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Why Do Young Men Love Hurting Themselves?

An Exploration of Masculinity, Pain, Humor, Privilege, and *Jackass*

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Abstract

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What does laughing at pain suggest about adolescent men, with regards to cultural, racial, and social ideologies? Through analysis of MTV's raucously violent *Jackass* program and film series, I break down how the performance of pain illuminates the ways in which young men stake out alternative and ironic forms of masculinity, through the playful and twisted reappropriation of castration anxiety, tropes of minstrelsy, and carnivalesque attitudes, among other agile and abject exertions of privilege. These attitudes both destroy and lampoon ideals of hegemonic masculinity, while simultaneously clinging to and ultimately strengthening them.

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Introduction

People around the world have been laughing at pain for thousands of years, in the comic traditions of *commedia dell'arte*, circus, pantomime, vaudeville, and slapstick, among others. But what makes the punishment of the body so sidesplittingly funny to some and not others? What makes this a mainly an adolescent male phenomenon, and what does laughing at the performance of pain say about this demographic? My goal here is to get to the bottom of *what* makes the performance of pain funny, *why* it mainly resonates with certain groups, and what consumption of such entertainment connotes about their relationship with their self, others, and their society.

In the past quarter-century, no spectacle of pain comedy has been more significant and culturally revealing than *Jackass*, the groundbreaking MTV show that ran three seasons on the air and spawned three movies and a slew of spinoffs. Created by Johnny Knoxville, *Big Brother* magazine editor Jeff Tremaine and filmmaker Spike Jonze, populated by skateboarders, stuntmen and a former clown, this hugely influential program features a group of rambunctious (white) men partaking in dangerous stunts (almost always) designed to fail and chaotic feats of public disruption, evoking revulsion and discomfort for its own sake. I argue that the types of behavior exhibited on this program illuminate socioeconomic tensions between the working-class young white man and the “feminized” surrounding world he unwittingly finds himself a part of, struggling (perhaps unconsciously) to both decry and maintain his sense of privilege.

Skate or Die

The ethos of *Jackass* was built out of skateboarding culture in the 1990s. As Emily Yochim writes, “venerated by, used by, rejected by, and reinvented by the dominant society, skateboarders also venerate, use, reject, and reinvent the mainstream” (173). Race and class aside, skaters represent a pseudo-oppressed cultural minority. As a group they are often associated with laziness, destruction of public property, and lack of education, among other negative critiques. Urban planners commonly install barriers on city handrails and ledges to suppress skaters’ reappropriation of public space. This cultural malignment inspires a reflexive, reactionary worldview that rests on skate life’s rejection of mainstream values, inspiring an ideology of resentful and ironic rebellion, a “stick it to the man” attitude that dares authority to get in the way of their messy self-expression.

In their repudiation of traditional articulations of masculinity and general conduct, young male skaters place value on the destruction of the body, as a matter of achievement, essentially proving their manhood through wipeout. In 2007 MTV aired a program called *Scarred*, which showcases home videos of terrible extreme sports accidents and the resulting injuries. This highlights the marketability for the fetishization of male pain onscreen. Physical debasement holds a different level of cache in the skate community and is seen almost as a badge of honor, of toughness, of independence. Even the slang catchphrase “skate or die” is emblematic of skateboarding culture’s reckless ambivalence toward one’s own body. The influential skateboarding magazine *Thrasher* includes a section featuring professional skateboarders pictured mid-wipeout called “Hall of Meat.” The *Skate* video game franchise sported a game mode of the same name, where the player could rack up points injuring and wrecking their skater avatar in creative ways. As an oft-

bored high schooler, I frequently found myself trying to find creative ways to break 100,000. Both *Jackass* and skateboarding thematically center on reclamation (of space, of body, of socioeconomic status/privilege). If one feels oppressed in a capitalist system that devalues their individuality, the single area in which one maintains their autonomy is what they choose to do with (and to) their own body. Intentional, ironic, social destruction of the body sends a defiant message to power structures, as an exertion of the reclamation of personal freedom and control.

The legitimization of skating with the advent of *The X-Games* in 1995 and the transcendent success of superstar Tony Hawk and his eponymous video game franchise, combined with the increasing popularity of MTV at the same time left a perfect cultural lane open for a ragtag group of skaters, stuntmen, and deadbeats to find a dotting television audience of young men fed up with their social standing, searching for a dirty, disgusting, off-putting, hilarious manifestation of their collective grievances aimed at a society bent on taking itself seriously. The fact that *Jackass* patently and consistently pissed off parents certainly didn't hurt its rebellious appeal, either.

“White Male Backlash”

Jackass, whose chief audience demographic was 12 to 35-year-old working-class males (*Variety*) and was MTV's most consumed-by-men show to date (*Entertainment Weekly*), appeals to young men “who are either disenfranchised or alienated from mainstream opportunities and therefore reject them” (Tourino 3). This phenomenon, coined by David Savran (1999) as “White Male Backlash” refers to the claim to marginalized status and victimhood by white men in the face of their sense that they have lost major social traction since the latter part of the 20th century, as groups like women,

blacks, gays, and immigrants have made significant social progress, resulting in the impression of a muddying social hierarchy in which traditional notions of white male supremacy have become no longer relevant nor accepted. According to many on the conservative right, white men are the marginalized victims of affirmative action, immigration, and diversity programs, apparently stripped of their social entitlement. This perceived marginalization is said to be the driver of many white nationalist incidents of violence and acts of terror. The subset of masculinity discussed in this essay, however, centers on those who have the same need for societal recognition in the face of perceived oppression, but ultimately lack and reject the self-seriousness to exercise their privilege and frustration towards something meaningful and/or consequential.

The twentieth-century articulation of the fantasy of white male victimhood could be said to have arisen out of the Hipster movement in the period following the second World War, years before the clichéd Brooklynite-fixed-gear-bike-avocado-toast Hipsters of today. With the United States in a vulnerable diplomatic position and the paranoia and social unrest of the Cold War and the Vietnam War on the rise, this fear inspired in many young people a feeling of social frustration and depression. The rejection of such fear and pressure to conform birthed youth countercultural movements that produced momentous gains in civil rights and liberties for marginalized folks, but also generated more resentful subsets where this submission to an abstract authority threatened a potential loss of identity.

Enter the proverbial Hipster, the man who, with existentialist exasperation, decries the established social order where the world has meaning and bearing on him. The term was coined by 1940s jazz pianist Harry Gibson, then reappropriated by cultural critic Norman Mailer (1957), who connects the "psychic havoc" wrought by the Holocaust and

atomic bomb to the aftermath of slavery in America. The Hipster, numbed by physical atrocities of World War II and social fear of violence at the hands of an oppressive state, was likened in spirit to the plight of the marginalized African American, in regards to an authentic relationship to persecution and injustice, along with the primitive desire to fulfill bodily and sexual urges, a “utopian wholeness and plenitude that have been lost in white, bourgeois American culture” (“Taking it Like a Man...” 50). This controversial phenomenon is what Mailer so boldly deemed “The White Negro” (in this case the Hipster *must* be white). Prejudiced race science aside, this describes a nihilistic and oppressed worldview where one feels enlightened when he realizes he has no choice but to accept these horrors, and in the face of such supposed oppression,

encourage the psychopath in oneself, to explore that domain of experience where security is boredom and therefore sickness, and one exists in the present, in that enormous present which is without past or future, memory or planned intention, the life where a man must go until he is beat, where he must gamble with his energies through all those small or large crises of courage and unforeseen situations which beset his day, where he must be with it or doomed not to swing. (Mailer 3)

