, “The Changing Face of America’s Favorite Sport,” *The Washington Post*, December 18, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/interactive/2023/football-participation-decline-politics-demographics

an analysis of the game's mythologies, media products, and overlapping structures of subordination is so necessary.

Beginning in the 1960s, American professional football forced its way to the center of American life through savvy media partnerships and political positioning. Michael MacCambridge points out that "As pro football rose in popularity in the '60s, almost in counterpoint to the youth movement and anti-Vietnam fervor on college campuses, it began to take on a larger symbolic meaning." The National Football League's foothold in American mass culture of that era, and its mutually reinforcing relationship with network television, positioned the sport as an emblem of American strength, ingenuity, sophistication, and masculinity. "For a growing group of middle-class adults, the game itself served as a kind of social touchstone," MacCambridge claims, "which recognized and honored—especially in the archetypes like John Unitas—the eternal verities of hard work, dedication, respect for authority, and community."[211] Political operators and cultural producers alike took note of football's rising ideological import.

The NFL Films' epic histories of the 1960s and 70s helped to popularize American football by presenting the game and its values in heroic terms. The company's finely tuned aesthetic language and storytelling techniques helped elevate the NFL to the level of American folklore. NFL Films' use of slow-motion

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[211] MacCambridge, *America's Game*, 231.

photography served its strategic aims, resetting the activity of gameplay in mythological time. Triumphant music and bold, authoritative voiceover heightened the drama retrospectively. The 1969 telefilm *Big Game America* attempts to have it both ways; by (temporarily) doing away with the "voice of God" in favor of a softer pitched, more understated narrator (the actor Burt Lancaster), and organizing its narrative around a Black-white character dyad the film endeavored to be forward-looking in content and form. However, its undertone, by way of the things it leaves unsaid, the subjects it chooses to omit or tip toe around, such as the racism, drug abuse, social dynamics among players, hazing, dehumanizing brutality, and militarism raised in Meggyesy's *Out of Their League*, betrays the film's liberal appearance. *Big Game America* reiterates and expands upon NFL Films' penchant for underspecification, interweaving domestically situated interviews with NFL stars Jim Marshall and Don Meredith into a selective chronicle of the great men and teams of the league's past. This treatment is symptomatic of NFL Films' move to preserve the mythological past and create enduring archetypes while also displaying a modern semblance. Players such as Jim Thorpe become larger-than-life icons, displaced from the social conditions and struggles of their lifetimes. Myth triumphs over history.

Pro Football: Pottstown, PA takes a different approach. Grounding its narrative in the world of minor league football, the verité documentary strives towards a gritty, realistic portrayal of the game, bracketed off from the grandeur

and spectacle of the National Football League. The film even tacitly acknowledges the political world outside the bounds of the game, even if to express bemusement at the plight of Vietnam War dissenters. But *Pottstown* also maintains the racial hierarchies inscribed in *Big Game America.* The charismatic, overachieving white quarterback is presented as a personification of American capitalist values; displayed alongside his family and his fancy possessions. His Black defensive counterpart, on the other hand, is coded as a malcontent and a strange loner who, despite redemption in the end, fails to fully maximize his physical attributes (and by extension, his earning potential).

The structural juxtaposition of white quarterbacks and Black defensive players in *Big Game America* and *Pro Football: Pottstown, PA* is contrasted in the made-for-TV movie *Brian's Song* and the Hollywood drama *Remember the Titans.* These narratives of racial transcendence and harmony based on real stories from the late 1960s and early 1970s, a time of social transformation, provide more nuanced characterizations and empathetic perspectives but also uphold established sports movie conventions while maintaining status quo power dynamics. Produced in the early-70s, *Brian's Song* commemorates an interracial homosocial love story. Its narrative of male tenderness, compassion, and affection breaks from the rigid (and homophobic) machismo of American football culture to imagine more inclusive and affirming masculinities. However, it does so within a frame that upholds a naturalized hegemonic whiteness. Set in 1971, *Remember the Titans*, a heartwarming Disney production from 2000, tells

the story of a newly integrated suburban high school football team whose victories on the field double as victories against racism (and white flight). A championship gains the team's Black head coach, Herman Boone, and his family acceptance from their white neighbors and the parents of the school's white players, who earlier in the film refer to him as "Coach Coon" and violently threaten his home. Here, the sublimation of racialized hatred and bigotry into fiercely loyal sports fandom transforms Boone into a hero of his community. But what happens when the victories stop coming?

Posing an alternative to these mainstream representations, the experimental video essay *Marshawn Lynch: A History* takes full advantage of its independent, noncommercial context. Drawing on the hip hop tradition of sampling and the subversive agenda of appropriation art, the film interweaves hundreds of pirated clips into an expansive counternarrative of creative resistance and an interrogation of American antiblackness. In Shields's account, Lynch embodies a paradoxical unknowable authenticity; a peoples' champion whose silence is as culturally potent as Muhammad Ali's verbosity; a trickster hero whose savvy indifference unsettles the American sports-media complex.

In her diagnosis of hegemonic masculinity, bell hooks notes that patriarchal culture "teaches all of us that the core of our identity is defined by the will to dominate and control others… When culture is based on a dominator model, not only will it be violent but it will frame all relationships as power

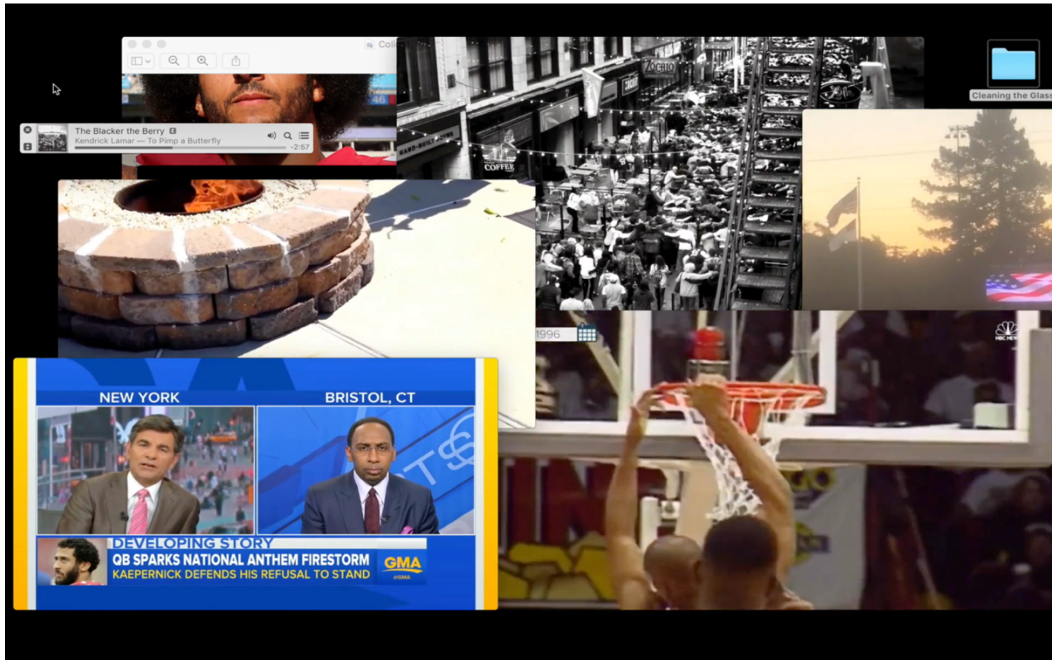
struggles."[212] American tackle football is a hetero-male-controlled game that is predicated upon the physical domination of one's opponent and forceful appropriation of territory. For decades, the sport's violence was part of its mass appeal and its packaging: from *The Violent World of Sam Huff* to *Mayhem on a Sunday Afternoon* to *Crunch Course* and so on. The men who entered the professional football ranks (more or less) understood the *bodily* sacrifice it required and willingly accepted the trade-off. In return for a chance at fame, glory, and if fortunate, a generous or even lucrative paycheck: a future of acute back pain, chronic knee and hip dysfunction, inflammation, arthritis. Of course, we know a lot more now about the impalpable, and difficult to diagnose, damage that football also causes to the minds of many who play it. The consequences of willfully disregarding this unpleasant and long-suppressed truth about football's link with debilitating brain disease, as opposed to looking and listening more intently, and accepting responsibility as participant-consumers, are considerable. As hooks points out, "Until we can collectively acknowledge the damage patriarchy causes and the suffering it creates, we cannot address male pain";[213] underscoring why intersectional feminist interrogations of power and knowledge, via gender, race, sexuality, and class, are essential to theorizing American football and the ideas of masculinity, power, and domination it

[212] hooks, *The Will to Change,* 115-116.
[213] hooks, *The Will to Change,* 30.

upholds. We might start by considering, more deeply, who plays, for who, and why?

SECOND TIMEOUT

Cleaning the Glass



Link to video: https://vimeo.com/195062715

In this piece, the computer desktop serves as a site for the staging of research and thinking through problems and through media. Content management, articulated through the opening, layering, moving, resizing, and closing of files, becomes a primary operational and aesthetic strategy. This began with building, from the ground/glass up, a vertical collage of static and moving images culled from the internet that is then dissolved over the course of the video's duration.

Movement (montage) is generated through an unveiling/excavation and rearrangement of layers rather than a succession of sequences or units of footage, each replacing the one that came before. The looping of videos of different lengths on the bottom surface layer allowed for unexpected (unplanned) simultaneities and surprises to emerge.

The process of making this work presented an opportunity to reflect on the nature of the desktop itself, a place where we spend increasingly large proportions of our time. The desktop has become a space of familiarity and comfort, and, despite being a product of corporate hegemonies, is a highly individualized and customizable space. But it offers untapped potential as a frame for critique as well. Thought moves through the creation, naming, and organization of files and folders, the annotation of metadata, the keeping and losing of tabs, the process of backing up, all the ways in which we build up our user histories and archive our online trails, scrolling, clicking—a daily practice of intense distraction. How do we keep it all together and not lose what's important, including ourselves?

The double nature of the desktop as a media-making tool, functioning as both canvas and recording device (screen capture) reminds me of the Lumière Cinématographe, which functioned as both a camera and a projector. This dual purpose fascinates me: A tool for looking that is also a projection machine, or a mirror. It makes things easier (lighter, more streamlined) and it can make things

more complicated as well (generating loops of reflections). I like the potential of this exploded or refracted point-of-view.

Ironically, using the laptop screen in this way, as temporal surface and camera, also reminds me of the system of analog, linear video post-production. Prior to the introduction of digital media and nonlinear computer-based editing, to make a change you had to go back and re-do all your work from that point forward. Edits were made on the fly deck-to-deck and recorded in real time on physical tape with the aid of a time-based synchronizer. In comparison, it made the tactile, film-based process of cutting and taping together pieces of plastic seem radically visible and revisable; perhaps this explains why video editing software has adopted the iconography of razor blades and trim bins.

Working in the modality of the desktop documentary was an attempt to respond to the changing nature of the video essay in today's fan-generated, conversational, and more democratically organized and distributed media landscape. I situate *Cleaning the Glass* in between this approach, which is rooted in cinephilia, appropriation, productive consumption, and talking back and through media, and the current videographic, multimedia trend in film studies; what has been described as "audiovisualcy" and "essay video," and which typically incorporates a more theoretical framework as well as the conventions of academic production (footnoting and so on). My premise is that this latter iteration of the video essay—as distinct from the tradition of the artistically-inflected cine-essay—and often taking the form of an annotated string-of-clips

with analytic voice-over, has evolved an under-the-radar mode of web-based pop-critical practice, a kind of flip side to the viral fan-made supercut. My intention was to work inside or across these iterations of the video essay, but in a way that short-circuits uncomplicated subjectivity and disrupts, in the case of the *essay-video*, the patina of expertise.

Colin Kaepernick's silent protest of police violence prior to an August 2016 NFL exhibition game between the San Francisco 49ers and Green Bay Packers—registered through his refusal to stand for the playing of the national anthem—sparked a torrent of media attention, debate, criticism, pushback, emulation, and adaptation.[214] Much of the conversation it generated centered upon the question of whether it's appropriate for athletes to take positions on, to give voice to, social concerns. It seems to me that what's at stake in Kaepernick's action, aside from its immediate focusing on issues of racial injustice, is the right to free speech in the NFL (and professional sports more broadly), and its regulation. Who has voice, what are the forms that it takes, and how is it mediated?

I see Kaepernick's decision to take a knee rather than stand at attention during the national anthem, and to back that up with clearly stated and informed

[214] As Kaepernick commented after the game: "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color." See Steve Wyche, "Colin Kaepernick Explains Why He Sat During National Anthem," NFL.com, August 27, 2016, http://www.nfl.com/news/story/0ap3000000691077/article/colin-kaepernick-explains-why-he-sat-during-national-anthem

motivations, as part of a larger continuum of activism in American sports that has materialized over the last decade. In the mid-1980s, Michael Jordan's rise to fame coupled with his status as a corporate-branded athlete had a chilling effect on political speech in North American professional team sports. Jordan was the quintessential postmodern, apolitical athlete. He projected a neutral image, gave no expression of moral values or political opinions, which made him an ideal salesman. His focus was on dominating the game and transcending the boundaries of sport, to become an "all-purpose entertainment superstar." His incredible success, on and off the court, created or at least elaborated a cult of the individual in the NBA. Over the next 30 years, basketball and its neighboring sports entertainments underwent a fundamental change, characterized by a drifting away of the concept of pro athlete as engaged citizen.

Over the past decade, the notion that professional athletes should "shut up and play" has been challenged and thoroughly rebuked. The WNBA has led the way in American sport's transformation as a platform of political consciousness, conscience, and progressiveness. I also note a succession of meaningful small gestures: From the Los Angeles Clippers' turning of their uniforms inside out to protest their owner's racist speech; to Jason Collins' public coming out, becoming the first active (male) athlete in North American professional team sports to do so; to the Miami Heat's team photo of themselves in hoodies, in tribute to Trayvon Martin; to the embrace of the Black Lives Matters movement by athletes in the NBA, the NFL, and college athletics.

These developments and actions, and the struggles they represent, have combined to generate the forces necessary to empower individual athletes to think collectively and historically about their place within American society and its political discourse. *Cleaning the Glass* attempts to tease out and illuminate this shift while also looking back to the past for precedents. In this regard, I find the mostly forgotten story of former NBA player Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf to be especially illuminating, as it disrupts the neat division between the Jordan and post-Jordan eras. In 1996, Abdul-Rauf refused to stand for "The Star-Spangled Banner" before games, citing the flag as a symbol of oppression and the United States' long history of tyranny. The furious response to his action can be seen retrospectively as a harbinger of the Islamophobia that was fully unleashed following the events of September 11, 2001. His narrative forms an important bridge between Colin Kaepernick and the 1960s' generation of athlete-activists, including Muhammad Ali, Jim Brown, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Bill Walton, Tommie Smith, John Carlos, and many more.

CHAPTER THREE

The Game is Not the Thing: TVTV vs. The Super Bowl

> It's not the game as plays but the game as people that we're after.
>
> – Michael Shamberg, TVTV member[215]

In 1976, the California-based video collective Top Value Television (TVTV) aimed its portapaks at America's most popular sport-spectacle: The Super Bowl. Promising "football as you've never seen it before," their intimate, freewheeling tele-documentary treats the National Football League's signature event as a social and artistic research field. Inconceivable in today's rigidly enclosed, corporate media-sports nexus, *TVTV Goes to the Super Bowl* maps an alluring but short-lived convergence of countercultural positionality, mass media entertainment, and cooperative TV production. Assembling the perspectives of players, spouses, fans, executives, and the press, TVTV's backstage look at Super Bowl X, played in Miami, delivers an amusing commentary on the mainstream sports media and pro football industries and their operational (and ideological) norms. A precursor of reality-based verité television, the video's unscripted

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[215] Quoted in "Covering the Covering of the Super Bowl," *The Washington Post,* January 17, 1976.

approach favored open-ended encounters, showcasing real people as entertainers.[216]

This chapter examines how *Super Bowl*, as a work of guerrilla television, subverts the accepted mythology of American football. Breaking from conventional network TV processes and forms, TVTV's disarming, improvisational, at times jocular approach achieves a difficult double maneuver: it satirizes the media spectacle of professional football while at the same time humanizing its constituent performers. I propose that TVTV's intervention into the sports media space destabilizes the dominant image of masculinity as embodied and expressed in popular football documentaries (notably, the repertoire of NFL Films), documentary series like *Last Chance U* and *Hard Knocks,* and standard broadcast television coverage of the sport (see: any NFL telecast). I argue that TVTV's counterhegemonic vision is made possible by its status as an ethnographic television-art hybrid that exists outside of the production model and distribution circuit of American sports entertainment culture. Arising from the interwoven traditions of activist media, community-based video, public television, and video art, TVTV's *Super Bowl* operates against the dominant logics of broadcast television; eluding bureaucracy,

[216] It could be argued that TVTV's made-for-TV documentaries belong to the proto/first wave of reality television, alongside anthropological projects such as *An American Family*, a 12-part, 12-hour documentary series which aired on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) in 1973. Chronicling the day-to-day lives of the William C. Loud family of Santa Barbara, *An American Family* is credited with bringing cinéma verité concepts to television.

professionalism, and mastery in favor of messy experimental aesthetics, social engagement, and vulnerability. By shifting focus away from the storyline of a game to the images, communities, and subjectivities of those who play, *Super Bowl* expands the horizon of masculine representation in body culture, offers an alternative means of identification, and reimagines football as a non-zero-sum game.