Mailer sees this as a form of psychopathy, a rebellion against state control to satisfy the urge to effect choice and agency upon one’s own life, in which the only way to be truly free is to reject rules in order to assert and maintain one’s individuality. One must constantly challenge one’s own boundaries, in order to sense one’s place in the universe, to continually pursue, as Mailer puts it, “an orgasm more apocalyptic than the one that preceded it” (9). This postmodern subject is a product of late capitalism, where, in the midst of shifting national demographics, Broyard (1948) asserts that Hipsterism developed from

a sense that minorities in America were subject to decisions made about their lives by conspiracies of power they could never possibly know. In this way, the psychopathy implied here depends on a reliance on symbolic, “isolated truths of what each observer feels at each instant of his existence” (Mailer 14). Those who weren’t “hip” to the lingo of higher thinking were, in turn, deemed Square. The Square has surrendered his individuality, trapped inside the quiet prison of mind and body, choosing to conform to “the totalitarian tissues of an American society” (Mailer 3). This is a clear-cut dichotomy, wherein one is either a rebel or one conforms. The rebellion here is merely abstract, however, since the White Hipster is not fighting against legitimate persecution, but against his own sense of helplessness, truly making him a “rebel without a cause.”

The turn of the millennium saw the rebranding of the Hipster moniker, with the “hipper than thou” spirit still intact and cranked up to eleven. The New White Hipster renounced the snobby avant-garde ethos of the original Hip and Beat movements (jazz, fedoras, *Dissent* magazine) in favor of the reclamation of the rebellious aesthetics of “white trash” (tattoos, trucker hats, cheap beer, *Vice* magazine). Where the former Hipster represented a rejection of whiteness as a fetishization of a marginalized Black identity, the New White Hipster wore whiteness on his sleeve. “I love being white, and I think it’s something to be proud of,” *Vice* founder Gavin McInnes told the *Times* in 2003.

As such, the skater is the perfect Hipster figure. He represents anti-patriarchal sentiments without substantially questioning patriarchal norms. He is openly critical of hegemonic masculinity and “jock” culture, rebelling against values like physical dominance, overvaluation of competition, and emotional repression, instead espousing and constructing alternative modes of masculine power that maintain attitudes of reckless

dominance over women and people of color. This culture valorizes immaturity and sees its defining obsession with individuality as a blessing that doubles as a curse, a sort of self-loathing self-absorption. In reclaiming his whiteness as something now mysteriously accepted as “cool” in an urban setting, the New Hipster wars with his own sense of rebellion and feels oppressed within his supposed superiority.

Human Abjection

To understand this paradox of privilege and victimhood, we must turn to Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject. She defines the abject as “one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable” (Kristeva 1). The abject occupies a space that is neither subject nor object. If the subject represents “that which is inside,” and the object, “that which is outside,” the abject constitutes “that which I am not.” The term has been explored in post-structuralism as that which inherently disturbs conventional identity and cultural concepts.

When borders of reality are blurred and ignored, it can produce a physically nauseating effect. This is, for example, why people are instinctively repulsed when seeing a corpse. A corpse is the perfect abject figure because it constitutes a human body simultaneously existing in the space between life (on Earth) and death (in the ground), violating the order of the world, defying both existence and nonexistence, forcing the body to reject it (not to mention one’s own personal anxiety over death). An object or person cannot necessarily *be* abject, for it is a state of being, of undoing, of rejection: “The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I” (Kristeva 1).

In the young white male, this dichotomy creates a condition of *reflexive sadomasochism*, where, as Savran writes, this victimized identity “has the effect of splitting the subject’s ego between a sadistic half and masochistic half. So, the reflexive sadomasochist, rather than humiliate and master others, turns this impulse back upon himself” (“The Sadomasochist...” 129). This idea is best represented in the film *Fight Club* (1999) by the literal splitting of the narrator’s ego into the characters played by Edward Norton and Brad Pitt, where the male agent is simultaneously passive and aggressive, acting as both victim and perpetrator, on himself and others. This abject notion represents the simultaneous repulsion of what the self is *not* as well as what the self *is*. In this, “a masculinized self inflicts punishment upon a feminized self” (Brayton 59). In Savran’s terms, “the white male as victim flirts recklessly with disaster, putting himself through the most trying ordeals, torturing himself to prove his masculinity” (“The Sadomasochist...” 129). With American social hierarchies shifting away from white heteropatriarchy, the young white man has no choice but to turn his societal power back onto himself, exerting the autonomy to wreck his own body, on his own terms, for “the only capital [he] ha[s] to exploit is [his] body” (Tourino 15). Through ritualistic physical harm as a form of homosocial bonding, *Jackass* creates a “spectacle of emasculation that is also a reassertion of the masculine” (Brayton 69).

On a base level, it is easiest to understand the abject through the lens of the gross-out humor displayed on *Jackass*. A recurring theme is the show’s obsession with scatology, bodily fluids, and private parts. “The Omelette,” a controversial sketch in season three, sees cast member Dave England dressed as a chef, parodying generic television cooking instruction programs. He individually ingests the raw ingredients for an omelette (onions,

peppers, butter, cheese, tomato, milk, and eggs), “mixing them around” in his stomach, regurgitates them, then re-consumes the completed “vomelette,” causing many surrounding crew and cast to lose their lunch as well. Vomit, as an abject symbol, represents literally what the body rejects. This notion of willfully inducing and performatively enduring the expulsion of bodily waste subverts the rules of the body, since throwing up is nearly always unintentional and/or in response to a negative feeling of shock or disgust. Here, it is entirely used for fun.

In the first *Jackass* movie, England proceeds to publicly defecate in a hardware store’s display toilet. In a twist of fate and poor timing, he soils himself in the crowded van on the way to the store, leaving the crew in stitches. Cameramen laugh as they puke into the bushes, causing a short cycle of laughing and puking. When they make it to the store later that day, England drops his pants and does his “business” on the display toilet, casually reading a newspaper, as if nothing is wrong. The store manager asks him to clean up his mess, but the film cuts before we can see the actual consequences of England’s actions. England renders this situation abject by blatantly disregarding the rules of social etiquette, in favor of literally (excuse the pun) *shitting* on them. He breaks these boundaries knowingly and intentionally, choosing to live in between the spheres of “right” and “wrong” by flagrantly flaunting the fragility of the rules of the society that tells him that evacuating his bowels in public is inappropriate and in bad taste.

Oddly enough, England seems to have constructed his entire public identity through his peculiar penchant for defecation. As of writing, England’s Twitter handle is “daveenglandshit” and his bio, “I’m that one dude from Jackass who shits.” He has performed the most poop-related stunts on the show of any cast member (others include

defecating into a mini-dollhouse, eating horse feces on a \$200 bet from rap group Three 6 Mafia, and a twisted yet inventive sketch called “Poo Volcano” that I’ll choose to leave up to the reader’s imagination). This pride that he takes in denigrating himself (on television, no less) cements the idea that because he takes “grandeur in amorality” (Kristeva 3), England transforms *himself* into the abject subject, not just his actions or his excrement. In their refusal to “respect borders, positions, rules” (Kristeva 4) of the human form and the laws of etiquette and the world around them, the *Jackass* crew does not just abject their bodies (physically), but also their selves (socially).

Benign Violations

In slapstick performance, there are four types of pain: accidental, random, intentional, and real (Peacock). While over-the-top and comedic in nature, *Jackass* explicitly does not trade in theatrics, meaning that the pain and stunts exhibited onscreen are *real*, never simulated or staged. A crucial comedic principle at work here is the Benign Violation Theory. Formulated by Dr. Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren, this theory proposes that humor occurs “when (1) a circumstance is appraised as a violation, (2) the circumstance is appraised as benign, and (3) both appraisals occur simultaneously” (McGraw and Warren 75). A violation is anything that seems threatening or departs from a norm in a potentially negative way. This theory could be viewed as an elaboration to the Incongruity Theory of comedy, which suggests that humor occurs when an object or event breaks routine/expectation for an unexpected outcome. Henri Bergson writes that humor arises out of mechanical inelasticity, wherein “the attitudes, gestures, and movements of the human body are laughable in the exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine” (Bergson 218). Blind obstinance, inability to adapt to unforeseen circumstances,

and steadfast inflexibility are qualities of basic automatons, and when humans resist and/or succumb to these rigidities, this twist of violations turning benign makes a situation humorous. Violations on their own, however, are not humorous. In order to induce a laugh, the subject must be convinced that the violation is OK, safe, or acceptable (benign). This explains why, for example, tickling can be a humorous violation. It takes a violent situation and removes the pain/risk from it, and surprisingly so. Tickling and play-fighting are received as benign/funny because they are mock-attacks, yet still a violation of personal and physical space. Tickling oneself, however, is not funny, because there is no violation, no surprise. Additionally, neither is getting tickled by a stranger, because the victim does not know or trust the aggressor, resulting in a strictly malign violation.

It is commonly agreed upon that the pain of others is an inherently negative occurrence, a violation in any case. In order to decipher why folks laugh at someone falling off a roof or getting kicked in the groin, we must trace it to the concept of *Benign Masochism*, the phenomenon of “enjoying initially negative experiences that the body (brain) falsely interprets as threatening” (Rozin et al.). This goes beyond laughing at the performance of pain and can be applied to other common violations like enjoying spicy food (oral irritation), extreme sports and horror movies (fear), or crying at sad movies (sadness). In a University of Pennsylvania study, participants were asked to rank their enjoyment of several generally unpleasant occurrences (categories included sad, burn, disgust, fear, pain, alcohol, exhaust, and bitter). While this experiment showed little differences between the sexes, women overwhelmingly enjoyed activities involving sadness (i.e. fiction or music) and men generally scored higher in categories of pain and alcohol (Rozin et al).

The process of receiving enjoyment from viewing pain must involve what is called a *hedonic reversal*, the conversion of a (usually) innate negative experience into a positive experience (Rozin et al). Traditionally, in slapstick performance, there is a general understanding between the audience that the performer is not in any danger, that the events presented on stage are not real, and that their pain is merely simulated through prop effects and physical acting choices. This is what permits the audience to laugh. The violation is shown to be benign. Stephen Halliwell (1991), in his analysis of the role of laughter in ancient Greek society, defines this phenomenon as *playful laughter*, which involves a “psychological relaxation; and a shared acceptance of the self-sufficient presuppositions or conventions of such laughter by all who participate in it” (283). On the flip side of this, Halliwell characterizes *consequential laughter* as laughing *at* the performer, and through the laughter inflecting a sense of malice and antagonism, wishing pain, shame, or embarrassment onto the victim. In everyday life, people are unlikely to laugh at the pain of another unless they believe it is in some way deserved. The gruesome and gnarly comedy of *Jackass* combines these two ways of viewing into an appeal that laughs at pain *because* it is real.

When the pain is real, however, what makes certain kinds of pain benign? The factors in play here would be timing and psychological distance. Mark Twain famously quipped that “humor is tragedy plus time.” A major factor in someone’s humorous perception and reaction to an event is their closeness to that event and/or those involved. This analysis is what scientists call psychological distance (McGraw et al). There are four types of psychological distance that can either help or hurt an event/joke/behavior’s humorousness.

Temporal Distance constitutes the passage of time, wherein we are permitted to laugh at, for example, old war stories or ancient tragedies because they occurred so long ago that we are no longer feeling their serious effects. This can also be applied to the mode of television, in which it is understood that lead Jackass Johnny Knoxville baiting a bucking bull while wearing a blindfold and a red shirt (2006) happened in the past and implies no current, further existential threat to Knoxville's body.

Social Distance concerns a viewer's familiarity with a subject. This is why disparaging jokes are more amusing to people who are not the target of the joke (e.g. sexist jokes are funnier to men). Monty Python's John Cleese once remarked, "comedy is very like tragedy; it's just a question of whether you are sympathetic to the people who are suffering or whether you're standing back a bit and laughing at them." Disgusting, off-putting, painful jokes and events are often funnier when they happen to other people/strangers, due to the amount of distance between the viewer and the victim. If one has no relationship whatsoever to the victim of a violation, this separation allows the viewer to perceive it as benign and with laughter, guilt-free. This partially explains the huge popularity of online FAIL compilations, various series of short videos "documenting an act of failure, often involving unexpected humiliation, embarrassment, pain or self-ownage" (Urban Dictionary). These videos are always brief, surprising, out-of-context, and anonymous. They cut away right after the moment of "failure," leaving out the physical, social, or legal repercussions of their actions. Plus, the fact that the viewer is highly unlikely to personally recognize any of the victims of an epic FAIL allows them to laugh *only* at their misfortune, without concern for their personal wellbeing and/or bruised ego. Naturally, a healthy dose of *schadenfreude* is necessary to appreciate this type of content.

Connected under the blanket theory of benign masochism, *schadenfreude* specifically refers to deriving pleasure from the misfortune of *others*.

The third type of psychological distance is *Spatial Distance*, involving things that happen far away, say, on the other side of the world or in the opposite part of the room. The increased physical distance has the potential to lessen the threat of a violation. For example, highly disturbing photographs were shown to be more amusing to laboratory participants when the photographs were presented from a distant visual perspective (McGraw et al). A dangerous fall seems less threatening when you are far enough away to not see the blood or separated by a television screen.

The final kind, *Hypothetical Distance*, only applies to when it is understood that something is not real but imagined. This explains why animated cartoons like *Looney Tunes* or *Family Guy* can get away with much more wild and obscene instances of violence and satire than their live-action counterparts. Since the characters are not actually real, it is abundantly clear that no threat is actually posed to them, due to their Hypothetical Distance from reality, so they have clearance to go way farther over the line than real people acting in the real world. When Wile E. Coyote falls off a cliff only to have a boulder land on his head and crush him, then causes himself to explode with a faulty stick of dynamite, it is obvious that the drawing itself feels no actual pain, not to mention the fact that the character always resets back to full strength in the next scene/episode.

Sometimes, however, distance has the potential to hurt humor. Recent research illustrates that “although tragedies are more humorous when temporally, socially, hypothetically, or spatially distant, mild mishaps are more humorous when psychologically close” (McGraw et al. 603). For example, a small blunder like a stranger slipping on a

banana peel is not as potentially funny as when it happens to your friend. Due to your relative familiarity and decreased distance, the mild violation turns benign. Likewise, your friend slipping on a banana peel is funnier if it happened today, rather than ten years ago, given that they don't get seriously hurt. A person all the way in China slipping on a banana is not as funny as when it happens right in front of you, and a drawing of such cannot be as humorous as when it happens in person. This could be described as the "You Had to Be There" phenomenon.