TVTV's deconstruction of sports television's masculinist frame, meanwhile, offers a welcome subversion of the corporatized, patriarchal media coverage of the NFL. At the same time, *Super Bowl* must also be considered within the historical conventions, tropes, and ingrained narratives of the sports film, broadly defined; and more specifically, as a "Black body genre." As theorized by film scholar Samantha N. Sheppard, sports films constitute such a genre through their foregrounding of "Black athletes' corporeal performance as a spectacle, such that blackness is realized, mitigated, succumbed to and disavowed via cinema's regimes of representation."[217] Reading *Super Bowl*'s treatment of (frequently unclothed and examined) Black sporting bodies through such a lens, I consider how TVTV's success and maverick reputation in part masks its disavowal of race as an axis of critique.

[217] Sheppard, *Sporting Blackness,* 8.

TVTV: From Political Journalism to Nonfiction Entertainment

Top Value Television was formed in San Francisco in 1972 by Michael Shamberg, Allen Rucker, Megan Williams, Tom Weinberg, and Hudson Marquez. During its six-year run, TVTV's membership was amorphous; overlapping and intermixing with other alternative video collectives such as Ant Farm, Optic Nerve, and the Videofreex. Seizing on the influx of funding for public television in the late 1960s, as well as the opportunities opened by New Journalism for a lively, more socially oriented brand of investigative reportage, TVTV's debut productions, *The World's Largest TV Studio* and *Four More Years,* chronicled the 1972 Democratic and Republican National Convention, respectively, both held in Miami Beach. Shot in video verité style, these two documentaries (self-funded and then sold to the Public Broadcasting Service [PBS] for cross-country transmission) established a loose, conversational alternative to the prim network style of news reporting and commentary. TVTV went places, talked to people, and pointed their cameras in directions the networks usually didn't, including at the networks themselves. The group covered mainstream American politics and culture from the vantage of curious outsiders with one foot in the door; armed with full accreditation, "lightweight" equipment, and a vox populist scheme.

TVTV's irreverent approach to media-based journalism heralded a new form: guerrilla television. Together with east coast groups like People's Video Theatre, Raindance Corporation, Videofreex, and People's Communication Network, TVTV brought an activist perspective, informality, and skillset to the

then-new medium of video documentary; a hybrid of direct cinema and video art. (Video art having gained recognition as its own distinct form starting in the mid 1960s, via the gallery-based video and TV experiments of artists Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell). Unlike these other media artists and collectives, however, TVTV maintained an aspirational relationship to mainstream television for the course of its existence, through the sale and commissioning of its projects for broadcast and choice of topics.

In the late 1960s, mainstream media outlets started paying closer attention to what was happening in the counterculture. From the outside looking in, performance art, psychedelic drugs and music, intermedia theater, and communal living were strange and exciting; threatening status quo norms. The Woodstock music festival, held in August 1969, represented a flashpoint, magnifying what was by then a full-fledged radical youth movement. The Videofreex's documentation of Woodstock caught the eye of the Columbia Broadcasting System; leading to an invitation to create a series of videos (covering the Black Panthers, communes, political demonstrations, and so on) for the network. The pilot episode of *Subject to Change* was recorded live to tape for CBS executives in December 1969 but the program never aired. Realizing the compromises required by commercial television, the Videofreex changed course. A grant from the New York State Council for the Arts (NYSCA) enabled the group's relocation from a SoHo loft in New York City to upstate New York, where they launched their own low-wattage pirate narrowcast. Lanesville TV,

nicknamed the “World's Smallest TV Station,” was an early example of community-focused cable access television. As Parry Teasdale explains, “Between March 1972 and February 1977, the Videofreex aired 258 television broadcasts from a home-built studio and jerry-rigged transmitter in an old boarding house they rented in the tiny Catskill Mountain hamlet of Lanesville. It was a revolutionary act in defiance of FCC regulations—the first unlicensed TV station in America.”[218]

TVTV, on the other hand, consistently pursued a national audience for their collectively produced media interventions, which they achieved through the platform of public television. The founding of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in 1967, the Children’s Television Workshop in 1968, the Public Broadcasting Service in 1969, and the TV Lab, created by WNET, New York’s innovative public station, in 1972 (with support from NYSCA and the Rockefeller Foundation) provided a production and distribution infrastructure for alternative and grassroots projects. Guerrilla television and other independent video initiatives, including cable access, were also enabled by the introduction of Sony’s Portapak, a battery-powered camera and deck, in 1967. Despite its’ many limitations—the rig was heavy and difficult to thread, videotape was fragile, you couldn’t aim the camera directly at a bright light, you couldn’t edit easily (in-

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[218] Quoted in synopsis to *Lanesville TV Overview I,* Video Data Bank, https://www.vdb.org/titles/lanesville-tv-overview-i (accessed August 30, 2020); from Parry D. Teasdale, *Videofreex: America's First Pirate TV Station & the Catskills Collective that Turned It On* (Catskill, NY: Black Dome Press, 1999).

camera editing was the norm)—the Portapak and other first-generation portable video equipment spurred more spontaneous modes of television making and video art practices. Community groups and artist collectives pooled resources to purchase cameras, which were still too costly for most individuals.

The resulting projects spanned a range of program forms and were often targeted to niche audiences. They circulated via countercultural venues and artist spaces as well as noncommercial networks like National Educational Television (NET) and public access stations. *Inside Bedford-Stuyvesant,* which premiered in April 1968, was one such hyper-local public affairs program shot on half-inch video. The program's budgetary restraints manifested an instinctive style and casual intimacy that complemented its freeform discussions of neighborhood concerns. This open approach, of letting stories unfold organically and with minimal interruption, rather than structuring them to conform to the more edited and packaged style of broadcast news reports, was a common feature of early activist video and cable access TV.

The ability to create television without bulky, expensive studio cameras or interior sets, beginning in the late 1960s, was a technological breakthrough. With cameras becoming portable extensions of the body, able to record sound and image simultaneously on a single format, newsgathering gained mobility and immediacy. Prior to 1967, the processing of news footage shot of film caused delays, and wasn't cheap, while audio typically had to be recorded separately then synced to the picture. The breakthrough was not only technological,

however. American media throughout the first decades of the network era (starting in 1952) operated largely as a monoculture. Television was dominated by the big three of CBS, ABC, and NBC. Portable video equipment changed how breaking news and current affairs were treated and disseminated. The types of subjects that were considered newsworthy expanded. Regular citizens and artists became documentarians of local events and political actions as they unfolded; creating alternative records. Liberated from sponsors, studios, executives, and other traditional gatekeepers, DIY practitioners sought to make their own news while becoming part of the news: a dream of two-way television. On the flipside, guerrilla TV lacked the means of distribution. The rigging of low-wattage pirate stations like Lanesville TV and the creation of citizen-run, public access television in the early 1970s (via a Federal Communications Commission mandate) provided solutions, but the reach was limited meaning the impact was minimal (specific to localized viewers).[219] Top Value Television was fairly unique in its ability to bridge mainstream American television and noncommercial production techniques, activist politics, and video art aesthetics; although shows like the NET-funded, magazine-style news program *Black Journal* (debuting in 1968), achieved similar syntheses of formal innovation and broad accessibility

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[219] For more on the history of public access TV, see DeeDee Halleck, "The Experience of Citizens' Television in the United States: Public Access/Public Sphere," in *Hand-Held Visions: The Impossible Possibilities of Community Media* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 97-108; online at: http://documentaryisneverneutral.com/words/ddhcittv.html

via public television. Like the most prominent writers of the New Journalism movement, TVTV's intersectional privilege as young, white, highly educated and primarily male journalists combined with their comic sensibility and enthusiasm for popular subject matter allowed the group to move more easily between establishment and avant-garde circles than other video artists and producers of that time.[220]

Consistently, TVTV's collective imagination was drawn to the intersecting vectors of celebrity culture, cult-of-personality, and large-scale social phenomena. *Lord of the Universe* (1974), the group's feature exposé on the 16-year-old Guru Maharaj Ji and his *Millennium '73* event held at the Houston Astrodome, was a critical and artistic success, and helped facilitate funding for future projects, including the group's Super Bowl documentary. *Lord of the Universe,* which followed Maharaj Ji for six weeks, aired on PBS and garnered a Dupont Award for Broadcast Journalism. Then, after a WNET-funded examination of the Watergate scandal and Nixon's impeachment was torpedoed by his resignation, the group pivoted into a four-part miniseries for PBS titled *Gerald Ford's America,* broadcast in January 1975. The project, which chronicled the early days of the Ford administration, gave TVTV license to drift around the Washington, D.C. political scene. They took their cameras into the White House, the D.C. party circuit, and the backrooms of Congress. Regular, ongoing

[220] For example, prior to co-founding TVTV, Michael Shamberg worked as a *Time/Life* correspondent.

proximity to the political establishment brought with it the threat of co-option. Which is perhaps why, later that year, they recorded a longform video interview with Abbie Hoffman, who, at the time, was evading a cocaine trafficking charge. *In Hiding: America's Fugitive Underground* (PBS, 1975) was heavily criticized, eliciting accusations of checkbook journalism.[221]

TVTV's other projects during this period convey a restlessness with the confined setting of mainstream politics and the format of political journalism. Moving further afield, the experimental ethnography *The Good Times Are Killing Me* (PBS, 1975) documented the culture of the Cajun people of rural Louisiana. *Adland* (PBS, 1974) critically explored the world of TV advertising. *Super Bowl*, which ostensibly focused on football mania, was followed by a Bob Dylan and Joan Baez concert doc for NBC, titled *Hard Rain* (aired September 14, 1976); and a behind-the-scenes, docufictional account of the Academy Awards, *TVTV Looks at the Oscars* (PBS, 1977), highlighted by Lily Tomlin performing dual roles: a Midwestern housewife named Judy Beasley, and herself. TVTV's final major project, *Super Vision,* was a serialized fictional history of television, created for PBS. NBC hired the group to remake *Super Vision* with a new cast, including John Belushi. The pilot aired October 21, 1977, but it was seen as a flop. The group disbanded soon after. Its final board meeting was held January 11, 1979.

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[221] The backstory of and public controversy surrounding *In Hiding* is detailed in Deirdre Boyle, "Furor over Fugitive," in *Subject to Change: Guerrilla Television Revisited* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 128-138.

Running the Wrong Pattern: *TVTV Goes to the Super Bowl*

What began as a decentralized, underground vehicle designed to signal-boost the voices and actions of hippies, Yippies, antiwar protestors, and other allies, had by the mid 1970s crossed streams with network entertainment programming. TVTV's move from San Francisco to Los Angeles was one indicator. *Super Bowl,* and its following exposé of the Academy Awards, further signaled the group's hybrid aspirations: "Just as journalism moved closer to entertainment, entertainment will move closer to journalism," Shamberg explained in a 1977 interview with *Variety* magazine.[222] The group's idea of injecting comedy into the sports media space, as part of its larger goal of satirizing and deconstructing commercial TV production, however, proved less effective than its unfettered interactions with the NFL players and their spouses. These extended, casual dialogues cast light on the everydayness of pro football and off-field, family life; revealing truths about the business of professional football entertainment. The video's most impressive accomplishment is in the way it humanizes its subjects; bringing pathos to a vocation—professional athletics—that is often disparaged as trivial and a modern day "opiate of the masses."

[222] Quoted in Jim Harwood, "Film Directors Get the Message: Tape is Becoming Competitive," *Variety*, September 12, 1977.

Hyped as the "largest portable video project ever attempted," TVTV's *Super Bowl* was commissioned by PBS for inclusion in its 1976 membership campaign, a two-week series of 22 special programs allied under the banner "Festival '76."[223] *Super Bowl* had a budget of $55,000; production support from the Los Angeles video group Great Balls of Fire and the WNET Television Lab; as well as the full cooperation of the NFL and CBS, the NFL's broadcast partner for Super Bowl X.[224] According to TVTV member Allen Rucker, the original plan was to make CBS Sports' coverage of the game their main story, that is, until the players, their partners, and their fans, emerged as more compelling subjects.[225]

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[223] Press release, "Video Documentary, 'Superbowl,' Takes an Irreverent, Behind-the-Scenes Look at Pro Football and Its Ultimate Event – Super X," WNET/13, February 25, 1976. TVTV Collection, Pacific Film Archive (PFA), Berkeley, California.
[224] Boyle, *Subject to Change,* 161. Great Balls of Fire was a partnership between Billy Adler and Van Schley. Schley, an artist turned baseball entrepreneur represents a unique embodiment of avant-garde/sports/entertainment crossover. In 1977, he bought the Texas City Stars, a minor league expansion outfit, and hired TVTV member Hudson Marquez to design the uniforms. The following year, following the collapse of the team's Lone Star League, Schley moved his players to Washington state, taking over operations of the minor league Grays Harbor Loggers. In the summer of 1978, Schley signed Bill Murray, then on hiatus after his first season as a cast member on *Saturday Night Live*, to play for the team. For more on this history, see "The Summer of Bill Murray," Foxsports.com, February 16, 2015 (updated March 4, 2020), https://www.foxsports.com/stories/other/the-summer-of-bill-murray
[225] C.W. Skipper, "TV Looks at Superbowl X, Trains," *The Houston Post*, April 8, 1976.

FIGURE 52. Christopher Guest introduces "Super Bowl IX ½" segment in *TVTV Goes to The Super Bowl* (Top Value Television, 1976).

FIGURE 53. Bill Murray announces "Super Bowl IX ½" pickup football game.

TVTV's approach to sports coverage deviated from conventional sports media in several key ways. Largely ignoring the game as a central focus, TVTV distributed its resources widely. The production employed a team of 42 people, many enlisted from sister media collectives like the Videofreex. Eight mobile crews, supplied with rental cars and color half-inch video cameras, rolled tape for ten consecutive days leading up to and including the big game; generating over 100 hours of footage. Their method, according to Rucker, was to "shoot at will and wait for stories to unfold."[226] This unscripted, verité style of approach is unusual for sports television, which tends to favor familiar storylines and patterns. As a hedge, and for additional flavor, an all-humor crew of improvisational actors —including Christopher Guest (FIG. 52), Bill Murray (FIG. 53), and Brian Doyle Murray, then of *National Lampoon Show* and *Howard Cosell Saturday Night* fame—was hired by TVTV to juice up interactions by posing as pseudo correspondents.[227] For one segment titled "Midnight in Miami," a black-and-white portapak, modified to record in low-light situations, was handed over to members of the Pittsburgh Steelers (FIGS. 54-55). Their after-dark videotape, emceed by star Pittsburgh Steeler wideout Lynn Swann, details a coquettish

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[226] Allen Rucker, letter to William Leggett of *Sports Illustrated,* March 2, 1976. TVTV Collection, PFA.
[227] For more on the history of ABC's *Saturday Night Live with Howard Cosell* program, see Vogan, *ABC Sports*, 165-68.

episode in the team's hotel—an aspect of the athletes' lives that is normally off-limits to fans (FIG. 56). In all, the 46-minute *Super Bowl* special offered a highly fragmented merger of new age documentary journalism and nonfiction entertainment. For me, its strangeness as a piece of television—its conspicuous unevenness, kaleidoscope of perspectives, abrupt juxtapositions, and tonal collisions—is inseparable from its effort to defamiliarize this popular American ritual.

FIGURES 54 and 55. Lynn Swann emcees "Midnight in Miami" segment, recorded by and featuring members of the Pittsburgh Steelers, who interact with their fans in their hotel.

FIGURE 56. Lynn Swann interviews a fan.

Within the field of sports media and film, TVTV's *Super Bowl* is perhaps most comparable to the documentary productions of NFL Films, which similarly employed a roving multi-camera approach while lavishing attention on the peripheral elements of the games, including fan cultures and expression. As Travis Vogan notes, NFL Films' pioneering deployment of mobile sideline cameras to "capture candid elements beyond the field, such as fans' reactions [etc.] … established greater awareness that in-stadium activities were being recorded and put on display."[228] NFL Films, which by that time had many well-established television properties, was assuredly a point of reference for TVTV's conception of the *Super Bowl* project. Despite being an NFL subsidiary that existed to promote, celebrate, and valorize the league, NFL Films also issued satirical takes on the sport through its *Football Follies* (1968) and subsequent blooper programs; as well as more measured, quasi-verité, character-driven productions such as *Pro Football: Pottstown, PA.* However, contrasting NFL Films, which favored the warmth and softness of 16mm color film, long telephoto lenses, and the dramatizing effects of close-ups, slow motion, symphonic music, and scripted narration, TVTV's aims were less calibrated towards narrativization, romance, and aestheticization. Exchanging the high-resolution image quality and versatility of motion picture film for the bulk quantity of analogue color and black-and-white videotape allowed TVTV to

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[228] Vogan, *Keepers of the Flame*, 19.

pursue conversation as a primary strategy; and delve deeper into the lives of its participants.

Super Bowl X was played at Miami's Orange Bowl Stadium on January 18, 1976. An invention of NFL commissioner Pete Rozelle, the Super Bowl, had become, by the mid 1970s the "most lucrative annual spectacle in American mass culture,"[229] and a national TV event. CBS paid $3.5 million for the rights to broadcast the game. 77 million people tuned in to see Pittsburgh defeat Dallas 21-17. Non-fans, meanwhile, could delight in the high concept advertisements, which cost $230,000 per minute to air. Michael Real's influential analysis of the 1974 Super Bowl broadcast as a para-literary, ideological text provides a useful context for considering the TVTV project. As the nation's most watched television event, the Super Bowl is laden with cultural significance. Much of this meaning, however, occurs at the level of symbolic form (i.e. seasonal ritual, heroic myth, communal participation), rather than as a manifestation of its content (i.e. a competitive football game). "Rather than mere diversionary entertainment," Real writes, the Super Bowl "can be seen to function as a 'propaganda' vehicle strengthening and developing the larger social structure."[230] TVTV's approach was to explore the game's structural and symbolic values as well as the experiences of its players and their families. "Super Bowl X… coinciding with America's 200th anniversary," Rucker explains,

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[229] Real, "Super Bowl," 31.
[230] Real, "Super Bowl," 42.

"was a perfect event for TVTV's impressionistic style of video… then as now, [the game] drew tons of coverage, most of which was commercial pandering and a straight-ahead broadcast of a football game. To TVTV, the game was the least important aspect of the whole media orgy… [We] wanted to capture the reality behind the hype."[231]

During the weeklong lead-up to the game, TVTV examined the game from many angles. Crews were assigned to each of the Super Bowl combatants—the Cowboys and Steelers players and their relationship to the home cities of Dallas and Pittsburgh. One crew tracked a group of "Steeler wives." Additional crews were dispatched to document the 100-member CBS broadcast team as they went through their buildup and preparation; looking at how television affects football and how the network approaches sports TV. Diehard Steeler fans receive a large measure of attention. Texas millionaire Ed Krump also figures prominently; TVTV follows the Dallas superfan as he flies 145 of his friends to the game on a chartered plane. In a typical TV sports program, fans and players' spouses, if given any attention at all, are fodder for visual cutaways but are seldom provided opportunities to speak their minds.

During the game itself, TVTV dispersed four crews into the stands and had one crew at field level roaming the sidelines, talking to players. These in-

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[231] Allen Rucker, "The Best Super Bowl Documentary You've Never Seen (Featuring Bill Murray, Groupies, and Bob Irsay Being a Dick)," *Deadspin,* February 2, 2013, https://deadspin.com/5981035/the-best-super-bowl-documentary-youve-never-seen-featuring-bill-murray-groupies-and-bob-irsay-being-a-dick/

game conversations with athletes, fans, and spouses, are not part of standard network football coverage but were in keeping with TVTV's holistic approach. The group also had access to the CBS production booth and footage from the CBS telecast, which occasionally appear in *Super Bowl.* While illustrative of TVTV's desire to peel back the curtain to reveal television's inner workings, this meta aspect of *Super Bowl* was in part inevitable. "We couldn't have recorded any of the game even if we had wanted to, Rucker explains. "CBS had the exclusive TV rights sewn up."[232] In a letter to the *Washington Star-News*' Bernie Harrison, Rucker emphasized the group's desire to look beyond the sporting contest itself, and the popular storylines emerging from it, but rather its outer and inner layers: "The program is not about the football game, which CBS took care of, but the business and social event that surrounded it."[233]

Also notable were things that were documented but excluded from the final broadcast edit: the parties, the excessive orchestration of Super Bowl week, the inflated pre- and postgame shows.[234] League and team executives are

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[232] Quoted in Win Fanning, "Nonsports Coverage at the Super Bowl," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette,* January 22, 1976.

[233] Allen Rucker, letter to Bernie Harrison of *Washington Star-News,* March 1, 1976. TVTV Collection, PFA.

[234] Although it sits far apart on the ideological spectrum TVTV's *Super Bowl* bears similarities in content and structure to Super Bowl pregame shows, which frequently highlight human interest stories and comedy segments. Lawrence Wenner's analysis of the pregame show that frames NBC's 1986 broadcast of Super Bowl XX demonstrates the variety of ways that the genre of wraparound programming differs from most television sports (i.e. the live coverage of athletic contests). As he notes, the pregame show is exclusively composed of *process*, rather than outcome. See Wenner, "The Super Bowl Pregame Show: Cultural Fantasies and Political Subtext," in Lawrence A. Wenner, ed., *Media, Sports, and Society* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1989), 157-179.

strangely absent as well, save for one scene where Baltimore Colts owner Robert Irsay likens the head of the NFL Players' Union to a clapping monkey toy. NFL commissioner Rozelle is nowhere to be seen. The footage logs for *Super Bowl* and the group's early press releases and correspondence with reviewers provides an expanded picture of what was left out of the video. "NFL Properties [the league's merchandising arm] cut us off entirely," Rucker explains, "and the party material, and a potentially devastating tale on [the Ford-sponsored Punt, Pass, Kick competition] were chopped because we simply ran out of editing time."[235] Also recorded but excluded: Segments on CBS's production meetings, the network's cocktail and variety show, the commissioner's party at Hialeah Racetrack, the CBS control room, Steeler fans watching the game in a Pittsburgh bar, a welcome home parade for the victorious team, NFL business meetings and merchandizing seminar, and a pro-am golf tournament.

Following the conclusion of Super Bowl X, TVTV had five weeks to edit and deliver a cut of the documentary to PBS. 110 hours of raw material was squeezed down to a 52-minute fine cut, which was further whittled to its final 46-minute version. In a letter to *New York Times* TV critic John J. O'Connor, Michael Shamberg maintained that "The program was finished only hours before it had to be at PBS in Washington… the deadline forced us to make expedient decisions rather than creative ones. We're still talking about how we'd like to re-

[235] Allen Rucker, letter to John Jeansonne of *Newsday*, April 12, 1976. TVTV Collection, PFA.

edit the show, given more time."[236] Deirdre Boyle, author of *Subject to Change: Guerrilla Television Revisited*, quips that "Rumors of cocaine in the editing suite remained unconfirmed."[237] In order to make its broadcast deadline, flow was sacrificed for a sometimes-arbitrary structure of mini-segments, each between one to three minutes in length (with some exceptions). These segments alternate between one-on-one conversations with Cowboy and Steelers players, which frequently explore the gloomier aspects of the sport, such as failure, exploitation, alienation, and injury; group interviews ("FANS," "STEELER WIVES"); and thematized vignettes ("SPORTS FACTS"). In the middle of the video, a longer segment, "SUPER BOWL IX ½" mock-covers a pickup touch football game played by members of the CBS broadcast team and retired stars like Johnny Unitas and Paul Hornung; with Bill Murray improvising color commentary. Most of the final third of the video is devoted to the Super Bowl gameday, including snippets of the on-field pregame show, game action from field level, clips of the CBS broadcast, postgame reactions, and candid conversations with players on the sidelines and Steeler spouses watching from the stands.

The video begins with footage of the pseudo-religious singing group Up with People performing "200 Years and Just a Baby," a song written for

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[236] Michael Shamberg, letter to John J. O'Connor of *The New York Times*, March 18, 1976. TVTV collection, PFA. Allen Rucker's opinion of the completed version varies slightly: "The program was a bitch to edit, but it came out pretty close to our expectations." Rucker, letter to Frank Swertlow of *TV Guide,* March 8, 1976. TVTV Collection, PFA.
[237] Boyle, *Subject to Change,* 162.

America's bicentennial, during the Super Bowl X halftime show.[238] After this opening sequence, which mixes in a sprinkling of clips from ensuing sections, we move into the Cowboys locker room. It's a week before the Super Bowl. Dallas Cowboys tight end Jean Fugett, easygoing, relaxed, and naked from the waste up, introduces the TVTV crew to his teammates, who seem less interested in the attention. A sequence with the fans, seemingly staged for the camera, on Miami Beach follows. Different fan groups show off their homemade banners and clothing items, bearing slogans such as "Gerela's Gorillas," "Jack Ham: Dobre Shanka," "From an Ugly Duckling… to a Beautiful Swan," "Dallas Ain't Shit," and a pair of panties imprinted with the phrase "Pull 'Em Down Pittsburgh."

Casual and flagrant sexism, which are never called into question by the people behind the cameras, recur throughout *Super Bowl*. Several of the spouses of Steeler players have a prominent role. They are first introduced as sexualized figures: displayed poolside in bikinis. However, while the camera lingers over their lounging, outstretched bodies, they pointedly articulate what the players themselves can't say, or say comfortably: That their husbands are underpaid in comparison to what the owners' rake in from their labor, that the work is risky and dangerous. Some also lament their own lack of professional opportunities in

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[238] For more on the cult-like group and its history of Super Bowl performances, see Jonathan Mahler, "Remembering Up With People: The Gayish Quasi-Cult that Invented the Super Bowl Halftime Show," *Deadspin,* February 1, 2013, https://deadspin.com/remembering-up-with-people-the-gayish-quasi-cult-that-5980867

comparison. (Unacknowledged is the fact that all of wives who are interviewed in the video are white). The "Super Bowl IX ½" segment that occurs midway through the video highlights Phyllis George, a member of the CBS broadcast team and one of the first women to co-host a network TV sports program. George had the career and profile that some of the featured spouses seem to aspire to. And yet even in this brief comedic set-up, George cannot escape the specter of sexism. While being interviewed by actor Bill Murray, his demeanor towards her is verbally and physically aggressive. He badgers her about what football player she would like to marry, then forcibly cajoles her into joining the pick-up game, which she is not dressed or otherwise prepared for. The objectifying treatment of George and the Steeler spouses, who voice many of the video's most salient critiques of the National Football League, is revealing of the double standards that underpin white patriarchal structures and systems of oppression. The problematic representations of gender and race that plague the video are by no means specific to TVTV's work, which reflexively and invisibly enacts a regulatory gaze via unarticulated power differentials. What is specifically problematic in these moments is how they compound heteronormativity, racial dominance, and gender inequality behind a veneer of social and cultural progressivism. In this sense, TVTV's *Super Bowl* sustains the matrices of domination and discrimination—overlapping, intersecting, routinized forms of control that condition identity and produce injustice—theorized by Black

feminist scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshaw, particularly with respect to marginalized individuals and groups.[239]

Super Bowl began airing on PBS affiliate stations in March 1976, less than two months after the game was played. A press release promoting the special explained that the program: "is about the culture of pro football, and only incidentally, the game itself. With a production staff of 43 people and a production style based on the advantages of newly-developed portable, small-scale videotape equipment, we attempted to discover the links between NFL football and the personal lives of players, wives, fans, businessmen, and network personalities. We covered all aspects of Super Bowl Week, and witnessed the game from the eyes of selected participants. The players, it turned out, were as open and candid as anyone we met."[240] The video was aired at various times in various markets between March 7th and March 21st and was widely reviewed in the mainstream press. All the major American newspapers published reviews. Critical opinion was divided. The Chicago broadcast was met with the headline "Super Fumble." "It's sad to report," a *Chicago Tribune* writer proclaims, that "the experimental group of brainy young video freaks, has fumbled a golden

[239] See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-1299. In the context of intersectionality, it's worth noting here that women of color are almost entirely absent from TVTV's *Super Bowl*.
[240] Allen Rucker, letter to Don Graham, *Washington Post* sports editor, March 1, 1976. TVTV Collection, PFA.

opportunity to prick the pomposity that permeates the perennial pigskin affair."[241] Described as an "ironic look at the pro football extravaganza," the program was excoriated for its lack of point of view: "It fails miserably to reflect the well-oiled hucksterism that persuades an enormous segment of America that the Super Bowl is a national shrine."[242] *The Wall Street Journal* was more enthusiastic, hailing *Super Bowl* as "a constantly arresting portrait of what has in 10 years become an American institution."[243] O'Connor, writing in *The New York Times*, found the video's visual organization and lack of identifying detail "occasionally confusing." Despite these flaws, however, "the overall occasion, the artificially inseminated annual ritual, is projected clearly and quite delightfully."[244] The majority of reviews identified the video's satire, exposing the "soft, raunchy underbelly" of Super Bowl X festivities and the game's hollow, corporatized character, as it's foremost achievement.[245] *Newsday*'s John Jeansonne, however, noted that "the 'irreverent, behind-the-scenes look' promised by the press release gets left out."[246] Rather than a comic takedown of an overhyped spectacle, TVTV's *Super Bowl* stands as a sober account of the inglorious labor conditions and exploitative dimensions of professional football.

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[241] Gary Deeb, "TVTV's Super Fumble," *Chicago Tribune*, March 10, 1976.
[242] Deeb, "TVTV's Super Fumble."
[243] Benjamin Stein, "A Syrupy Soaper and Two Winners," *The Wall Street Journal,* March 9, 1976, 20.
[244] John O'Connor, "Ebullient *Superbowl* is on Channel 1," *The New York Times,* March 15, 1976, 56.
[245] Dwight Newton, "Superbowl's Underbelly," *San Francisco Examiner,* March 19, 1976, 43.
[246] John Jeansonne, "Super Bowl Special: Not Special," *Newsday*, March 15, 1976.

Super Bowl: A Non-Zero-Sum Game

The remainder of this chapter examines how *TVTV Goes to the Super Bowl* subtly undermines the accepted mythology of American football. In doing so, the video, perhaps unwittingly, enacts a challenge to the dominant image of masculinity embodied and expressed in media coverage of pro football; a masculinity characterized by virility, toughness, compliance, technological mastery, and gender segregation. My analysis proposes that TVTV's *Super Bowl* complicates football's construction of manliness by refocusing on qualities of vulnerability, fallibility, and uncertainty within the homosocial arena, rather than the game's hallmark values, such as dominance, heroicism, success, and technocratic ingenuity.

In this sense, I argue that *Super Bowl* can be read as a counterhegemonic, counternarrative of American football, functioning as a glitch in the mass manufacture of cultural norms and mythic reification. By shifting focus away from the game itself to its production as a media event, and by centering the subjectivities of the players, treated here as individuated working people rather than synchronized, substitutable parts of a football line-up, or as sport-stars; TVTV's *Super Bowl* foregrounds occupational discourse against the backdrop of spectator athletics (FIG. 57). Fandom, depicted as both delirious frenzy and a creative folk practice, is offset by the measured, often diffident comments of the athletes. As the Dallas Cowboys' Harvey Martin (FIG. 58) says early on, "It's a job.

That's all it is… You gotta look at it like that, because you get paid for it."

Descriptions of football as hard, even dangerous physical labor resound. The split between work and play, and how they become dissolved in mediatized professional sports, is one of *Super Bowl'*s central themes. Unlike most of American life, here workplace and playground are seen as one and the same.

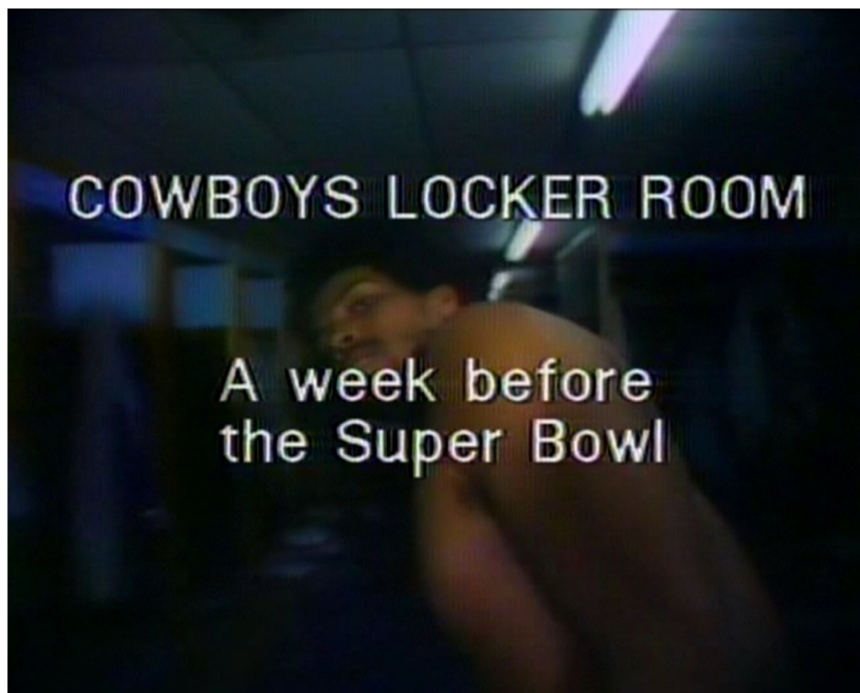

FIGURE 57. Jean Fugett guides TVTV crew members through the Dallas Cowboys' locker room.

FIGURE 58. “It's a job. That’s all it is.” Dallas Cowboys’ Harvey Martin is interviewed by TVTV.

I suggest TVTV’s *Super Bowl* can usefully be thought of as a *surrealist ethnography.* As James Clifford writes, in surrealist ethnography “The cuts and sutures of the research process are left visible; there is no smoothing over or blending of the work’s raw data into a homogeneous representation.”[247] *Super Bowl* collates documentation of a ten-day period captured in a mesh of transecting zones. The video’s ensemble production, with eight units each doing their own semi-autonomous thing; it’s five-week delivery turnaround, during

[247] James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Surrealism,” in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 146.

which 110 hours of footage was culled to 46 minutes; and the formal latitude bestowed by its noncommercial broadcast platform, all impacted on *Super Bowl*'s prismatic composition.