Given that psychological distance "helps reduce the threat of aversive events" (McGraw et al. 603), the painful comedy of a show like *Jackass* flips this on its head, where a stunt or prank is seen as often funnier or more successful, the *less* distance there is. Several times throughout the series, Johnny Knoxville has willingly stepped into the ring with professional fighters, begging for failure like a true masochist, "a victim in need of a torturer" (Deleuze 20). Naturally, when he goes up against the heavyweight boxer Butterbean in a setting as odd and incongruent as a department store (2002), he gets knocked out in the first round. With little to no psychological distance between the victim and the observer, there ought to be nothing funny about it: Knoxville is a familiar person getting legitimately hurt, on-camera but up close, with innocent and confused bystanders that watch in true horror as it happens. Through the stark elimination of nearly any psychological distance between the viewer and the victim, *Jackass* is able to *subvert*, *invert*, and *pervert* the Benign Violation Theory by rewriting its rules, where, "because the masochist enacts his or her submission for the sake of pleasure rather than punishment, masochism challenges the passive and active binaries that underwrite hierarchical social relations" (Bromley 558). We're not glad to see Knoxville hurt, in a cruel sense, per se, but

we are indeed glad that it's him and not us, especially since he's given us permission to laugh (it's his movie after all).

Contrast this with the culture surrounding professional wrestling, another globally popular form of pain-centric mass-media geared towards young men that hit its peak in the early 2000's. Wrestling canonically promotes a hegemonic ideal of masculinity, built around subordinating alternative and nontraditional forms of masculinity. Wrestling is both a pseudo-sport and a form of mainstream entertainment that presents masculinity in its "culturally ideal form," emphasizing physical size, strength, and aggression. Wrestlers are able to "withstand" the most horrific violence imaginable (it is a staged performance, sorry for spoiling the magic) and get back up and keep fighting. The stamina and conviction to stay in a fight until the bitter end is indicative of a "real man," since real men never back down from conflict. For example, the Undertaker confronts Ric Flair about his aggressive attack on him the previous evening (RAW 2-18-02): Undertaker: "you hit me in the head with that pipe last night." Ric Flair replies, "that was me just being a man." Through this display of bravado and belittlement, wrestlers effectively reaffirm their masculinity by emasculating other men.

In "Department Store Boxing," Knoxville reaffirms his masculinity by emasculating *himself*. *Jackass* redefines what constitutes a true violation and throws under the bus the assumed social standards that would never otherwise render it benign, socially abjecting and obscuring any and all rules, all to appease the chaotic thrill of watching another man get hurt.

Indeed, a degree of cold-hearted schadenfreude is required to laugh at Knoxville's reckless stupidity for electing this harm onto his own body, but in order to appreciate this

spectacle, one must be able to simultaneously identify with the victim and disidentify from the self. We identify with the victim here because even though we do not physically feel Johnny's pain, we relate to the pain on a human level and experience an involuntary reaction in response to diffusion of the ego, the abject separation of the subject and the self. We can also identify with the room and surrounding crew, laughing *with* them, *at* Knoxville. When the innocent bystanders gawk at the situation with silent dread and sober concern, the tension this contrast produces can also produce a laugh from the audience member at home watching safely from their couch. This shared reaction at a painful image creates a burst of cathartic laughter that both acknowledges and rejects human fallibility. On the flip side, a necessary dissociation of identity is required when watching a program so lewd and offensive as *Jackass*, specifically the "ability to separate myself from a qualm or a nausea that comes in from the outside. That is, in my ability to manage my bodily intensity without coming wholly undone by it, to dissociate enough to bind the affect" (Richmond 6). If laughter constitutes, as Henri Bergson put it, "a momentary anesthesia of the heart" (215), appreciating this violent display becomes in essence a laxative of the heart. Here, laughter serves as a physical release, in the place of nausea or vomiting, creating what Scott C. Richmond calls a "geographic indifferenciation of the self" (4), where "identification is in this sense a disidentification, but only in this sense: I distinguish myself from the other as a condition of our connection across boundaries" (Richmond 6). The abject is defined by the recognition of what the self *is not*. Here, the choice is made to identify *with* the abject, not to reject it, but to revel in its unseemliness.

Licensed Transgression

The idea that this identification with the victim results in laughter rests wholly on the assumption of the viewer's *ambivalence*, meaning that the viewer *must* reason that he doesn't have an overt existential problem with watching a friend/TV character put himself through such physical duress. In this way, it serves to look at *Jackass* as characteristic of farce, the theatrical form where the "guiding rule is to tread a fine line between offense and entertainment" (Milner Davis 2). Comedic farces are populated not by complex sympathetic characters, but more simplified comic types who "lack flexibility and [are] dominated by a rigid mental set" (Bergson 96). So, too, in *Jackass*, we learn next to nothing about the main cast of Jackasses outside the context of their sophomoric physical degradation and debasement on the show (even though they are indeed real people, not fictional characters). We (consciously or not) choose to neglect any other important details about them in favor of perceiving them only in this basic way, as comedic *objects*, simply at the mercy of their next stunt or prank, ready to reset every time, just like Wile E. Coyote. This emotionally distances the characters, implying that "they lack the flexibility, the self-consciousness and the unique individuality of fully rounded human life" (Milner Davis 5), permitting a suspension of empathy in the audience. In so doing, farce writers and *Jackass* performers allow themselves to deliberately overstep boundaries of etiquette normally afforded to characters in dramas and everyday people. As this art form becomes a playground for high spirits, self-indulgence, and overall rudeness, the necessary ambivalence required to enjoy it speaks volumes to "the strange ability of human beings to consent under some conditions to acts which under other conditions would be disbarred by

their own value systems” (Milner Davis 12). Throughout the centuries there has been a proven demand for the consumption and celebration of human ugliness.

Through tone and subject matter, *Jackass* also exhibits classical and Bakhtinian notions of the carnivalesque, in the “temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men and of certain norms and prohibitions of usual life” (Bakhtin 15). In ancient Rome, each December brought on a festival called Saturnalia to honor the god Saturn. It was a time of behavioral license and role reversal, where masters would serve fineries to their slaves in an ironic celebration of liberty for both slaves and freedmen alike. Similarly, the Romans also threw annual festivals to honor Bacchus, the god of wine, intoxication, and ecstasy. The carnival of Bacchanalia represents a brief purge of all unseemly and tawdry emotions and practices, such as excessive eating and drinking, sexual promiscuity, and a transitory license to foulmouth authority and speak truth to power. Even though it was designed as a way to keep commoners in line for the other 364 days of the year, Carnival served as a liberating ceremony to let out and indulge in all of humanity’s most ignoble and depraved urges. Much like the American Mardi Gras and Brazilian Carnaval celebrations of today, the authorized transgression exhibited in these festivals evokes a communal laughter and a focus on bringing the low high and the high low, a temporary collective release of social tensions, without actually changing the status quo.

In season three of the series, *Jackass* took the imagery of flipping social hierarchies quite literally, where a skit called “Wee King” (2001) found cast member Jason “Wee Man” Acuña (a little person) dressed in full royal regalia (crown, scepter, robe, etc.), standing on a long red carpet, dragged behind a moving car as if it were his chariot. The car frequently speeds up, causing him to fall off the carpet. From ancient times through

Modern era Europe, dwarves were employed (bought and sold) as attendants or entertainers to kings and queens (partially to make the royalty look larger), often exploited for amusement due to their unusual bodies. In the traditions of Saturnalia, there was crowned a *Saturnalicius Princeps* ("Ruler of the Saturnalia"). Also known as the "Lord of Misrule," a slave or commoner selected by the crowd was given the right to preside over the feasts and conduct light-hearted mischief. In dressing a little person as a king and hazardously traipsing him around, *Jackass* is able to both lampoon the incongruity of a dwarf king and undermine the absurdity of traditional regal decorum, while celebrating a carnivalistic status reversal and honoring the fool, even if merely exploiting it for a cheap laugh.

In the free-spirited public naughtiness of *Jackass*, this upending of social conventions through dangerous stunts, gross-out and genital humor, and invasive public pranks highlights the effectiveness of *grotesque realism*, whose bread and butter "is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract" (Bakhtin 19). On the flip side of this argument, however, since carnival's systemic reversal traditionally represents the oppositional culture of the oppressed, Robert Stam argues that the privileged socioeconomic status of a bunch of white boys gallivanting about invalidates the spirit of carnival, for

it would be wrong, for example, to see the beer-fueled carousing of fraternity boys in *Animal House* as a Bakhtinian celebration of people's culture, since fraternity boys and their macho rituals form an integral part of the power structure which authentic carnival symbolically overturns. (Stam, qtd in Walsh)

Indeed, as we shall see, when traditional power dynamics are simultaneously muddied and ultimately upheld, it can lead to a *displaced abjection* (Stallybrass and White), where by

virtue of this festive carnivalesque mocking, the low are brought even lower (ex. blackface minstrelsy, gay jokes, sexist play). In turning the mocking on both themselves and the proverbial “Other,” the *Jackass* crew exercises their misogynist white privilege, but in a way that aims to skirt criticism on the basis of naïve stupidity and the impression of relative harmlessness. This may be rooted in the desire to assume the metaphoric body of the oppressed, given that “the masochist’s pleasure serves as a subversive substitute for the disciplinary effects that the ideologies of oppression presumably seek” (Bromley 562).

Privilege, Homoeroticism, and Minstrelsy

One way in which the Jackasses highlight the opposition between their privilege and masochistic vulnerability is through burlesque displays of homoeroticism. In an effort to both lampoon and uphold their steadfastness in their heterosexuality, the anus is routinely jeopardized. This becomes a mark of courting homosexuality while simultaneously conquering it. Fintan Walsh writes that “while the violation of the male body poses a threat to male authority, penetrating the male body runs the risk of terminally disrupting the codes of heteronormative heterosexuality” (4). In a stunt called “The Strongman” (2006), the crew sets up a twisted version of the popular carnival game (also known as the “high striker” or “strength tester”) where one swings a hammer to propel a metal puck to the top of a tower with the goal of ringing the bell at the top. Here, the metal puck has been replaced with a golden dildo being shot directly up into cast member Bam Margera’s spread cheeks, as he nervously sits perched atop the structure, ten or so feet in the air. Chris Pontius plays the titular strongman and wears garb resembling a vintage bodybuilder (a tight-fitting, leopard-print one-piece) and a large fake mustache. He speaks in an exaggerated low affect, combining a flagrant parody of hegemonic masculine bravado

with the flippant homoeroticism that ends the sketch with a metal phallus literally propelled with brute force up into Bam's anus (sorry, Mom). This juxtaposition of these two seemingly opposing versions of masculinity not only produces painful and cathartic laughter but reinforces Bam's status as a Man in this situation, on the basis that he can survive the supposed humiliation of having the chief visual marker of homosexuality literally thrust upon (and into) him, a triumphant overcoming of "male heterosexuality's abject correlate that defies the border-controls of paternal Law" (Walsh 4). After the painful stunt, the crew laughs and applauds, both praising and ridiculing Bam's willing endurance of forceful homoerotic penetration. This represents a carnivalistic celebration of the grotesque elements of human nature, where "the openings and orifices of this carnival body are emphasized, not its closure or its finish" (Bakhtin, qtd in Mercer 6), highlighting the valorization of the disgusting and a disavowal of traditional decorum. In this desire to occupy the position of the debased, they exercise their privileged position to do so by skirting the lines of heterosexual taboo, yet laugh at themselves in the process, placing the joke on the exaggerated ritual of (a narrow and sophomoric portrayal of) homosexuality, boosting their own (definition of) manhood in the process.

It could be useful to contextualize the sadomasochistic cishet (cisgender and heterosexual) white man's perverse propensity towards the performance of gayness through the lens of blackface minstrelsy. Cultural historian Eric Lott identifies the Black mask as "a way to play with collective fears of the degraded and threatening—and male—Other while maintaining some symbolic control over them" (Lott 25). Traditional blackface performance was designed to both stage and construct symbolic boundaries between the dominant White entity and the "Other" (the Black body and culture). As such,

maintaining the racial status quo and the high/low power dynamic is crucial to the structure of the performance, where the goal is to laugh *at* the abjected Other by physically embodying it.

One of the most popular recurring comedic characters in the *Jackass* universe is Party Boy, essentially a homoerotic minstrel figure, played by Chris Pontius. In each appearance, he dresses in a tracksuit and carries a small boombox, then rips off the suit to reveal nothing but a g-string thong and a bow tie, reminiscent of a male stripper. Blasting steamy House music, Party Boy giddily thrusts his pelvis and bottom in all directions, dancing around in public, making sure to get right in the personal space of any and all unsuspecting strangers, trolling them with his put-on homosexual energy. After all, he just “feels like partying.” Here, Pontius embodies a cliché stereotype that would be most threatening to the hegemonic masculine power structure: the gay exotic dancer who comes on too strong and won’t let up. By weaponizing and parodying this fear for the purpose of juvenile comedy and general annoyance, Pontius is able to strip this representation of heterosexual collective fear of its potential threat, reducing it to a mere public agitation and a mocking exercise of masculine privilege, rather than an affront to one’s (his own) identity, a true signal of patriarchal mastery, representing “both a denial and a pleasurable conversion of a hysterical set of... fears” (Lott 31).

A moment in season two finds Party Boy—this time completely bottomless—running through and disrupting a local team’s football practice. American football has long been held as one of the most prevalent and universal symbols of macho straight masculinity, and by encroaching on that space with irreverent, in-your-face homoeroticism, Pontius highlights what Christine Tourino calls his “surplus of gender:”

The men in *Jackass*, however, are not positioned socially in such a way that requires the protection, defense, and augmentation of their masculinity, and so they are free to undermine it. This ability to disregard the signal rules governing white heterosexual masculinity puts their surplus of gender, sexuality, and race in evidence for all to see (Tourino 11).

This “surplus of gender” illuminates an exertion of privilege and identity *based* in the undermining of such. Combined with the righteous self-pity of white male backlash and the paranoid pretension of the Hipster movement, “an ironic white masculinity is produced, one that is self-marginalizing and therefore implausibly victimized” (Brayton 69). This ironic point of view acknowledges the fragility of masculinity, but, in so exaggerating it, overcomes it using hegemonic modes of manhood as the butt of jokes by placing themselves as the punchline. Since these individuals come from a place of masculine and racial privilege, enacting pain/ridicule on themselves creates a contrived oppression that comes from a narcissistic need for recognition and a sense of belonging achieved through homosocial bonding and self-abjection, where “bromantic community here forms around a democracy of shared sadomasochistic gaze.” (Feil 182). In a (relatively) high social position, they have nowhere to punch but down, projecting and displacing their abjection onto both the gay caricatures they emulate and themselves.