The resulting collage of satirical set pieces and sincere conversations, counter-posing the sport's more absurd aspects with explorations of football as quotidian, and a site of work, destabilize expectations of continuity, wholeness, and closure—qualities normally considered intrinsic to athletic contests and one-off televisions specials alike. "As a television program," one critic complained, TVTV's *Super Bowl* "lacks any recognizable viewpoint. Its focus and its energies are diffused; its moments of wit and/or insight so rare as to appear accidental."[248] On the other hand, in *Rethinking Visual Anthropology,* Marcus Banks and Howard Morphy emphasize that "the structuring of ethnographic film, especially those films produced for television, can impose a false fixity and narrative coherence on the fluidity of quotidian social interaction."[249] *Super Bowl*, a documentary made-for-TV by a band of experimental journalists and comedic actors, fails terribly at visual and narrative coherence. What results is a shaggy, frequently surprising piece of counterprogramming.

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[248] Dick Adler, "*Superbowl* Tackled in Semisatire," *Los Angeles Times*, March 17, 1976, F18.
[249] Howard Morphy and Marcus Banks, "Introduction: Rethinking Visual Anthropology," in Marcus Banks and Howard Morphy, eds., *Rethinking Visual Anthropology* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 18.

Contrasting the hyperbole and cinematic grandeur of some of NFL Films' best-known documentaries of the period, such as *Big Game America*, which aimed to elevate athletes and coaches into heroes and legends through heightened aesthetics and poetic, dehistoricized narration, in *Super Bowl* the players are not presented as larger-than-life but as individuals undergoing mental and physical struggles. Steelers defensive tackle Ernie Holmes talks about his anger issues. "I *am* moody," he admits. "Right now, I feel like breaking the mic. You know, take it and crush it. Beat it on the concrete. Put my sandals on and stomp it." Incidentally, earlier in his career Holmes had been charged with assault with a deadly weapon after firing a pistol at a highway patrol helicopter, wounding its pilot and prompting a police chase. He was sentenced to five months of probation and spent two months in a psychiatric hospital as a result.[250]

[250] See Roy Blount Jr., *About Three Bricks Shy… and the Load Filled Up: The Story of the Greatest Football Team Ever*, 30th anniversary edition (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004), 48-49.

FIGURE 59. Lynn Swann narrates his injury history for the TVTV cameras.

FIGURE 60. Unidentified TVTV crew member caresses a scar on Swann's lower back.

Numerous players narrate their extensive injury histories and broken-down bodies. “It’s hard work,” Dallas lineman John Fitzgerald explains as the camera inspects his damaged, mis-shaped elbow, fingers, and knee. “It’s physical labor. If you don’t like it, there’s just no use doing it.” Later on, Pittsburgh receiver Lynn Swann (FIG. 59), MVP of *Super Bowl* video and game alike, removes his shirt for the camera. “Notice that gorgeous body,” he remarks. “There’s nothing wrong with the front of my body.” He then turns to reveal scars on his back and arm, conceding at least three concussions as well. “I came up with the idea of interviewing their bodies,” TVTV’s Megan Williams explains. “They would undress for us,” another member recalls. “They would put their clothes on, take their clothes off, they’d show us their trophies and their scars.”[251] As Allen Rucker writes, “because no one had ever wanted to get close to the real event [i.e. the Super Bowl], TVTV had almost carte-blanche access.”[252] This amount of access to the players would be close to unfathomable for a group of media activist-artists today.

The camaraderie achieved during the making of *Super Bowl,* palpable in the video itself, is remarkable. As striking is the lack of attention given to race or to how racialized bodies circulate within the economy of American professional sports. There is no onscreen acknowledgment of the power dynamics that

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[251] Quoted in the documentary film *TVTV: Video Revolutionaries* (Paul Goldsmith, 2018).
[252] Rucker, “The Best Super Bowl Documentary You’ve Never Seen.”

underlie many of the interview setups. The video lacks the sort of self-reflexive "speaking nearby" that Trinh T. Minh-ha describes in reference to her own experimental nonfiction method: "A speaking that reflects on itself and [that] can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it."[253] It is not a question of who or what, as Trinh puts it, but of how. Again, Rucker emphasizes that TVTV "managed to get very close to the players and their wives—even though many of our crew were not football enthusiasts," noting that the Steelers "were much more relaxed in their relationships with one another and with us—particularly the black players, even though… we had no black production crew members in Miami."[254] Absent a mechanism for addressing the influence of its all-white crew on its subjects' behavior and the interaction dynamics, *Super Bowl,* at times, partakes in racial fetishism. In the segment with Swann, as he muses about his physical disfigurements, a white woman's hand pierces the frame (FIG. 60). The player's cropped body otherwise fills the screen. As the camera lingers in close-up, the interviewer's finger boldly traces along a scar on his lower back. The caress is tender, but it registers, also, as a violation. It's a touch made without permission, to a bare, intimate part of the body that really has nowhere else to go in that moment (Swann is positioned between a fence and the camera). It's the only such physical interaction between

[253] Quoted in Nancy N. Chen, "Speaking Nearby: A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-ha," *Visual Anthropology Review* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 87.
[254] Quoted in Fanning, "Nonsports Coverage at the Super Bowl."

crew member and player that we see anywhere in the video. One also senses an erotic charge to the encounter, which recalls an earlier scene in the Steelers hotel, in which a female fan is shown flirting with Swann and his teammates. Except in that case the players were the ones recording, and therefore had greater control over their own (self) representation.

The objectification and management of racialized Black and non-white bodies for white pleasure and economic gain is, of course, continuous with America's and the NFL's racist social order. In the above example Swann becomes unconsciously entangled in the historical construction of the Black male body as an object of discourse; evoking David Marriott's analysis of the role of the camera in "defining how black men are seen." As "Distorted and fantasmatic images of white desire," Marriott writes, "black men have been obliged to take part in a fatal scenario, consumed by what James Cameron [a Black man who survived lynching] calls the 'murderous appetite' of racist culture." Further, "These are appetites that *disfigure* us [Black men], indistinguishable from a gaping wound in our fantasies and dreams…"[255] Here, what is motivating, and what is at stake, in the interviewer's directive to "Show us your body and tell us what happened"?

To put it another way: What does it mean that a 42-person crew with no Black people on it is covering a sport in which all the team owners and

[255] David Marriott, *On Black Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 40-41.

executives are white, while more than two-thirds of the talent is Black/non-white? Or that the one Black woman to speak in the video, a Dallas cheerleader, does so in the 40th minute, close to the end, after the *featured* characters have already been established? My point is that for all its counterhegemonic efforts to reframe masculinity and to uncouple work and play, the video still participates in the reproduction of white dominant cultural values and hierarchies. And in a way, it reaffirms the ethnographer's position of privilege, inscribed as an othering gaze.

In her analysis of how Black sporting icons function within the complex circuitries of racial capital and entertainment culture, Nicole Fleetwood observes that "sports commentators regularly fetishize the black athlete in gleeful, erotic ways."[256] The visual representation and attendant judgment of kinetic, embodied blackness is an inescapable dimension of American sports texts. The hypervisibility of Black bodies in sports media coverage produces an excess that (typically white, male) play-by-play announcers and "color" analysts govern and assuage through their narration. Like many football films and media objects, TVTV's *Super Bowl* frequently gazes upon muscular, masculine Black bodies without attempting to acknowledge or ponder the sport's scopophilic pleasures or the implications and historical context of those pleasures. The video's establishing frame, which features an interviewer and cameraperson roaming,

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[256] Nicole R. Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 81.

unencumbered, through the Dallas Cowboys' postgame locker room, chatting up players as they get dressed, is one such example. Although TVTV's crew members are not sports commentators in a professional or even an operational sense, Fleetwood's remark bears on how Black athletes are depicted in *Super Bowl*: as objects of fascination. But these athletes also thwart and transcend the flattening effects of racial iconography, racialized athletic stereotypes, and sports film conventions. Their individual, intertextual, multifaceted personas break through what Thomas Oates refers to as the conservative white male hegemony of pro football's commercialized narratives.[257] TVTV's most successful move was to pass the mic. The Cowboys' Jean Fugett, who acts as a willing interlocutor and guide during the video's opening locker room scene, and who candidly converses with TVTV members on the sidelines before and *during* the Super Bowl game, and the Steelers' Lynn Swann are the most prominent examples of this.

The fact that Swann commands special attention in *Super Bowl* is significant. At the time of production, Swann was an ascendant star receiver; two years into his NFL career after a high-profile, All-American tenure at the University of Southern California. On the field, Swann was one of football's most athletically graceful performers renowned for his acrobatic catches. Swann attributed his success in football to his training as a dancer. Off the field, Swann's

[257] See Oates, *Football and Manliness*.

charisma and loquaciousness enabled him to surpass being identified and admired solely on the basis of his corporeal excellence (he went on to have a long career as a broadcaster and television host). As Fleetwood asserts, "The [American] professional athlete is akin to a national hero whose physical prowess and abilities are admired and praised by many. The black athlete has represented these attributes, as well as vexed notions of spectacles and threat, since the integration of professional sports."[258] Despite its brief running time, TVTV gives space to select participants to broaden the terms of their on-screen presentation and performance, as we see with Fugett, who comes across as affable, engaging, and self-reflective in his moments of screen time, as well with Swann. In *Super Bowl,* the *characters* of Fugett and Swann operate as both subjects and objects of their own authoring.

Super Bowl as Mythic Spectacle and Mass Ornament

Michael Real argues that a Super Bowl broadcast, which "combines electronic media and spectator sports in a ritualized mass activity," "reveals specific cultural values proper to American institutions and ideology," and "is best explained as a contemporary form of mythic spectacle."[259] He concludes that "If one wanted to create from scratch a sport that reflected the sexual, racial, and organizational priorities of American social structure, it is doubtful that one

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[258] Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons*, 11.
[259] Real, "Super Bowl," 31.

could improve on football."[260] It goes without saying, American tackle football is a sport dominated by obsessively competitive, straight men. To be an openly gay gridder is nearly unfeasible. At the ownership and administrative levels of professional football, structural inequity is a defining feature. Although the majority of NFL pros are Black, roughly 60%, almost all the NFL's team owners are white. Of the leagues' 32 franchises, none are owned by African Americans. According to the sports business website *Front Office Sports*, only two people of color hold a majority ownership stake: Kim Pegula, who is Korean American, co-owns the Buffalo Bills, while the Jacksonville Jaguars' Shad Khan, of Pakistan descent, is the only non-white controlling owner in the NFL.[261] Even in 2023, nearly all of the NFL's primary decision-makers—the head coaches (82%) and general managers (72%)—are white. And as a game of highly coordinated systems and patterns, American football is reflective of logistical capitalism, technological adaptation, and "the distinctly modern American concept of specialization."[262] Football's embodiment of American economic, social, and political values has helped to naturalize the game as American myth.

Roland Barthes describes myth as "a system of communication… a message… a mode of signification, a form."[263] Barthes definition echoes forth in

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[260] Real, "Super Bowl," 38.
[261] A.J. Perez, "NFL Offers Up First NFL Owner Diversity Report," *Front Office Sports*, March 28, 2023, https://frontofficesports.com/nfl-offers-up-first-nfl-owner-diversity-report/
[262] MacCambridge, *America's Game*, 85.
[263] Roland Barthes, "Myth Today" (1957), in *Mythologies,* translated by Richard Howard and Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013), 217.

Althusser's description of ideology as a "system (possessing its own logic and rigor) of representation (images, *myths*, ideas or concepts as the case may be) existing and having a historical role within a given society."[264] Althusser's theory proposes that hegemonic power reproduces itself by obscuring traditional forms of repression and incorporating individuals into the power structure, a system that there is no way out of. The political theorist Antonio Gramsci, Sut Jhally points out, uses the concept of hegemony differently, to argue that the conditions of class domination are historically determined and never absolute or invariable.[265] Gramsci thus provides another way for thinking about the relationship of culture, ideology, and class that doesn't deny human agency; through the formation of counterhegemonic projects. I maintain that TVTV's *Super Bowl* is one such example.

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[264] Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (New York: Vintage, 1970), 231. Emphasis added.
[265] Sut Jhally, "Cultural Studies and the Sports/Media Complex," in *Media, Sports, and Society*, edited by Lawrence A. Wenner (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1989), 74-75.

FIGURE 61: Up with People perform during the Super Bowl X halftime show, as seen in *TVTV Goes to the Super Bowl.*

As noted above, *Super Bowl* begins with the settler colonial anthem, “200 Years and Just a Baby.” The song, written and performed as a tribute to America’s bicentennial by a crusading vocal troupe (Up with People), was the centerpiece of a halftime extravaganza that linked football with national myth (FIG. 61). Myth is commonly understood today as a traditional story, told again and again, that attempts to explain the foundation of a social phenomenon or history of a people. A myth gains cogency through repetition and underspecification (abstractness). Detail, specificity, difference, nuance, are sanded down, blurring into familiar patterns and types. (Consider the established conventions of the annual Super Bowl telecast, with its pre-game

military flyovers and extravagant anthem renditions, to its mid-game song-and-dance spectacles, to its postgame confetti-fueled trophy ceremony, all of which now feel rote and expected). This brings me, finally, to Sigfried Kracauer's concept of the "mass ornament." Writing in the late-1920s, the German theorist analyzes a change that was then taking place within the field of physical culture, which mirrored the social and economic transformations brought on by industrialized capitalism. In the images of the Tiller Girls, a British dance troupe famous for its harmonized leg kicks, and the pageantry of mass rhythmical gymnastics, Kracauer identifies a process by which individuals are subsumed into pattern, producing a precisely coordinated whole. These arrays of bodies-in-motion, operating as one unified "mass ornament" match the coordinating logic of American football quite uniquely. Football's highly bureaucratized and systematic organization doesn't allow for the same degree of improvisational flourishes that more free-flowing team sports like soccer and hockey engender. Real notes that "as even the simplest play diagram reveals, football's temporal and spatial confinement demands the most regimented and intricately coordinated forms of activity."[266] In Kracauer's model, sports contribute to the maintenance of political hegemony by turning bodily activity into something that can be programmed and consumed.

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[266] Real, "Super Bowl," 38.

A Super Bowl is, in many ways, an exemplary mass ornament; by which I mean, a perfect aesthetic seduction. Or as one sportswriter put it: "all appearance and little substance."[267] It provides a multitude of closely-knit patterns: from the scripted plays and commercial breaks to the heavily choreographed halftime show, every part of the production is perfected and rendered familiar. The source of its power and identification *is* the mediated display. As Kracauer notes, the ornament is empty at its core. Mass ornaments are irrealities: "mythological cult[s] wrapped in abstractness."[268] Through visual description of the backstage of pro football, the fan engagement that drives its success, and the media-amplified circus atmosphere of Super Bowl week, TVTV positions the football *game* as one part of a complex formation. By juxtaposing satire and sincerity, by bringing us closer to the inner lives of the players, and by portraying supporters as creative cultural producers, *Super Bowl* carves out an ambivalent position, a crack in the mass ornament. Stuart Hall demonstrated that there are contradictory aspects to all cultural forms. Sport may be a socializer of dominant values and an instrument of power, but it is also a source of identity, passion, pleasure, and enjoyment. This is why an intervention like TVTV's *Super Bowl,* as an instantiation of surrealist ethnography, working across aesthetic, sensual, emotional, and critical registers; cutting Super Bowl attractions with introspective testimony, is such a fascinating object. By turning

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[267] Jeansonne, "Super Bowl Special: Not Special."
[268] Sigfried Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament," *New German Critique* 5 (Spring 1975): 74.

the camera away from the game, TVTV gives us a fresh view of a mostly predictable media event.[269] "The surrealist moment in ethnography is that moment in which the possibility of comparison exists in unmediated tension with sheer incongruity," Clifford writes.[270] In response to a writer who penalized *Super Bowl* for lacking a critical edge, Allen Rucker explained that they "limited [their] assault on the silliness of the event and the politics of the NFL to give more time to the players… who's [sic] personal lives said more to us about football than anything else."[271] This shift in attention is commendable, but invites getting even closer, a turn of the lens, let's call it, a buttonhook in. In attending more closely to the very threads of engagement, one might begin to undo the patterns that impose a false fixity.

Conclusion

TVTV's work stands apart from other guerrilla television ventures in its ambition to disrupt and needle monocultural media from within. Unlike community-based forums such as *Inside Bedford Stuyvesant* or the Videofreex's Lanesville TV, which addressed local issues and citizen concerns; or the activist

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[269] Janet Jackson's "wardrobe malfunction" during the 2004 Super Bowl halftime show is an exception that reveals American cultural and racial priorities under patriarchy. The fallout from the "Nipplegate" controversy, stoked by right wing activists, effectively derailed Jackson's career and diminished her stardom. Justin Timberlake's career and reputation, on the other hand, were largely unaffected.
[270] Clifford, "On Ethnographic Surrealism," 146.
[271] Allen Rucker, letter to John Voorhees of *Seattle Times,* April 12, 1976. TVTV Collection, PFA.