Worth noting, the Jackasses, in all their movies and TV shows, never seriously exercise their virulent heterosexuality in the pursuit of women. This is consistent with many representations of masculinity in mainstream male buddy comedy movies (from the early-2000s particularly) that generally prioritize the homosocial relationship, in favor of eschewing the heterosexual love interest that metaphorically stands in the way (see *Dude*,

Where's My Car, *Saving Silverman*). These films portray boyish immature men that, due to their callow ignorance, “are therefore allowed to grapple with the massive forces of cultural change that threaten conventional notions of white manhood without succumbing to them” (Greven 21). Thus, when seen as a “consolatory catharses for white manhood,” in harnessing the collective misplaced resentment towards the advanced social progression of women (added onto repressed sexual frustration, in many cases) and the perceived looming threat of homosexuality, “the teen comedies, therefore incorporate as much sexual perversity and transgression as possible in order to make their ultimate evacuation of these perversities and transgressions total” (Greven 21). So, in order to affirm subjective standards of manhood, these characters/performers tend to forgo the pursuit of “the fairer sex” in favor constructing a boys-only world comprised of masculine rituals of physical recklessness “which directly engage and reject codes of particularly white heterosexual masculinity” (Tourino 4).

Given all their complex relationships regarding homosexuality and phallic imagery, the *Jackass* crew certainly are nude or mostly nude around each other quite often, whether for use in a stunt or simply lounging around. This casual treatment of the naked male body presents it not as a sexual object, but as a playful disruptor, surprisingly devoid of misogynist and homoerotic undertones. Its presence is not presented as a rejection or necessarily a courtship of homosexuality, but as a perverse violation of social etiquette and personal space, creating a platonic and fraternal atmosphere that transcends sex, just “guys being guys.”

In the rejection of traditional practices of heterosexuality, the awkward, offensive, and exaggerated mimicry of gay behavior (in order to assert dominance over it, perhaps

even unconsciously to control the projection of one's own repressed feelings) in a joking way comes to hold a greater social value than the unironic pursuit of sex with girls, in which male control is no longer implied. These jokey homosexual portrayals and encounters are emblematic of the strength of the *bromance*, a male homosocial (and markedly heterosexual) bond that irreverently appears to blur the lines between friends and lovers. This harps on the trend of "straight camp" in the 1990's, when gender and sexuality distinctions were beginning to break down in popular culture, combined with the popularity of "gross-out" sex comedy films at the time, in which male buddies "comically invoked their proximity to gay taste in order to deny it and, by extension, belied any hint of queerness creeping into red-blooded American masculinity" (Feil 166). Crucial to this relationship is a flare of "smiling self-awareness, amused acknowledgment, and tongue-in-cheek self-labeling" (Feil 166). It's not gay if you constantly call attention to it, making clear you are in on the joke. With this coy winkiness firmly established, males can (within this logic) get away with harnessing the vulgarity of stereotypical masculinity, while rejecting and ultimately ignoring the sexual aspects of the queer lifestyle (anything beyond simple, randy eroticism), in favor of more surface level "feminine" traits. In "Playgirl Pontius" (2001), Pontius poses fully nude in a highly suggestive photoshoot where the goal is to take his "vanity shots" and get him "accepted" by the erotic magazine. While lathering Pontius's body with oil, a crew member cheekily nicknamed "Denny the Oil Boy" facetiously retorts, "I'm not gay, I mean, some guys think that just because you're lubing a guy down with lotion, that you're gay, but I mean it's just enhancing the look, making him look better." This sarcastic language suggests his awareness of the absurdity of the situation, yet his acknowledgement effectively distances himself from that which he aims

to parody, wherein queer and feminine eroticism is seen as a joke simply because it is being incongruously occupied by heterosexual men, lampooning both the male gaze and queer gaze.

This dedication to the carnivalistic reversal of social norms creates a chaotic “ceremony of uselessness; it is obstruction on parade” (Tourino 5). In one of the seldom instances the Jackasses so much as *interact* with women on screen, they hire four Dutch prostitutes to compete in a paddleboat race (2001). In this case, the women are treated merely as props. Although they engage in no sexual behavior, the “captains”, Knoxville and Pontius, still exercise patriarchal control over the prostitutes, aggressively and facetiously barking encouragement at them through megaphones. The reappropriation of such an icon of greedy, boyish masculinity and desire (prostitutes in the red-light-district) into a plaything—essentially a racehorse—exudes an anarchistic comedic perspective which rejects hegemonic tropes of masculinity, in favor of producing a masculine narrative consisting of both control and chaos.

The engagement in flippant homoeroticism can also be read as a performance of white impunity. In *Jackass: The Movie*, Party Boy travels to Japan and does his same old schtick, intruding on groups of people in public by thrusting and gyrating his junk in their vicinity, injecting the exaggerated performance of homosexual energy into a culture that is generally not as open to such. He invades an arcade and an electronics store by jumping and dancing in front of people who are not in on the joke, forcing them to acknowledge his presence, pressuring them to either push him away or leave the area, flaunting his relative impunity. The fact that Pontius is the only white person among a sea of Japanese puts this sequence in a new context, where he can use his white privilege to “other” himself in a way

he could not in America. He arrogantly evades seizure by a policeman with a sly grin and even steals his hat, continuously attempting to suggestively dance on him. Instead of becoming a subject of oppression, he transforms and harnesses his “otherness” into an object of ridicule, delighting in the creation of confusion and controversy (especially at the irritation of law enforcement), utilizing his Western colonialist cockiness as a shield from persecution and punishment, all under the guise that the joke is on *him*, since he is the one looking foolish, sticking out.

A person’s race resides not in nature but in the contingencies of politics and culture. The United States has remained a majority white country in sheer numbers, but the term “white” disguises and smooths over the diversity and hierarchies within such an ethnic demographic. As such, whiteness can be conflated as a neutral identity, where, due to its amalgamation of many social ties and ambiguous ancestral origins, whiteness is often codified as the absence of race. Similarly, because of the historical and systemic whitewashing of movies and TV, white is often considered the default race. If a character’s race is not specified, it can be assumed they’ll be assumed as white. Tides are changing, and Hollywood is now welcoming more diverse voices and greenlighting overdue representation, but so far that is beside the point.

Whiteness is generally defined by its position of power over others, whether it be through colonialist brute force or social microaggressions. Historically, whites represent the oppressors, not the oppressed. Due to a lack of genuine racial maltreatment and injustice, some whites conflate their personal socioeconomic woes with real racial oppression, in the spirit of clinging to a group identity and displacing personal responsibility. This manifests itself as a projection of racial fetishization (Mailer, Lott),

where, in an effort to escape the white body, whether through white guilt or misplaced grievance and resentment, whites can effectively eschew their own whiteness, utilizing their privilege to reflexively jump in and out of oppressed identities and positions. Due to such normalization of whiteness and minstrelsy, these attempts like Party Boy's are often seen as whimsical.

In search of the masochistic thrill that erupts from usurping the position of the oppressed, the *Jackass* crew frequently appropriates violent measures historically associated with non-white targets and even torture. In exercising white imperviousness to persecution, this “stages a kind of race reversal: a photo-negative image in which social threats most often suffered by non-whites are elected by whites instead” (Tourino 14). The Jackasses—who nearly always end up relatively unharmed—frequently play around with tasers, get shot by fire hoses and military-grade tactical pellets, and allow themselves to be ravaged by attack dogs. These methods of punishment/law enforcement are normally enacted on individuals on the margins of society, and while these real victims (of police brutality, for example) have no physical control over this maltreatment, the Jackasses elect it, twisting it for entertainment.