Paper Tiger Television and DIVA TV projects of the 1980s, which provided radical alternatives to mainstream news coverage, bringing forward marginalized perspectives; TVTV interventions sought engagement in and with the mass media sphere. Through parody, subjectivity, and a relaxed informal style, TVTV's televisual creations opened up a space of playful critique, pitched to a broad viewership. At the same time, their *Super Bowl* tele-doc also reveals some of the limits of the nonfiction entertainment and meta-media models that TVTV helped pioneer; which, as Rick Prelinger notes, influenced a range of programs and forms, from sketch comedy shows like *Saturday Night Live* to reality television to *The Daily Show*.[272] By focusing attention on the politics of the media and its spectacular distractions rather than the protests in the streets and their countering forces, TVTV stopped short of addressing social inequities. In *Super Bowl,* the nexus of class, economics, race, and gender in American football and its mediated forms, distinguished by an overwhelmingly asymmetrical and exploitative relationship of white ownership/control and Black labor—a primary source of football's staggering commercial success—goes largely unexamined. However, despite the video's blind spots and its absorption into opposing playbooks, TVTV's (anti-) game plan—to highlight the lives, observations, and anxieties of those with the most at stake, whose on-field

[272] Rick Prelinger, "The Revolutionary Glowing Rectangle," Preserving Guerrilla Television, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, August 10, 2020, https://guerrillatv.bampfa.berkeley.edu/essays/2020-08-10_rick-prelinger-revolutionary-rectangle.html

success is at best a thin shield from the enduring threat of racialized violence, over the narrative of winners and losers—remains more salient than ever.[273]

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[273] *Super Bowl*'s concepts and techniques can be found, for instance, reflected in the more lighthearted products of NFL Films, such as its *Football Follies* series and "Highlights for Highbrows" parodies of the 1980s and 90s; in *Monday Night Football*'s attempts to add comedic elements to its broadcasts; and in contemporary docu-series such as *Hard Knocks* and *Last Chance U*, which humanize football pros and aspiring small-school collegians (albeit for the sake of upping the dramatic stakes of the storytelling).

THIRD TIMEOUT

Formations

Gap-angle down, 17, dummy stitch.

Link to video: https://vimeo.com/191252646

"The exemplary spectator has his occasional lusts, but not for warfare, hardly at all for that. No, it's details he needs—impressions, colors, statistics, patterns, mysteries, numbers, idioms, symbols. Football, more than other sports, fulfills this need. It is the one sport guided by language, by the word signal, the snap number, the color code, the play name..." (Don DeLillo, *End Zone*)

CHAPTER FOUR

Breaking Formations: Football Media as Site of Counterhegemonic Play and Display

In his landmark 1955 essay "American Sports: Play and Display," Gregory Stone observes that while games have previously been used to understand human behavior (as in game theory), insufficient attention has been paid to how social, cultural, and economic factors impacted upon play.[274] Play, which he implicitly links with leisure activity and amateurism, and its more regulated, rule-bound variant, sport, have been ignored by social scientists, Stone notes. One reason, he suggests, is that Americans are uneasy with play and leisure due to reasons of class and social organization. This he connects to the *contestedness* of the sporting contest, which manifests tensions that bely its seemingly lighthearted character: *It's only a game!* To summarize, "Play is often conceived in archaic restraint and carried on in frenzies of unrestraint."[275] Onto this ambivalent relationship we can overlay the massification of spectator sports arising in the late 19th century, which redirected energies from recreational activity to mediated consumption. Stone relates this shift to midcentury patterns of urbanization, post-industrialization, and the growth of the American middle class, which had a different relationship to the folk traditions and activities

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[274] Stone, "American Sports," 83.
[275] Stone, "American Sports," 84.

inherited from Europe. His primary argument is that once sport became organized and targeted towards mass audiences, which the domestic television boom following World War II helped facilitate, and were no longer orientated solely towards amateur participants, *play* (unscripted, spontaneous, modest) becomes subordinated to *display* (prearranged, staged, spectacular). Sport, as a separate and distinct form of play, in effect becomes play's opposite: work. Governed by industrial, managerial, and commercial concerns, and adopted into the current of radio and TV programming, sport becomes fully an industry; one that is integrated into a broader *sports-media complex*,[276] or what the cultural critic Varda Burstyn terms the *sports nexus*.[277]

A dividing line for Stone is when games give way to theatricalization and professionalization. In his view (echoing Adorno) consumption without participation corrupts play, undermining its intrinsic social and creative values. At the level of everyday life, loosely structured, "unpredictable and uncertain" games, which Adorno hailed for their *purposelessness*, increasingly yield territory to "predictable and certain" spectacle.[278] The emphasis on sport's

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[276] Jhally, "Cultural Studies and the Sports/Media Complex," 70-93.
[277] For Varda Burstyn, the "sports nexus" describes a web of lucrative "interdependent relationships between the athletic, industrial, and media sectors" that combines cultural and economic influence to generate and assert an elitist, hypermasculine account of power and social order. See Burstyn, *The Rites of Men: Manhood, Politics, and the Culture of Sports* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 4.
[278] Stone, "Play and Display," 98. Grant Farred uses the term "pseudo-events" to underline the planned and predictable nature of most organized sporting contests, in contrast to "events," which are rare moments of (violent) rupture that open up holes in the otherwise smooth functioning space-time of professional sports. See Farred, *In*

transformation into media spectacle across the middle-third of the 20th century, joins Stone's analysis of American sport and its televisual diffusion with Kracauer's "mass ornament," Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia* (1938) and the creation of epic sports filmmaking, Debord's theory of spectacle,[279] and the Frankfurt School's critique of mass culture, in particular Horkheimer and Adorno's "culture industry" thesis.

The National Football League's postwar development as a multiplatform American mass cultural product coincides with an inflection point in thinking about sport, which Stone's essay forecasts. The 1960s saw a rise in interest in the subject across intellectual disciplines and bodies of thought, from semiology, to sociology, cultural theory and criticism, and communication studies. Not coincidentally, this is also an era when televisions became a common appliance in American homes; and one in which athlete activism and the politicization of sport were gaining visibility, which stoked the flames of nascent hot-take sports discourse. (The apotheosis of such visibility—John Carlos and Tommie Smith's raised fist Black Power salute at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City—was iconographic by design, carefully planned and choreographed to circulate as a media image in the global sphere.) Attempts to define sport and explicate its

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Motion, At Rest: The Event of the Athletic Body (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

[279] Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Red and Black, 1977) contains one mention of sport. In "Unity and Division within Appearances," thesis 62, he describes competitive sports and elections as examples of "trivial confrontations" that are designed to exacerbate social divisions through "false archaic oppositions, regionalisms and racisms" (no pagination).

social significance were prevalent throughout the decade.[280] "What is sport?" is the opening question of Roland Barthes's narration for the National Film Board of Canada's made-for-TV cine-essay *Of Sport and Men*. For Barthes, spectator sports fulfill the purpose of theater in previous eras, as shared public rituals that provide an outlet for the sublimation of violent impulses. I contend that tackle football, with its once-a-week schedule (making for appointment television), dramatic staging (from "Friday night lights" to *Monday Night Football* to the Super Bowl), and refined physicality, serves such a role for American audiences. I am also interested in how the "unfree consumption" of football as a signal product of the American culture industry is set into relief by (commercially) "purposeless" avant-garde explorations of the game's amateur performers and milieus.

This chapter examines a set of artistic mediations that challenge the hyper-masculinist, zero-sum nature of American football as typically expressed in popular media depictions of the sport. These alternative representations include Nathaniel Dorsky's lyrical short film *A Fall Trip Home* and Kevin Jerome Everson's minimalist film documents, *Home* and *Tygers*. Juxtaposing these objects with two works of the mainstream television and movie industries, NFL Films' made-for-ESPN documentary *Autumn Ritual* and the biographical sports

[280] Marshall McLuhan devotes considerable discussion to sports in *Understanding Media* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964). Cf. John Loy, "The Nature of Sport: A Definitional Effort," *Quest* 10, no. 1 (1968): 1-15; Harry Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (New York: Free Press, 1970).

drama *Rudy*, my analysis proposes that the unconventional, nonnarrative films of Dorsky and Everson gently tease apart and unsettle football's construction of manliness; a masculinity that is most often grounded in physical dominance (and submission) and the successful, forceful appropriation of land as a path to victory. Emphasizing tenderness, eroticism, community, and practice, these films, like TVTV's *Super Bowl*, resist mythic reification and heroicism; instead focusing on football's unheralded participants, everydayness, and quiet enjoyments. Drawing on concepts such as homosociality, failure, and uselessness, I aim to demonstrate how these works inflect the specular appeal and affective and social pleasures of American football in new and surprising ways. By resisting the narrative demand for closure (i.e. a winner), these works join a corpus of experimental media works that reframe American football as a field of critical/aesthetic exploration and possibility.

***Autumn Ritual*: Ernie Barnes Breaks Free**

For over 50 years, NFL Films has played a key role in shaping the NFL's image and ideological discourse, a fact the company's founders openly acknowledge. "We're myth-makers," Steve Sabol asserted. "We help quench the public's thirst for heroes."[281] This emphasis on myth or valor has side effects though: for one, it

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[281] Quoted in Tom Gilmore, "The Homeric Myth-Makers of NFL Films," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 16, 1985.

transforms the brutal reality of football's violence into a hyperreal simulation.[282] In turn, it overrides our perception of players as embodied participants in a flesh-and-blood material endeavor. Nowhere is this more evident than in the NFL Films tele-documentary *Autumn Ritual,* which unintentionally discloses many of the NFL's underlying attitudes towards labor, gender, class, race, and player safety, which has varied only a little in the 30 years since the film's original broadcast even if the NFL's institutional practices and rhetoric have adjusted to meet the times.[283]

Autumn Ritual begins with a series of computer-generated title cards that freeze the film's main concerns into a chain of proclamations. Each phrase is also read by separate offscreen, distinctively marked voices, as the words appear onscreen, augmented by fantastical audio chimes: FOOTBALL IS THE AUTUMN RITUAL (voiced by a stentorian male narrator); IT IS AS MODERN AS COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY (nerdy male voice); AS PRIMITIVE AS A TRIBAL

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[282] In recent decades, fantasy football leagues, which often employ an "auction" draft format, and blockbuster video games like *Madden NFL* have further contributed to this dehumanization. Chuck Klosterman makes this case in relation to fantasy football in "The Chris Johnson Problem," *Grantland*, September 27, 2012, http://grantland.com/features/fantasy-football-destroying-our-perceptions-nfl-athletes/

[283] The NFL's mishandling of several domestic violence incidents in recent years is a case in point. The NFL's nebulous Personal Conduct Policy, introduced in 2007, provides the league commissioner with broad powers to discipline players for acts of sexual assault, domestic violence, child abuse, and other criminal offenses. However, the policy is enforced inconsistently, opaquely, at times arbitrarily. Or sometimes not at all—until a situation becomes a public relations (i.e. image management) problem, which calls to mind Sara Ahmed's concept of nonperformativity. See Ahmed, "The Nonperformativity of Antiracism," *Meridians* 7, No. 1 (2006): 104-126.

CHANT (heavily accented, vaguely African male voice); A SPORT AS DISTINCTIVE AS THE AMERICAN CHARACTER (crisp white-coded female voice); THIS FILM EXAMINES THE ESSENCE OF FOOTBALL (a voice that sounds like George Will's); FROM A VIEWPOINT OUTSIDE THE ARENA (archetypal white male sportscaster voice). It then dissolves between ethnographic footage of an African youngster alone among a crescent of grass huts and a low angle shot of New York Giants football players sauntering towards a stadium pitch flanked by lines of female cheerleaders. These contrasting streams of exoticized otherness and exaggerated Americanness, where the males are spatially centered as the point of focus and displayed as larger than life, are extended and intercut with talking head clips explaining the cultural importance of games ("We create things in societies that we need" and so on). The rhythmic chanting of children (again, marked as African) bridge images of slender, uncovered Black bodies running amongst livestock in an open vista, and burly, fully clothed or uniformed football bodies jogging, warming up, and engaged in competition. Games "give us a place to experiment with who we might be," an offscreen voice tells us.

From there, the film implies universalized correlations between the cultural practices of the (stock) African villagers, who we watch playfighting with sticks, covering their bodies with white pigment, and dancing; the football men, seen shoving after a stoppage in play, having eye-black applied, clapping, bouncing, and celebrating in the locker room; and their spectators, who mug for the camera with faces painted green and white in symbiosis with their home

team. The sequence culminates with the unexpected pairing of Allen Ginsberg (football is "kind of healthy," he concludes, but "has no earthly purpose") and Nixon Watergate operative G. Gordon Liddy, credentialed as a "Security Systems Analyst." After Liddy informs the viewer that "Football is preparation for life, for many people. It is life itself, for those who play it," ghostly, computer simulated football figures appear, seemingly descending into a pitch-black void. Although we're told here that football is life itself, and that "you live by feeling" the lifeless, floating phantasms liken NFL professionals to anonymous, less than human, 3D renderings. These computer graphics, which associate football with sophisticated imaging technology—a combination that remains foundational to the game's televisual appeal—provide the background for the documentary's title credits. The opening sequence climaxes with an exaggerated super-slow-motion football spike—a symbolic ejaculation?—as a bow-tied, performatively excited psychiatrist (W. Walter Menninger) exclaims "That's the autumn ritual!"

FIGURE 62. *Autumn Ritual* (Phil Tuckett, 1986).

Produced as a one-off special for ESPN, *Autumn Ritual* proceeds as a string of interviews with an eccentric mix of specialists from "outside the arena." Highlights of various kinds—spectacular catches, vicious hits, follies—illustrate and structure the expert's testimonies. On closer inspection, the film's subject group reveals a less than truly diverse or representative cast. The people interviewed fall into a handful of overlapping categories:

ARTISTS AND CREATIVE PRODUCERS, including Ginsberg; the composer Philip Glass, musicians Phil Collins, Max Weinberg, and heavy metal singer Ronnie James Dio; fashion designer Bill Blass; Cleveland Ballet regisseur Roni Mahler; choreographer and director of the Dance Theatre of Harlem Arthur

Mitchell; and writers Roy Blount Jr. and George Plimpton, both of whom wrote well-reviewed books about the world of professional football.

ACADEMICS AND KNOWLEDGE SPECIALISTS, including the philosopher and transformation theorist George Thomas Ainsworth Land; the psychiatrist Walter Menninger; the theologian Michael Novak; the film and pop culture scholar Stuart Kaminsky; the linguist Tim Jay; the pollster George Gallup; and the sports psychologist Steve DeJulio.

POLITICAL FIGURES AND COMMENTATORS, including Liddy; the congressman Jack Kemp (a former NFL QB); the Christian evangelist and conservative activist Jerry Falwell (Sr.); and the conservative pundit George Will.

CONTEMPORARY AND RETIRED PLAYERS, COACHES, AND/OR BROADCASTERS, including Kellen Winslow, Mike Singletary, Lynn Swann, Ernie Barnes (featured mainly for his work as a painter), Larry Csonka (also credited as an entrepreneur), Art Donovan (also credited as a World War II veteran), Fred Dryer and Alex Karras (both listed as actors), Sam Wyche, Bill Curry, John Madden, and Brent Musberger.

It's revealing that a third of the film's subject group were current (at the time) or former professional players and coaches—not exactly outside the arena. 30 of the 35 commentators are white; only one is female (the ballerina Roni Mahler). Of the five non-white interview subjects, four are African American NFL pros, the other being dance choreographer Arthur Mitchell. This demographic composition speaks to the institution's pervasive white male point-of-view.

Moreover, in its selection and arrangement of interviewees, *Autumn Ritual* reifies a longstanding essentializing "media discourse of 'black brawn vs. white brains.'"[284] The film also contains it's one female respondent and one Black non-player within the explicitly feminized sphere of contemporary dance. Queer voices are sidelined and undercut. Blass is enlisted to compare football uniform design to the costumes of ancient Greek and Roman performers, but the film implicitly makes fun of high fashion and extravagant style through ironic editing juxtapositions and use of disco music. Ginsberg functions as comic relief.

The most interesting segment of *Autumn Ritual* features Ernie Barnes, a retired offensive lineman who played in the NFL for five seasons (from 1960 to 1964). However, Barnes's second identity as a painter isolates him from his athletic peers (he's captioned as "Artist / Former Player"—a split figure) (FIG. 63). Unlike the interviews with his fraternity of former and current players, which are filmed against a neutral background using even, three-point lighting, Barnes's segment takes place in his studio, in natural light. His placement in an everyday work environment links him more with the creative producers and academics, who are usually depicted in their idiosyncratic vocational spaces.

[284] Matthew W. Hughey and Devon R. Goss, "A Level Playing Field? Media Constructions of Athletics, Genetics, and Race," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 661 (September 2015): 182.

FIGURE 63. Former NFL lineman Ernie Barnes in his studio.