The Jackasses' power of whiteness is often maintained and upheld through its contrast with people of color positioned as comedic objects. A sketch called “Burglars” (2002) finds Knoxville and Bam busting through the ceiling of an office building, tackily dressed as burglars. As the many white workers stand in shock and confusion at the prank robbery, an African American man makes no absolutely hesitation to sprint straight out of the building and around the block, making it clear that they play by a different set of rules. This instinctual and fearful rapid departure is presented as the main joke of the skit,

contrasted with the white burglars' shabby escape. They are all able to laugh it off afterwards, once they are told it was an orchestrated prank, but the violation turned benign stems not only from the fact that the burglary was staged, but from the relief the black man and other bystanders receive from learning the assailants were white and therefore, in theory, non-threatening. They are able to divorce these stereotypes from their racialized constructs and laugh at the Jackasses' dangerous hijinks as *parody*, since their whiteness allows them to comfortably hop back and forth between racialized identities.

Electric shock is a technique often utilized in military torture. In *Jackass: The Movie*, the Jackasses collectively place muscle stimulators on their genitals and nipples, laughing as they go, competing to see who can withstand the shock the longest, abjecting the mode of torture by upending its context, using it as a perverse test of manliness, a performance of their sick masculinity. After all, a similar stunt is what got the show greenlit in the first place. In 1998, then-aspiring actor and writer Johnny Knoxville (born Phillip John Clapp) pitched a video to the *Big Brother* skateboarding magazine that caught the attention of future *Jackass* director and executive producer Jeff Tremaine. The stunt featured Knoxville testing out various self-defense equipment on himself, including pepper spray, a stun gun, a taser, and a .38 caliber handgun with a bulletproof vest. The flippancy with which he treats these dangerous weapons underscores his motives and point of view in the scenario, where he forgoes their normal function as police weapons to be used in pursuit of a reckless assailant in favor of expending his own physical capital, getting the best camera shots, and orchestrating self-promotion as a way of getting discovered by a big-shot TV producer (which happened for Knoxville almost immediately following). As stated previously, since the Jackasses occupy a relatively dominant socioeconomic

position, they have no option but to turn the punishment on themselves, a way to “engage in alternate ways of asserting their authority, and enjoy camaraderie as a result” (Tourino 15). They do it because they *can*, and as a result, their exemption from consequence *itself* becomes a violation rendered benign, resulting in a privileged yet communal laughter.

Fantasy of Indestructibility

This under-the-surface factor of white privilege creates a fantasy of indestructibility. Some of the *Jackass* stunts are designed to fail spectacularly, some are dangerous for the sake of pulling off an extreme-sports trick, but many position the victim literally as a target for impending agony, nothing more. A scene called “Human Bull’s-eye” (2001) sees cast member Brandon DiCamillo wearing a white jumpsuit with a bull’s-eye painted on the front, as he gets pelted from close range with footballs, baseballs, tomatoes, and eggs, much to the delight of those doing the throwing. The same on-the-nose imagery is evoked in Johnny Knoxville’s iconic 2001 *Rolling Stone* cover shoot, where, tied to a large bull’s-eye with the center of the target painted on his chest, he is relentlessly bombarded with a barrage of paintball pellets shot by his buddies, shielded only by a protective cup over his groin. This image of Knoxville simulates a firing squad scenario, where, by placing himself in the position of a target but to the outcome of a benign violation (real guns, only mildly painful pellets), he flaunts his relative imperviousness to this situation in real life, instead proudly celebrating it as a moment representative of popular culture, a portrait of a masochist icon to be published and printed in newsstands across the country and the world.

This phenomenon of the Jackasses placing themselves in the position of (metaphorically) staring down the barrel of the gun (as an exercise of status) is especially

apparent in their stunts involving the mastery of animals. They frequently position themselves literally as human bait, whether for alligators (Steve-O walks a tightrope over a pool of gators with raw meat hanging out of his jockstrap), snakes (“Anaconda Ball Pit”), or hammerhead sharks (one of the seldom times Steve-O has backed out of a stunt). This treatment of the body essentially *begging* to be mutilated “seems to endorse the recuperation of a masculinity defined by its powers of endurance rather than by its powers of productivity; a masculinity which is qualified by submitting the male body to reflexively empowering laws of endurance” (Walsh 12). The courtship of unpredictable and uncontrollable animals seeks to test not any particular skill or feat of virtuosity, but the lengths to which the male body can withstand and in essence conquer forces of nature beyond any human influence, creating not only a rush of adrenaline but a boosted sense of identity, (de)based in this twisted version of bravery.

This fantasy of indestructibility is certainly present in the performers, but in many ways, also in the viewer. In a *Rolling Stone* video interview celebrating *Jackass*’ fifteenth anniversary, cast member and former professional snowboarder Ehren McGehey commented, in regards to the show’s appeal, “you can’t really fake that stuff. And I think that’s one of the reasons people were really drawn to the show is that they could watch people destroy themselves without actually having to do it themselves.” Justifiably, the stunts and mischief exhibited on the show would not be received with such festive laughter if replicated in the real world, free of context. As such, *Jackass* indulges white male fantasies of rejecting traditional codes of behavior that rely on decorum, seriousness, and general rule-following. In an abstract sense, the show itself is representative of a carnivalesque suspension of hierarchies, projecting the fantasy that young, uneducated

lower-middle-class (for lack of a better term) jackasses can succeed on mainstream television by wrecking their bodies for fun.

In public discourse, white working-class men are often portrayed as racist, conservative, drunk, etc. Regardless of if they actually are any of these things, adolescent white men, in this way, are abjected in popular culture, since they exist within the in-between zone on the spectrum of “colonizer” and “colonized.” The audience of young men discussed in this paper in theory largely lack the life experience, will power, and social capital to enact any substantial physical and political upheaval. As such, this group often feels unduly and negatively characterized and stigmatized as flatly representative those undesirable descriptors mentioned above. This does not mean, however, that I argue in favor of the concept of reverse-racism. It does, however, ostensibly inspire reactionary ideologies built around the resentment of such characterization, such that manifest themselves as a semi-desperate quest to justify one’s own anger, boredom, or resentment through the adoption of a false victimhood status.

To the extent of the recognition of these dichotomies, reputations, and characterizations, *Jackass* makes a political statement in shaking off stereotypes by doubling them down on them hard, for the sake of making themselves laugh and others uncomfortable, a privileged attitude of testy invincibility only white folks could seemingly get away with. In this, young white male viewers can relate to the reckless dopes who not only look like them but behave in foolish ways that society tells them not to. The show’s ideology (or rather, rejection of ideology) pushes against the idea of meritocracy, lamenting the idea that certain people may not feel satisfied with what advances in status in life they believe they are owed (especially in relation to the rapidly shifting multicultural

demographic landscape), combatting this resentment with an irreverent disavowal of any hegemonic or “acceptable” manifestation of the self, turning the hurt back onto themselves, as a manner of controlling and mastering their own environment. In the *Time* magazine review of *Jackass*’ first series, James Poniewozik contends that “performers like Knoxville seem to be staking out an alternative jockdom, a macho loserhood.” They deride and ridicule traditional male proving rituals that place emphasis on physical strength and smarts, subverting these boundaries through parody, where, “by openly mocking themselves, they suggest that they are secure in their masculinity” (Yochim 120). A “real man” does not need to put his masculinity on display; he does not need to constantly prove himself and can even scoff off such displays as out-and-out dumb.