The mise-en-scène stages Barnes among his canvases, sketching at an easel. As he describes his artwork, the camera pans to one of his paintings (none are identified by title) of a chaotic on-field scrum, then dissolves to show a second football piece, dissolving again into a detail of a third. In all these paintings, the bodies of players are portrayed as unnaturally, almost grotesquely large, out of anatomical proportion, and bulging, while their faces are obscured either by face masks or by the way the figures are positioned in the compositions; looking down or away. Next, the film cuts to a medium shot of Barnes seated, his face partially shrouded in shadow. As he speaks a montage of loosely connected shots from the archive is matched to the story of his transition from lineman to painter: "Before I retired, actually retired, I was beginning to

look at a game of football through the eyes of an artist. I was studying the angles, of the man that I had to play against. What his pads looked like, as it moved down to his feet. The light from the stadium hitting the field from a certain angle. The shadows being cast. The blood, and the grass stains… All of these things I started to look at while I'm listening for an audible from the quarterback. When all of this was happening, I knew it was time for me to make my exit." A fast-paced dissociated montage of game footage, set to unearthly, minor key ambient synth music, builds on Barnes's gloomily poetic account. The section concludes with a return to Barnes's words and images. "When you get 11 people, 22 in all, moving against each other, and you see the rhythms of a guy breaking through the line, and his movements, no other word fits but 'artist.' He has become an artist." It's left ambiguous whether Barnes is suggesting that the football player's improvisational eloquence (here we see a kick returner weaving through the open field for a touchdown) is an artform, or whether he's referring to his own transformation. Significantly, the final image we see before a fade to black is not one of Barnes's football canvases but rather a painting of a (white) sprinter victoriously crossing a finish line. The film thus deflects attention from his visual critique of football's subjugation and depersonalization of its participants and sublimates his haunted feelings about the game through a depiction of white achievement in a different sport.

The placement of this scene and its sound design are instructive. It occurs a little way past the midpoint of *Autumn Ritual*, and immediately follows and

contrasts a spectacular time-lapse shot that condenses an entire gameday into a single minute, underscored by a buoyant, upbeat Philip Glass composition. Barnes's profile, on the other hand, is supported by dissonant, atonal electronic music and unintelligible choral chanting. As he describes the hostility and aggression that football fostered in him, which he observed on the field and translated into his paintings of distorted, entangled, broken, and elongated gladiatorial bodies, a feeling of psychological disturbance is generated through sound.

FIGURE 64. Detail of an unidentified Ernie Barnes's painting, as seen in *Autumn Ritual*.

Barnes's section is a cut within the text of the film, a moment where cheap humor recedes, and a contemplative sorrow unsettles its previously established tone and temporality. The homoerotic energy and violent terror that Barnes's paintings simultaneously elicit can hardly be contained by the film. It is as though his art has disclosed a truth and exposed a reality (echoed in his commentary) that the film itself cannot easily disavow. Throughout *Autumn Ritual*, contemporary and retired players are most often employed as anecdotal storytellers, parceling out entertaining sound bites, rather than as contemplative subjects. Despite their firsthand knowledge of the game, they are not the experts of the film; they provide the color commentary that acts as a relief to the philosophical musings of the white intellectuals. Barnes duality as an athlete/artist, an insider/outsider, disrupts the film's hierarchy of racialized expertise and threatens to derail an otherwise lighthearted and whimsical sponsored documentary. A film, it should be noted, that frequently objectifies and fetishizes male bodies without attempting to consciously acknowledge or ponder football's scopophilic pleasures. For instance, "consider the extent to which football gear accents the male physique," writes anthropologist William Arens. "The donning of the required items results in an enlarged head and shoulders and a narrowed waist, and the lower torso poured into skintight pants accented only by a metal codpiece. The result is not an expression but an

exaggeration of maleness."[285] This could be a description of Barnes's paintings. Sport, Margaret Morse points out, is the only situation (within heterosexual culture) in which men are permitted to look at other men, where the male body "is a legitimate object of the male gaze."[286] I turn now to a film that begins from the premise of *Autumn Ritual*'s unconscious/unthought questions, of what's at stake in men's desire to look at other men, and how that voyeuristic impulse is mediated and redirected by the moving image.

Autumn Erotic: Nathaniel Dorsky's *Fall Trip Home*

> In the Shreve High football stadium,
> I think of Polacks nursing long beers in Tiltonsville,
> And gray faces of Negroes in the blast furnace at Benwood,
> And the ruptured night watchman of Wheeling Steel,
> Dreaming of heroes.
>
> All the proud fathers are ashamed to go home,
> Their women cluck like starved pullets,
> Dying for love.
>
> Therefore,
> Their sons grow suicidally beautiful
> At the beginning of October,
> And gallop terribly against each other's bodies.
>
> - James Wright, "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio" (1963)

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[285] William Arens, "An Anthropologist Looks at the Rituals of Football," *The New York Times*, November 16, 1975, 238.

[286] Margaret Morse, "Sport on Television: Replay and Display," in E. Ann Kaplan, ed., *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches – An Anthology* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1983), 45.

In American culture, fall is virtually synonymous with football. An evidently irresistible cultural form despite our awakened comprehension of its traumatic aftereffects, mediation is essential to the game's popular appeal. This makes sense, elementally. Have you ever attended an outdoor football game in Ohio in October? College football and NFL contests dominate the TV schedule from September to January, spilling further and further across the weekly grid: from Saturday and Sunday afternoons in the 1950s and 60s, to Monday night (starting in 1970), then Sunday night (as of 1987), and since 2006, Thursday nights as well. Today game footage is captured with high-speed cameras from every conceivable angle, repeated and dissected in slow motion replays, supplemented by torrents of statistical info and a parallel fantasy football industry (in which players become interchangeable with, and reduced to their statistical profiles). Mediated football's affective, sensual pleasures are thus partly defused and redirected by its high tech, scientific presentation. "The mediatedness of the spectacle of [men's sport]," Jennifer Doyle observes, "seems to provide the artist and the fan with a distance that gives him permission to adore his subject."[287]

[287] Jennifer Doyle, "Media and Desire in the Sport Spectacle," in Erica Suderberg and Ming Yuen S. Ma, eds., *Resolutions 3: Global Networks of Video* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 281. Here Doyle is referring to high-profile, male-authored artworks that focus on men's sports, such as Harun Farocki's panoptical 12-channel installation *Deep Play* (2007); and Douglas Gordon and Phillipe Parreno's *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* (2006), which trained 17 synchronized cameras on Real Madrid star midfielder Zinedine Zidane during a single game. Doyle's observation about these gendered, real-time sport-spectacles applies readily to televised football as well.

As Morse notes, “football on television is a world of representation which has abandoned Renaissance space and Newtonian physics—but not the claim to scientificity of sport.”[288] This recourse to scientific-investigative observation and statistical fixation is a means by which the (homo)erotic spectacle of football, wherein men are permitted to touch each other in a variety of aggressive *and* affectionate ways, is repudiated by its majority straight male audience. Arens remarks that, while in uniform, “players can engage in hand holding, hugging and bottom patting that would be disapproved of in any other [straight] context, but which is accepted on the gridiron without a second thought.”[289] And as the folklorist Alan Dundes observes in his psychoanalytic interpretation, the sexually suggestive terms of American football, such as “penetration,” “tight end,” “hitting the hole,” and so on, and the game’s structural goal, of getting into the opponent’s end zone more often the opponent gets into yours, imply “a thinly disguised symbolic form by, and directed towards, males and males only, [that] would seem to constitute ritual homosexuality.”[290]

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[288] Morse, “Sport on Television,” 49.
[289] Arens, “An Anthropologist Looks at the Rituals of Football,” 238.
[290] Alan Dundes, “Into the Endzone for a Touchdown: A Psychoanalytic Consideration of American Football,” *Western Folklore* 37, no. 2 (April 1978): 87.

FIGURE 65. *A Fall Trip Home* (Nathaniel Dorsky, 1964).

Few have lensed this symbolic ritual and tableau of manliness as sensuously and complexly as the film artist Nathaniel Dorsky. Even more remarkable, Dorsky's delicate handling of the game and its defining season was made at the tender age of 21. The second film of a career-opening trilogy, *A Fall Trip Home*, like it's sister films *Ingreen* (1964) and *Summerwind* (1965) is restrained in its visual concept and skillfully executed. Dorsky's subjective first-person camera ingathers fall-time Northeastern foliage, which is tightly interleaved with the tangled, swirling, and collapsing bodies of anonymous adolescent footballers, and close-ups of their rapt onlookers. The flow of images is modulated by montage editing, slow motion photography, and floating superimpositions. The film begins with an extreme long shot of a train, echoing

the title, fog rising from the distant tree line. A progression of blue-green forested hills and flora follows, which melds with snippets of kids playing pickup football in a grassy yard, a high school stadium, pieces of mundane game action, a marching band, pompoms, and a cheering audience in dissolving cascades. Throughout the 11-minute running time, images surface, assemble momentarily, then vanish and reemerge. Outside of its initial framing, the film adheres to a nonlinear logic; documentation is suffused with qualities of remembrance and fantasy. A section of blue-toned, black-and-white footage in the middle of the film, of imagery we saw earlier in full color, adds to the impression of disjunctive timeframes.

Dorsky describes the film as "less a psychodrama [though it is that] and more a sad sweet song of youth and death, of boyhood and manhood and our tender earth."[291] The dissolves between visuals of players and leaves emphasizes the themes of transformation and maturation. Tenderness is the film's foremost emotional register,[292] until the end, when *A Fall Trip Home* takes a sharp turn towards personal psychical drama. This shift in tone, from affection to anxiety, follows a move from the outdoors of daytime, landscape, and football, and into the filmmaker's family home. We see his actual mother at the kitchen window

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[291] "A Fall Trip Home," Canyon Cinema website, http://canyoncinema.com/catalog/film/?i=802

[292] This quality of tenderness separates *A Fall Trip Home* from celebrated mainstream cinematic treatments of the sport, such as *North Dallas Forty* (1979) and *Any Given Sunday* (1999), which often explore the visceral brutality and degrading aspects of football's professionalized variant.

backlit by artificial light. It is getting dark out, and Dorsky is seemingly called inside. With this move, from public/social/day into private/familial/night, we are no longer in a heavily mediated time-space of memory and daydream (a world of slow motion and layered assemblage) focused around the spectacle of male teenaged bodies. That spell has been broken by the domestic setting. Instead, we are treated to black-and-white images of planes dropping bombs, connecting football to war, re-photographed off a television monitor. A sense of despair and unease attends this final passage. Returning home also entails a reminder of what one needed to leave in the first place.

Roughly speaking, *A Fall Trip Home* is what its title asserts: A return to the filmmaker's hometown of Millburn, New Jersey, shot intermittently over the course of a season with his personal Bolex (a lightweight, spring-wound 16mm camera popular amongst film experimenters and documentarists). At the time Dorsky was living in Manhattan and attending film courses at New York University. What might be of visual interest to a young artist honing their craft, and, as Scott MacDonald writes, "coming to grips with the combined excitement and terror of gay desire,"[293] upon returning to the autumnal suburban landscape of their childhood? Given the time, place, and circumstances of its production, it's not surprising that *A Fall Trip Home* would focus upon the poetic and aesthetic aspects of football within the context of a seasonal rite, staged here as going

[293] Scott MacDonald, "Nathaniel Dorsky," in *A Critical Cinema 5: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 78.

home (crucially as a subject in flux). More accurately, it seems appropriate to me that Dorsky would cast his eye on the male homosocial sphere of football, with its regiment of intimate male contact, as subject matter.

As he explains, "Like a lot of kids, I loved playing touch football after school. I was crazy about it. I mean, in the fall. You only played football in the fall, and you only played baseball in the spring. I loved playing touch football, but I was never on the level that I would want to play varsity, high school football. In fact, I was in the marching band. [Laughs.] I was in the orchestra, and then the orchestra was the marching band during football season. So I did go to all of the football games, as a band member."[294]

FIGURE 66. *A Fall Trip Home* (Nathaniel Dorsky, 1964).

[294] Nathaniel Dorsky, telephone interview with the author, July 16, 2018.

Dorsky's relationship to football is framed within the pleasures of performance, looking, and accompaniment (as band member), and at a remove from the competitive and violent physicality of organized tackle football. *A Fall Trip Home* mobilizes these personal threads into a fascinating counternarrative of masculine ritual and erotic longing through primarily visual means. Although, unlike most Dorsky's films, *A Fall Trip Home* also has a soundtrack. Japanese flute music, discovered by the filmmaker in a record store in San Francisco's Japantown, contributes to the film's pensive mood. Further, the evocative homemade wind instrument provides a fitting complement to the film's slow-motion imagery. In eschewing the bombastic music commonly associated with high school and college football—that of the percussive, upbeat marching band—for a solo performance of elegiac non-Western music Dorsky heightens his atypical, highly individualized presentation of this American game.

A Fall Trip Home is also notable in the way that it anticipates formal advancements in sports media language. Dorsky's film was shot at the same time that NFL Films was being conceived as a publicity instrument of the National Football League—the ultimate marriage of sports, advertising, and corporate media. Both Dorsky, working with film individually and noncommercially as an artist, and NFL Films, an institutional, large-scale documenting apparatus, used slow motion cinematography and color 16mm film to express their visions of

football. The grainy texture of 16mm and the vibrant, high-contrast range of Kodachrome film stock convey a sense of romanticism and nostalgia. Unlike video, which imbues immediacy and "presentness," filmed images carry an intrinsic archival effect, a sense of the past. And unlike the slow motion of the instant replay, an electronic process associated with analysis, Dorsky's use of the technique affirms the theme of, in his words, "a melancholy struggle. I realized that if you slowed down the football players it would turn more into… not a bromance [laughs], to use a modern word, but slightly eroticized."[295] John Fiske similarly observes that the use of slow motion in mediating sports functions "to eroticize power, to extend the moment of climax."[296]

Dorsky's film speaks to one of the foremost paradoxes of football. As scholar Thomas Oates describes, "From its earliest days, football has been a complex and conflicted cultural text, in which seemingly straightforward assertions of the power of white men consistently involve an undercurrent of uncertainty and anxiety."[297] In *A Fall Trip Home* this undercurrent is expressed by a desirous yet detached subjectivity. Male bodies are captured on film, slowed down, studied, but also obscured under layers of superimposition. The film's specular gaze is complicated by aesthetic rather than scientific mediation. Here, a game in which masculinity is defined and affirmed unfolds in front of the

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[295] Dorsky, interview.
[296] John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Routledge, 1989), 219.
[297] Oates, *Football and Manliness*, 8-9.

camera, but its homoerotic traces are "masked by the (supposedly) hypermasculine setting of football."[298] The homoerotic undertones of *A Fall Trip Home* are circumscribed within the seasonal and the homosocial.

Homosociality provides a context for understanding what goes on when men watch other men perform. In *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire,* Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains that "'Homosocial' is a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences [to describe] social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with 'homosexual,' and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from 'homosexual.' In fact, it is applied to such activities as 'male bonding,' which may, as in our society, be characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality." Football's sexually violent hazing rituals are an example of the fear (heterosexual panic) produced by homosocialty. Sedgwick continues: "To draw the 'homosocial' back into the orbit of 'desire,' of the potentially erotic, then, is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual—a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted."[299]

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[298] James L. Cherney and Kurt Lindemann, "Queering Street: Homosociality, Masculinity, and Disability in *Friday Night Lights*," *Western Journal of Communication* 78, no. 1 (January–February 2014): 2.
[299] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 1-2.

Football, through its enforcement of homosocial but often homophobic behavior, adherence to male authority, and suppression of individual speech, teaches patriarchal thinking and practice. The consequences are considerable. As bell hooks notes, "To indoctrinate boys into the rules of patriarchy, we force them to feel pain and to deny their feelings."[300] Although hooks is referring here to emotional pain, football's concussion crisis stems in part from this condition of denial. The tenderness and poeticism that underpins Dorsky's representation, draw, as Sedgwick puts it, the homosocial into the orbit of desire and the potentially erotic, and in so doing, breaks through the hegemonic bounds of heterosexual patriarchal masculinity. If even for a handful of moments, the viewers of *A Fall Trip Home* are accorded "the ambiguity of sexual orientation in the liminal state of love for *and* identification with the object of desire."[301]

[300] hooks, *The Will to Change,* 18.
[301] Morse, "Sport on Television," 57.

FIGURE 67. *Home* (Kevin Jerome Everson, 2008).

Losing Time: Football as Metaphor in Kevin Jerome Everson's Mansfield

In Kevin Jerome Everson's *Home*, a continuous, 90-second take of murky black-and-white Super 8 film captures the waning moments of a high school football game; set in the filmmaker's hometown of Mansfield, Ohio. What we experience are not the gripping last-second events of the game but instead their numerical translation on the stadium's electronic scoreboard; and the murmurs of the crowd, which focus our attention and provide context for the situation unfolding out-of-frame (FIG. 67). From the scoreboard we gather that the Mansfield Senior High TYGERS are poised to defeat its unspecified VISITOR. It's late in the fourth quarter and the Tygers are leading 14-13. The opponents have the ball, facing 2nd and 23 on the 43-yard line. 14 seconds remain. Victory for the home team seems nearly assured. As the seconds tick away, the mood of the unseen crowd

audibly fluctuates. A tremor of disappointment can be detected. The countdown halts at 3.9 seconds, followed by a long pause. The scoreboard refreshes: It's now 3rd and 11, and the ball has moved up to the 31. The stoppage gives us time to speculate that the opponent is now within range to attempt a long three-point field goal, which, if successful, would win them the game. The final seconds tick away. The crowd noise swells, but what happened? After a drawn-out beat, the scoreboard updates one last time: TYGERS 14, VISITOR 16. Game over/film over. Cut to black.

Home distills the emotional roller-coaster of athletic competition, in which fortunes can reverse in the final second. It is a bittersweet film to watch, because the losing it chronicles is not simply one of innumerable Friday night high school football contests. All these zero-sum games anoint winners and losers, but the winners and losers change week-to-week, and with the seasons. The economic conditions of northeast Ohio do not follow the same cyclical renewals and promises of momentary changes of fortunes, however. Mansfield is a former manufacturing city located in the American rust belt, midway between Columbus and Cleveland. The collapse of the US steel industry in the early-1970s devastated the local labor markets of cities such as Mansfield. In discussing what the region means to him and his work, Everson says "I identify as someone from Northern Ohio. Unemployment, employment, migration from the South, language, weather, benchmarks, and basements. These are the keywords for my craft as I continue to try and get better as an artist. I'm drawn to what gestures

might represent."[302] In the face of economic downturn brought about by the processes of deindustrialization and massive job loss, civic pride becomes redistributed in durable symbols like high school football. In this scenario, what does the gesture of a last second game-winning or losing field goal represent? Like the spectators in James Wright's poem "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio" (which Nathaniel Dorsky sites as an inspiration for *A Fall Trip Home*) it's tempting to perceive the citizenry of Mansfield as psychically *overinvested* in the sporting activities of adolescent boys. Such a condition would make every loss incurred on the field both more than and less than a single letdown.

Embracing defeat but without showing it, Everson's *Home* denies his viewer the spectacle of failure (or its flipside success) and diminishes the opportunity for empathy. All we get is a secondhand account, plainly indexed. If you're not looking closely, the loss might not even register. The film ends abruptly after the final scoreboard update, and the crowd's disembodied reaction is ambiguous at best. As Emmanuel Burdeau observes, "competition isn't what interests" Everson, even though sports are a frequent source of subject matter in his work. "If it happens that the hurrahs and applause of the crowd are heard in the background, it's just so that we hear another breath, and no doubt with a certain irony," as is the case in *Home*. "The athleticism of

[302] Quoted in Michael B. Gillespie, "Grace and Grind: Notes on the Work of Kevin Jerome Everson," in *How to Remain Human*, exhibition catalog (Cleveland: Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland, 2015), 48.

numerous films of Everson, the athleticism that is complacently associated with Black Americans, is therefore no doubt a ruse. His cinema doesn't have that conquering vitality, his images don't have that facile positivity," Burdeau concludes.[303]

In *The Queer Art of Failure* Jack Halberstam theorizes (queer) failure as an antidisciplinary form of knowing that is resistant to mastery. Quoting Benjamin's maxim that "Empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers," Halberstam argues that losing and failure offer oppositional tools and forms of critique that are already embedded in the dominant. As Gramsci maintained, ideology produces commonsense norms—under a capitalist economy, winners and losers are a necessary outcome. "The queer art of failure," Halberstam writes, "turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being."[304] Although it does not contain a queer energy, *Home*, to me, exemplifies a generative model of failure. To fall short can be in itself a form of escape for a person and for a community; escape from the logics of urban renewal and gentrification, of the need for symbolic successes, and from the dream of heroes.

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[303] Emmanuel Burdeau, "Undefeated – Notes on the films of Kevin Jerome Everson," trans. Bill Krohn, *Drain* 10, no. 1 (2013), http://drainmag.com/undefeated-notes-on-the-films-of-kevin-jerome-everson/

[304] Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 88.

FIGURE 68. *Tygers* (Kevin Jerome Everson, 2014).

Home is not the only football record that Everson made in Mansfield. *Tygers*, from 2014, is a single roll of 16mm black-and-white film and also depicts high school football, but with a focus on its performers.[305] Here, members of the Mansfield Tygers execute a series of practice drills for the handheld camera, which is positioned on the field, close to the action (unlike in *Home,* where the camera is relatively far away and static). The silent film captures the recital of

[305] Another related art project is Catherine Opie's *High School Football* photographs (2007-09). It's worth noting that Opie's portraits were always taken at the end of practices. What we see depicted in Everson's film, in other words, are the moments before Catherine Opie arrives to take her portraits. Coincidentally, Opie also grew up in northern Ohio before moving to southern California at the age of 13. Her hometown of Sandusky is approximately 50 miles north of Mansfield. The towns thus compete against one another on the football field.

various moves: drop backs, back peddles, pass routes. The repetition of these routines is occasionally interrupted by breaks to catch a breath or adjust equipment, and prolonged close-ups of the helmeted teens testing out their game faces. The whole piece is elliptical, edited in-camera. Flash frames mark where the camera starts and stops, but it's impossible to tell how much time passes between shots. A looseness prevails, and a sense of comfort underpins the unself-conscious rehearsals of skills. We could analyze this rehearsal as an instantiation of Foucauldian "biopower," as belonging to the thousands of micro-disciplinings of the body that individuals submit to everyday, and which contribute to the subjugation and controlling of populations. I see these action-routines as less an occurrence of trained mechanization and more an opportunity for unproductive, purposeless expression.

Tygers is a film of antidevelopment. It exults practice for the sake of practice, a place to try things out, to low-stakes perform, rather than as a replication of rational work. The film goes nowhere, has no end goal, and no payoff. *Tygers* and my reading of it are utopian in this regard, as the coaches of the Mansfield High School football team surely conceive of practice differently, as useful preparation. Here it's apt to think about the different types of sport and play. Theodor Adorno argues that "Bourgeois sport… want(s) to differentiate

itself… strictly from play."[306] Sport in this sense is considered a purposive duty, an "afterimage" of work which denies any possibility of freedom. He concludes that "[organized] sports belong to the realm of unfreedom."[307] Departing from the rhetoric of disciplining and character building, I suggest a recasting of amateur sport, such as high school football, as a productively useless social practice. Adorno's relational framework of the useful and the useless offers an alternative way of thinking about what revolutionary potential sport holds within our current cultural formation (i.e. late capitalism). For Adorno, the useful is governed by domination, via instrumental reason. The useless encompasses the goods and pleasures of cultural life and is not predicated according to use value. Play for the sake of play, or in *Tygers* practice for the sake of practice, allows for the pleasure of corporeal skill to become an end in itself, bracketed off from utilitarian concerns, and a momentary release of the body from objectification, commodification, instrumentality, and becoming. By shifting focus away from stories of who won and the spectacle of athletic prowess, *Tygers* and its modest but richly suggestive companion film *Home*, reimagine the field of American football as a site for counterhegemonic play.

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[306] Theodor Adorno, "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, edited by Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Urizen, 1978), 274.
[307] Theodor Adorno, *Prisms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), 81.

FIGURE 69. Daniel "Rudy" Ruettiger trying out for the University of Notre Dame football team in *Rudy* (David Anspaugh, 1993).

Reversing Direction: *Rudy*

A mainstream narrative counterpart to *Tygers* is the 1993 Hollywood biopic, *Rudy*. Set in the early-1970s, *Rudy* tells the "real life story" of Daniel "Rudy" Ruettiger, a white, working-class Midwesterner who dreams of playing football at the University of Notre Dame (FIG. 69). The dream is complicated, however, by Rudy's meager athletic skill, limited financial means, and poor high school grades, which are offset by his defining character traits: a willingness to be thoroughly abused on the football field and his inability to take "no" for an answer. Following his high school graduation, Rudy spends the next few years toiling in an Indiana steel mill (not unlike those once found in Kevin Jerome Everson's Mansfield) alongside his father, brothers, and best friend. But after

witnessing his friend's death in a factory accident, Rudy recommits himself to realizing his dream. He enrolls in a junior college to improve his academic profile and eventually gains admission to Notre Dame. He proceeds to land a job on the stadium grounds crew and then improbably wins a place on the Fighting Irish practice squad as a walk-on (non-scholarship athlete).

Notably, *Rudy* is a sports movie that mostly depicts scenes of practice; echoing Everson's *Tygers*. Given that Rudy Ruettiger got onto the field for 27 seconds of game action during his two years at Notre Dame, the film's focus on practice is more a matter of necessity than strategic. Nonetheless, *Rudy* is impressive in its commitment to verisimilitude, period detail, and attention to process. Its football scenes are highly immersive and emotionally engrossing constructs. Across a bevy of sentimental montages, soundtracked with uplifting melodies, we experience the almost comically undersized Rudy, played by Sean Astin (of hobbit fame), getting pummeled in practice drills and scrimmages. Whereas in Harold Lloyd's college football farce *The Freshman*, the exaggerated on-field abuse of its main character is played for laughs, in *Rudy*, subjection to physical violence is designed to inspire.

The "Tryouts" scene is *Rudy*'s signature set-piece and an emblem of the film's primary themes. Opening with phrases of bright flute music underlaid with strings, which eventually builds into a full orchestral complement of timpani drums, brass, and piano, we see stationary, shallow-focus images of players filmed in slow motion at dawn; puffs of steam drifting off their gold

helmets, which glisten in the early morning light. The color pallet is soft and warm during these opening shots, which, in combination with the sprightly music, establishes an idyllic tone. During this brief section of opening exercises, we're provided initial glimpses of the Notre Dame coaching staff. Head coach Ara Parseghian (Jason Miller) oversees the proceedings, drifting amongst rows of bending bodies and dolling out pats in a paternal manner. As the players stretch and trot, we hear the voice of one of the team's defensive assistants, giving us the low down on what Rudy is up against, preceded by the discreet fanfare of trumpets. "Let me tell it to you as clean as I can," the coach intones, in an address to the team's walk-on prospects, the score gradually building in splendor. "We have 95 players here, so accomplished as athletes in high school, we gave them full scholarships to the best football program in the country." Here, the camera begins to range more freely, amplifying the significance of the coach's words. "NCAA regulations allow us to dress just 60 for home games, which means at least 35 scholarship athletes are going to be watching the game from the stands." At this point in the speech, the mobile camera tracks laterally across the rows of attentive prospects, centering on Rudy, whose face is accented by the warm morning light. "So if any of you," the coach continues, "has any fantasies about running out of that stadium tunnel with your gold helmet shining in the sun, you best leave them right here. Of you 15 dreamers out there, maybe we'll keep one or two. My job is to basically beat the shit out of you for the next five days. And whoever is still standing at the end, *maybe* we'll use for our scout teams. You'll

be running the opposition's plays week in and week out. Your greatest value to us is we don't care whether you get hurt. Our first teams are going to pound on you like you're their worst enemies. Like what you hear so far? Any of you want to run home to mamma?" the assistant coach asks, as the film cuts from a medium shot of the head coach, ambling across the field in pensive reflection, to a close-up of Rudy, centered in the frame and looking determined (FIG. 70). "Now's your chance."

FIGURE 70. How it started: Rudy at the beginning of "Tryouts."

FIGURE 71. How it's going: Rudy at the end of "Tryouts."

Over the next three minutes, we see and hear what the work of football looks and sounds like as the orchestral score crescendos. First, a succession of non-contact drills: athletes running through a rope obstacle, up-downs, dive-and-rolls, side-to-side shuffles, sprints, while coaches bark out directions and occasional words of encouragement. Then: tackling drills and one-on-ones, the sounds of the hits and grunts dialed up, as Rudy gets trucked again and again by much larger players. But his perseverance and obedience to the assignment at hand eventually garners respect. "This is where we separate the men from the girls," says a coach. Here and elsewhere in the film, *Rudy* is revealing of one of football's understated purposes—the sublimation of male violence.

Though indicative of *Rudy*'s overall manner and sentiment, "Tryouts" offers something that many football movies don't: a convincing, non-sensational

portrayal of the physical sacrifice that high-level football requires, as well as its tedium. In most other ways, *Rudy* is a fantasy. Unlike other popular football dramas of its era, like *The Program* (1993), *Any Given Sunday* (1999), and the *Friday Night Lights* television series, which treat catastrophic injuries as an undeniable, commonplace fact of the game, at no point do the main characters in *Rudy* experience or dwell upon the *consequences* of football's violence. The film's optimistic worldview and tilt towards fantasy is expressed most blatantly in the film's final scene, which culminates with Rudy being carried off the field on the shoulders of his teammates to the applause of the home crowd; thereby cementing his heroic status. Crucially, this ascension is enabled by the main character's masochistic subjugation. By sacrificing his body (and identity) for two years on the Notre Dame scout team (performing as a surrogate member of his team's opponent), Rudy wins the admiration of his fellow players. As a result of this accrued credit, Rudy is permitted to dress for the team's final game of the season, which is also his last opportunity to participate in an actual competitive contest before his college eligibility expires. Through a subtle act of coordinated disobedience, Rudy's teammates forego their coaches' direction to wind down the clock at the end of the game—with victory already well in hand—and instead run a play that results in another Notre Dame touchdown. By effectively running up the score (widely considered an act of poor sportsmanship), the Notre Dame gridders ensure another kickoff and opponent's possession—representing the only chance that Rudy, as a defensive substitute, would have to get on the field.

(Again, there are parallels here to *The Freshman*, which concludes in a similar way). In the game's meaningless final play, Rudy sacks the Georgia Tech quarterback, and the stadium goes wild. As Rudy departs the field atop his teammates' shoulders, presented in slow motion, to the roaring adulation of the fans and a saccharine final melody, a superimposed title card informs us that "Since 1975 no other Notre Dame player has been carried off the field." Fade to black.

However, according to NFL Hall of Famer Joe Montana, who was Notre Dame's starting quarterback during the timeframe that the film takes place in, Rudy was carried off the field "sarcastically, not in celebration" by three of the "biggest pranksters on the team." Nor did the crowd chant Rudy's name, per Montana.[308] Without the celebratory ending, if portrayed as an impish gesture rather than a triumphal moment, Rudy's story would be more indicative of the realities of competitive football, which more often than not is characterized by a bittersweet flavor. Like David Anspaugh's other Indiana high school sports drama, *Hoosiers*, *Rudy*'s racialized underdog narrative presents its sporting figure as a symbol of white working-class pluck. Despite his limited talent and athleticism, Rudy achieves success through obsessive determination and individual perseverance (in sports parlance, and usually white-coded, "heart"),

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[308] Jack Dougherty, "Joe Montana Broke America's Heart by Revealing Everything Wrong With Rudy Ruttieger [sic] From the 'Rudy' Movie," *Sportscasting,* August 23, 2020, https://www.sportscasting.com/joe-montana-just-broke-americas-heart-by-revealing-everything-wrong-with-rudy/

downplaying his structural advantages. And like *Hoosiers*, Rudy is devotedly ahistorical in its approach to race, despite being set in the period immediately following the breakthroughs won by the civil rights movement, when many public and private schools, including those in Indiana, were still being integrated. The Ruettiger portrayed in *Rudy* is in many ways an epitome of white privilege—free to follow his impossible dream, which in turn becomes a fictional reality through a denial of inconvenient details.

Conclusion

In "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular,'" Stuart Hall asserts that "there is no whole, authentic, autonomous 'popular culture' which lies outside the field of force of the relations of cultural power and domination."[309] To understand American football's popularity requires consideration of the intersecting social, cultural, political, economic, and technological factors that make up the "sports nexus." It also requires a close look at the development of American football as a popular media form and the game's artistic and cultural representation. Further, following Hall, how do consciousness, subjectivity, forms of resistance, and agency come into play? In other words, who has voice (as subject and as object), what are the forms that it takes, and how is it mediated? The NFL is among

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[309] Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular," in John Storey, ed., *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture,* 4th edition (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2009), 447. Originally published in Raphael Samuel, ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 227-241.

America's most powerful ideological apparatuses.[310] Not surprisingly, the league is also notorious for its curtailing of individual expression—whether it be through the policing of on-field celebrations and uniforms (penalties for touchdown dances that are too excessive or sexually suggestive, fines for penning unsanctioned messages on headbands or cleats), to the way that contracts are structured (most are non-guaranteed and front-loaded with signing bonuses), which allow teams to cut and replace players easily, and with limited long-term financial consequence.

One way of addressing these questions is to closely analyze the work and institution of NFL Films. For over 50 years, NFL Films has played a key role in shaping the NFL's image and ideological discourse. As Steve Sabol asserted, "Before we started, the NFL had a tradition like baseball has a tradition. What we did was give football a *mythology*."[311] This mythology is exemplified in *Autumn Ritual. Autumn Ritual* gives ample support to Michael Real's observation that American football, more than any other sport, provides a compelling embodiment of American social, political, and racial values and priorities.[312] In *Autumn Ritual,* the underbelly of those values and priorities—for instance, the game's underlying racism, sexism, homophobia, and lust for violence—are

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[310] Althusser includes sports among his listing of cultural apparatuses in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" but this was never elaborated on.
[311] Quoted in Jason Buhrmester, "NFL Films' Exhaustive Archive is Rushing into the Digital Age," *WIRED*, September 24, 2007, http://www.wired.com/2007/09/ps-nfl/. Emphasis added.
[312] Real, "Super Bowl," 38.

unconsciously revealed. In its centering of white patriarchal masculinity, even though approximately two-thirds of its on-field workforce is African American, football is a model of American colonial power. And as Vann R. Newkirk II writes, "Football is the way *Americanness* is performed now."[313] Newkirk's claim illuminates why Colin Kaepernick's 2016 protest of racialized state violence, and his refusal to stand for the playing of the national anthem, so enraged the power structures of mainstream white America. A Black athlete insisting on his subjectivity, on being recognized as a political subject, as fully human, is still considered a threat. One that must be, and was, expelled.

In mainstream American sports television and film, the labor of football is routinely transfigured as narrative ("real-life drama"). Narrativization, and what the founders of NFL Films call "mythmaking," are what allows us to look past the horrifying reality of a game that cripples the bodies and minds of its participants, a majority of whom are Black/non-white, at an alarming rate and speed. The romanticized white bootstrapper drama *Rudy,* despite its non-sensational portrayal of the game's somatic rigors, nonetheless contributes to the broader disavowal of football's violent outcomes and racial inequities. By representing American football as sites of homosociality that accommodate homosexual desire, or that acknowledge failure and uselessness as potentially emancipatory,

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[313] Vann R. Newkirk II, "Football Has Always Been a Battleground in the Culture War," *The Atlantic,* September 29, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/09/football-is-the-culture-war/541464/

experimental films like Nathaniel Dorsky's *Fall Trip Home* and Kevin Jerome Everson's *Home* and *Tygers* disrupt the "sexual, racial, and organizational priorities of American social structure,"[314] exemplified in *Rudy* and *Autumn Ritual*, and remap the football field as a site of cultural struggle. In these counterhegemonic films there are no stories, no winners, and no heroes. Specular pleasure triumphs over the pleasure of spectacle; the losers break free.

[314] Real, "Super Bowl," 38.

POSTGAME

One-Hundred Yard Universe

Link to sample: https://vimeo.com/brettkashmere/ohyu?share=copy

Conceived as a response to the traditions and conventions of the sports film genre, *One-Hundred Yard Universe* remains an incomplete and speculative element of this project. Informed by the historical research and critical analysis of the written component, and codirected with Solomon Turner, *One-Hundred Yard Universe* is an essayistic, autoethnographic investigation of the lived experience and ramifications of American football. Adopting a mode that is exploratory, intersubjective, and multivocal, *One-Hundred Yard Universe*

endeavors to work as an experimental essay film, a poetic first-person documentary, and as cultural critique. At the heart of the film is a personal narrative, which retraces Solomon's football history, and his father's football history, as a process towards unpacking and demystifying the game's cultural power and appeal. Like a football game, the film is organized in four sections. Each quarter maps a location where Solomon or his father, Benjamin, played football, across time. After starring as a running back at Henrico High School in Richmond, Virginia in the early-1970s, Benjamin was recruited to play Division I college football at the University of New Mexico (UNM) in Albuquerque. Solomon started played tackle football in Boston at the age of 8, as a member of the little league Dorchester Eagles; followed by high school football at Deerfield Academy (a New England prep school) and Division III college ball at Oberlin College in the 2010s. Each quarter has its own unique, nonlinear collage form, combining images and sound from past and present: newly self-shot documentary footage filmed on the actual fields where Solomon and Benjamin performed; home movies and photographs from the Turner family archive; an array of historical footage (including extracts from the NFL Films' catalog); voice-over narration; and interviews with family members and former teammates of Ben's at Henrico High and UNM.

One-Hundred Yard Universe represents the public-facing promise of this project, with the potential for greater impact. Operating in a call-and-response relationship, the film seeks to address, and possibly—hopefully—answer some

of the questions and problems posed by the written chapters. My motivation for this future-oriented thinking-through-media, and rationale for the documentary component, is to connect conversations about racial inequity, player safety, activism, and player empowerment in the world of football to larger discussions about racialized violence and white supremacy in America more broadly. In *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates tenders that to be Black in America is to live in constant fear of disembodiment.[315] The physical and psychological threats of police brutality and the lasting corporeal and cognitive strains caused by the sport of football, in my mind, correspond. They are socially produced forms of damage that routinely displace raced bodies from their humanity. Given the exigency of these issues, it is necessary to make work that is accessible to large and diverse publics. Adopting tactics and highlighting perspectives that counter the valorization of American football, *One-Hundred Yard Universe* enacts an experiential anti-myth of this popular tradition and institution.

Acknowledging the game's excessive physical demands, our film aims to reframe football as a space for nurturing, intimate relationships between men—as a place where men can and sometimes do take care of one another. We believe that football holds this promise, but it's a promise that is often undone by football's hypermasculine expectations. To reimagine the game's possibilities requires a shift of perspective and priority. As it relates to our film, we prioritize

[315] Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015).

the sideline over what's happening in the center of the field; practice and camaraderie over competition and winning; football as a non-zero-sum game. In this utopian vision, play for the sake of play is valued.

At the same time, *One-Hundred Yard Universe* is grounded in a tangible, complicated, and painful reality. In its experiences of loss, heartbreak, and absence, the story of the Turner Family is representative of thousands of families. But it is also unique. We recognize and honor the lived experiences of the Turners and hold space for them as they process their memories of the past and work towards new understandings, relations, and formations.

CONCLUSION

No Time for Losers (or Winners)

> As fans, it could help if we examine ourselves, search within and explore why we watch—why nothing, no amount of suffering, causes us to pull away from the game.
>
> – Kurt Streeter[316]

FIGURE 72. Kansas City Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes hoists the Vince Lombardi Trophy during the Super Bowl LVIII postgame award presentation.

[316] Kurt Streeter, “We’re All Complicit in the N.F.L.’s Violent Spectacle,” *The New York Times*, January 4, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/03/sports/football/nfl-broadcast-fans.html

On Sunday, February 11, 2024, the National Football League's San Francisco 49ers and Kansas City Chiefs met at Allegiant Stadium in Las Vegas to compete for the Vince Lombardi Trophy. The seven-pound, sterling silver prize, which depicts a football in kicking position atop a tapering three-sided base, is awarded annually to the winner of the NFL's championship game, known formally as the Super Bowl. 61,629 people attended this year's event, at an average ticket price of $8600. An average of 123.7 million spectators—the largest audience ever for a single-network program—viewed the CBS Sports broadcast across all its platforms, including the kid-focused, SpongeBob-themed Nickelodeon stream.[317] This year's ratings were surely boosted by Taylor Swift's devoted fanbase of "Swifties," many tuning in to catch a glimpse of the pop icon in a luxury skybox high above the on-field proceedings, cheering on her boyfriend, Kansas City tight end Travis Kelce. (CBS was happy to oblige the interest, offering 11 cutaways to Swift and friends throughout the game). This year's star-studded panoply of high concept Super Bowl commercials—which cost advertisers $7 million for a half-minute of airtime, or $233,333 per second—and the dizzying Apple Music Super Bowl LVIII Halftime Show, headlined by Usher ("Yeah!") with special guests Alicia Keys, H.E.R., Lil Jon, Ludacris, will.i.am, Jermaine Dupri, and an ensemble of

[317] Richard Deitsch and Greg Rosenstein, "Super Bowl LVIII becomes most-watched U.S. program ever with 123.7 million viewers: How it set the record," *The Athletic,* February 12, 2024, https://theathletic.com/5271559/2024/02/12/super-bowl-chiefs-49ers-ratings/. According to Nielsen Media Research, a record 202.4 million people watched at least part of the game.

roller-skating dancers, kept viewers entertained between breaks in the action. Approximately $23 billion was wagered on the Super Bowl's outcomes and a staggering assortment of novelty prop bets, from the duration of Reba McEntire's pregame rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner" (over/under 86.5 seconds), to the coin toss (heads or tails at even odds), to the color of the Gatorade (orange was the favorite at +300, while clear was an enticing longshot at +1200). For the first time ever, to ensure no silence went unfilled, the Super Bowl had its own in-game DJ, Kaskade. As much of America and the world followed along in ecstatic amusement, Israel used the supersized televisual affair to divert attention from its massive bombing of an Israel-designated "safe zone" in the Palestinian city of Rafah, killing dozens, while concurrently airing a multimillion-dollar propaganda commercial.

How did the Super Bowl become the ultimate manifestation of American capitalism, patriotism, and indulgent distraction? Why are American football and its mediatized entertainment products so popular? To understand these questions requires a historical perspective that considers a web of intersecting social, cultural, political, economic, and technological factors. It also requires a close look at the development of the National Football League and the game's audiovisual representation. A recurring argument throughout the preceding chapters maintains that in mainstream American sports media, the labor and performance of football is regularly transfigured as narrative, with unscripted reality (the playing of a game) and dramatized spectacle fused into one. Today's

NFL broadcasts are awash in predetermined storylines and subplots, repleted with stars, supporting characters, and special effects. The resultant mythic irreality, I argue, disavows the material, oftentimes punishing physicality of the sport. As the *New York Times* columnist Kurt Streeter writes, “The players are not avatars or objects, [but this] is how they are often viewed.”[318] Sports gambling and fantasy sports, which have both been effectively colonized by the NFL, the commodification of players as assets, the mediatization of the NFL draft and the scouting combine (FIG. 74), all help contribute to this perception.

FIGURE 73. NFL Scouting Combine, 2021.

[318] Streeter, “We’re All Complicit.”

When I was first scoping this project, in the fall of 2016, Colin Kaepernick's on-field protest of racialized police violence and brutality had just begun and the chances of Donald Trump becoming president seemed remote. During a political rally in Huntsville, Alabama on September 22, 2016, Trump declared to his mainly white audience that he hoped NFL players who knelt during the national anthem would lose their jobs. Some NFL owners scrambled to show their support of the players' right to protest; a handful locked arms and knelt alongside in a performance of solidarity (FIG. 75). These gestures, which lasted a week or two, were immediately seen for what they were: transparent attempts to whitewash, co-opt, and silence a social justice movement that threatened to alienate the NFL's conservative-leaning fan base. (It's estimated that over 80% of NFL fans are white, compared with 62% in the US population). Trump's leveraging of football as a lightning rod in the contemporary American culture wars—namely his criticism that football had become too soft, too concerned with brain injuries, too conscientious, too politically correct—further burnished his image as a right-wing populist.

FIGURE 74. Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones kneels with players and coaches before the playing of the anthem before a game against the Arizona Cardinals, September 25, 2017. Jones later threatened to suspend players who knelt during the national anthem.

FIGURE 75. The Kansas City Chiefs’ endzone during Super Bowl LVIII.

The forces that enabled Trump's ascension to the American presidency, a campaign which was supported by donations from nine NFL owners (with seven contributing $1 million or more), opened the league's institutional power relations, political investments, and ideological underpinnings to broader scrutiny.[319] The peaceful protests of racist state violence that Kaepernick inspired, and that led to his blackballing, catalyzed a new understanding of football's place within the national culture; the racial inequities that organize the league; and its hypocrisies.

FIGURE 76. Lee Powell, "Who Are the NFL Owners?" *The Washington Post*, August 29, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/interactive/2023/nfl-owners-illustrated/. Cover illustration by Chris Morris.

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319 Dan Cancian, "Which NFL Owners Support Donald Trump? List of Those Who Have Donated to the President," *Newsweek*, June 15, 2020, https://www.newsweek.com/nfl-owners-support-donald-trump-list-donated-president-1510841/

In *Big Game: The NFL in Dangerous Times*, journalist Mark Leibovitz asserts that "The NFL is the most conservative, Republican, and nationalistic of the major sports leagues, despite the socialist profit-sharing agreement that the billionaire owners enter into."[320] At present, aside from the community-owned Green Bay Packers, 29 of the NFL's other 31 franchises are owned by white men, white women, or majority white consortiums. Many of these are legacy owners, the offspring of billionaire industrialists, real estate developers, and NFL founding fathers. Current NFL commissioner Roger Goodell, son of a United States senator, is himself an NFL lifer, having worked his way up from administrative intern to Pete Rozelle in the early-1980s, followed by an apprenticeship in the league's PR department. Goodell has been inside the NFL for almost the entire duration of its ascent to the top of American sports entertainment. His relationships with the owners run deep. They've made each other tremendously rich: Goodell's current annual salary is believed to be about $64 million, despite helming one of the most tumultuous, scandal-ridden eras in the league's history; meanwhile his career earnings since becoming commissioner in 2006 are nearing $700 million. By the time he retires, Goodell will have made over a billion dollars from the NFL. So, it's no surprise that "protect the shield" (a reference to the NFL logo) has become his favorite

[320] Mark Leibovich, *Big Game: The NFL in Dangerous Times* (New York: Penguin, 2018), 226.

mantra. As the cultural critic Hua Hsu points out, "It's a shield that shields you [the player] from wondering how perverse it is that your workplace is asking for you to protect it—but from what?"[321] Also worth noting: the NFL commissioner wields nearly unlimited authority when it comes to disciplining employed individuals of an NFL club if they have violated league bylaws or committed loosely-defined "conduct detrimental to the welfare of the League or professional football."

Outside of a handful of marquee stars, the NFL strives to produce bodies without subjectivity. By and large, the league promotes *itself* and its teams foremost, which is logical, given the prevalence of unguaranteed contracts, the high risk of on-field injury, and the virtually limitless talent pool, resulting in ever-shrinking career spans.[322] The expendability of the NFL workforce contributes to the institutional objectification of its rank-and-file. Personalities are restrained (unless they're fun and nonthreatening, like Rob Gronkowski or Travis Kelce) or instrumentalized for color commentary, post-career, if one is

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[321] Hua Hsu, "Sword and Shield: Looking Back on the NFL's Very Bad Year," *Grantland*, December 26, 2013, http://grantland.com/features/the-nfl-very-bad-year/

[322] According to research done by *The Wall Street Journal*, the average career length, as of 2016, was 2.66 years. The number drops significantly when you remove quarterbacks and kickers, the two positions most protected from contact, from the subject group. See Rob Arthur, "The Shrinking Shelf Life of NFL Players," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 29, 2016, http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-shrinking-shelf-life-of-nfl-players-1456694959

fortunate. Faces are masked; mouths are guarded; dissenting voices are muted, disciplined, impugned, expunged.[323]

With all this in mind, I maintain that mainstream American football film and media—whether it be the newsreel parades of the 1930s, documentary programs like NFL Films' *They Call It Pro Football*, or Hollywood dramas like *Rudy*—warrants further close reading. My intention in bringing experimental media into the mix, both preexisting works as well as my own critical media interventions produced as part of this program of research, was to position the corporate/standardized and the individual/unpredictable—in productive juxtaposition; to see what new insights might emerge from the imbrication of traditional and nontraditional forms and approaches. I believe that experimental practice has a role to play in fostering a more comprehensive and critical understanding of sport but thus far has seldom been engaged in the scholarly work of critical sport studies. In the era of flashy data visualization, instant analysis, Twitter/X journalism, Insiders, podcasters, the rumor mill, the superfan, and the hot take, experimental media offers a necessary tool for addressing deeper concerns, connections, contradictions, and ideologies. It also

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[323] This extends to social media as well. The NFL's social media policy includes guidelines that impinge on players' right of freedom of speech, warning that "statements displaying obscenity or criticism of officiating, opposing players, owners, coaches, fans or threatening comments are subject to discipline," though it doesn't specify what this discipline might entail. See Zolan V Kanno-Youngs, "NFL Players Walk Tricky Line Because of Blurry Rules on Social Media," *USA Today*, July 9, 2015, http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nfl/2015/07/08/social-media-policy-twitter-facebook/29477163/

provides a set of tactics for unhooking the poetic and aesthetic aspects of sport from the domain of story and the encompassing spectacle. I propose that the relationships and interactions between media sport and media art, spectatorship and performance, theory and practice, can be thought of as a non-zero-sum game.

I offer this formulation as an alternative to the frequently invoked "zero-sum game." In game theory, a zero-sum game describes a competitive situation between individuals or groups in which gains and losses are balanced in direct proportion. A singles tennis match, for instance, always has one winner and one loser. The participants in a non-zero-sum game, on the other hand, are not always in direct conflict. Oftentimes they are working towards cooperative aims. The sum of gains and losses is not required to zero out, thus there is no predictable outcome.

As this study of American football has sought to unpack, sport is a site where culture, social relations, gender roles, and normative bodies are produced and reinforced. As mass entertainment, sport distracts and pacifies millions of spectators while preserving status quos. At the same time, sport offers potential as a de-stabilizing force, one that disrupts systems of power, promotes improvisation, and shifts the conversation, and by extension commonplace attitudes. The paradoxical nature of sport—exhibiting both "manipulative

manifestations" and "liberating tendencies"—makes it a rich and fascinating subject,[324] one that I endeavor to reimagine, expand, and rescope.

[324] Hargreaves, "Theorising Sport," 23.

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The Freshman (Sam Taylor and Fred C. Newmeyer, 1925)

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The Twentieth Century: The Violent World of Sam Huff (Nicholas Webster, 1960)

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A Fall Trip Home (Nathaniel Dorsky, 1964)

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Pro Football: Pottstown, PA (Phil Tuckett, 1972)

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Jim Thorpe – All-American (Michael Curtiz, 1951)

Of Sport and Men (Hubert Aquin, 1961)

I Spy (NBC, 1965-68)

NFL Game of the Week (syndication, 1965-2002; NFL Network, 2003-2006; ION, 2007)

Paper Lion (Alex March, 1968)

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The Black Six (Matt Cimber, 1973)

Blessing in Disguise: UNM Athletic Boycott (Conrad Figueroa, 1974)

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