The show’s consistency of form may also be soothing to some viewers. Tourino posits that “working-class men (whose livelihood often demands real physical risk) may be comforted by the repetition of a parody of physical risk that rarely results in lasting damage” (9). This implies an environment where people consistently avoid consequences for their recklessness. The show’s lack of a linear narrative and emphasis on disconnected stunts suggests a more primal laughter, rooted in the repudiation of order and rationalism, in both thought and behavior. By purposely and frequently courting humiliation, revulsion, mutilation, and the threat of death, Knoxville and company’s “spin on the genre is to use symbols and settings that would normally be considered banal or harmless or even sacred” (Concepcion). As such, viewers are able to vicariously experience things that human beings most wish to avoid. *Jackass*, while disjointed and relatively unorganized, follows the same repeatable discipline of style, a predictable consistency that promises: they are going to get hurt, but not so much that they can’t do it again next week.

This implication of indestructibility is empowering, yet ultimately hollow. The show's first few episodes began with a cheeky warning that "MTV insists that neither you or any of your dumb little buddies attempt this dangerous crap." When the show's creators were plagued with several controversies involving young people attempting to recreate stunts from the show or in the style of the show, they changed the warning to a more serious one, now explicitly discouraging viewers from re-creating the stunts, which it says are performed "under very strict control and supervision." One stark example of copycat behavior gone too far is the case of Thomas Hitz, a twelve-year-old who suffered second and third-degree burns after attempting to recreate a stunt called "Human Barbecue" at home with his friends. "I don't blame myself, I kind of blame the show," said Hitz, whose family decided not to sue MTV. "We did it because we saw [it] on *Jackass* and we were copying the show. In real life, kids don't think. They think they're invincible, so they don't worry about what will happen" (*Entertainment Weekly*, 2001). Obviously, viewing someone like Knoxville as a role model did not work out so well for this young boy.

This fan perception is emblematic of a parasocial relationship between performer and fan. Viewers (especially adolescents) can garner a feeling of knowing a media figure personally, after repeated and routine viewings, and can develop the same type of relationship as they would with real-life friends (Kirvesmies). This idea has oft been explored through the lens of marketing through social media influencers. Henry Jenkins argues that "fans construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images, articulating concerns which often go unvoiced within the dominant media" (23). This idea and Hitz's case speak to the fact that modern television viewers have been raised to become desensitized to violent content on screen.

George Gerbner's cultivation theory suggests that exposure to media, over time, subtly "cultivates" viewers' perceptions of reality. This is not to say that kids believe everything they see on TV, but that television is a prominent avenue in which they are socialized to certain prevalent topics. In a study of violence on prime-time network television from 1973-1996, more than 9 out of 10 Saturday morning children's programs (90.3%) and 8 out of 10 characters (81.0%) were involved in violence (Gerbner et al). Whether through cartoon programs like *Looney Tunes* or action blockbusters like *The Fast and the Furious*, young people have become conditioned to expect and love what Gerbner calls "happy violence," which entails "swift, cool, thrilling, painless, effective, designed not to upset but to lead to a happy ending and to deliver an audience to the advertiser's message in a receptive mood" (Gerbner et al 344). While the effects of this "cultivation" cannot be concretely measured, these exhibitions of violence without consequence, whether involving Wile E. Coyote or Johnny Knoxville, can indeed foster warped perceptions of how the physical world works, at least within the steadily developing mind of a teenage boy.

Jenkins also warns that "the same narratives can be read literally by one group and as camp by another. Some groups' pleasure comes not in celebrating the values of their chosen works but rather in 'reading them against the grain'" (63). *Jackass*' perverted irony might be lost on some, and may take on new meanings across a diverse spectrum of viewership (after all, young men were not the *only* audience). Here, the identification between young male viewers and the onscreen Jackasses represents a fervent aspiration to do what the former cannot: publicly exploit their own bodies and (more importantly) be rewarded for it. Tourino writes, "that some teens and college students injure themselves or

die by copying Knoxville and his crew is a measure of the distance between the license of the Jackasses and the dispossession of some of its viewers; at its core is longing, not rebellion” (10). The Jackasses (and their imitators) exert their privilege by essentially wasting it, flaunting it. They are not really rebelling against anything, just enacting extreme practices in search of visibility and external validation (whether positive or negative, it doesn’t necessarily matter), celebrating the ensuing chaos as a thing of their own creation. When it comes down to it, they are not anti-authoritarian renegades. They are clowns.

Castration and the Source of Male Power

In traditional discourse, the penis is a primary icon for male power and dominance, but *Jackass* yet again flips this trope on its head. As such, the threat of castration is a prevalent theme throughout the franchise, but often as the object of ridicule. The abuse of the genitals classically represents a metaphoric uncoupling of the male ethos, whereby, in flaunting and conquering this threat, Walsh contends that “the male 'victim's' indestructibility as a phallic agent is reinforced” (2). Here, ego instability is replaced with a brash and ironic fearlessness that represents a mastery of the ego, a relative untouchability defined by the performer’s closeness to (and full awareness of) danger, such that the threat of castration both proves and makes a mockery of Manhood. “To appease this threat,” the men attempt to use dangerous rituals of (potential) castration to “confirm the unity of the body through its ability to either resist or recover from violation” (Walsh 3).

In the opening sketch from *Jackass: Number Two* (2006) called “Puppet Show,” Chris Pontius, with a sock over his penis to make it look like a delicious mouse, places his member into a “glory hole” (yet another irreverent homoerotic reference) in a snake cage, where Knoxville baits it on a string like a marionette puppet to a hungry viper. The entire

crew looks on in excitement and breaks into chaos as the serpent fervently latches onto Pontius's own. This sketch positions Pontius's penis as a comedic prop, and any hesitancy or trepidation he might have about this dangerous animal stunt is assuaged with an ironic acknowledgement of the absurdity of the situation. He jokes, "just make sure my whole weiner's out. I wanna look good!" Danger is supplanted by sardonic theatricality, and castration is treated as a masochistic thrill. As a ritual of orchestrated performance, castration strengthens the male ego, rather than damage it.

A thematically similar sketch called "Cup Test" (2001) sees Knoxville essentially retooling his original *Jackass* submission video, but with the same masochistic twist. This time, he voluntarily undergoes various painful measures in order to purportedly test the strength of a protective cup. He receives repeated blows to the groin from tennis balls, croquet balls, a sledgehammer, and the kicks of several giddy children, as their parents watch on in amusement. If castration threatens to strip one of his proverbial manhood, then Knoxville in this situation is openly begging to be seen as (or at least kicked into becoming) less than a man. One child's mother, talent release contract in hand, facetiously shouts out, "he's a bad guy, you gotta kick him hard. Remember the self-defense!" This implies a victim-perpetrator revenge fantasy, or perhaps really a parodic, low-stakes playacting version of such, since no one is in any true danger (except Johnny Knoxville's junk). The kids can't tell the difference, however, as they receive contentment from getting to access their own form of licensed transgression (as if they really needed an emotional rationalization to kick a guy in the nuts). As Knoxville laughs it all off, the whole ritual becomes a celebration of male indestructibility, wherein "injuring the genitals is a mark of masculine prowess — which is authorial and ostensibly personal; the ensuing sensation

alerting the subject to the biological connection between the penis and the right to the symbolic phallus” (Walsh 3). In this context, destruction of the white male body is viewed as an object of fun, without consideration for the social or physical ramifications of the pain, as if he merely exists to be a punching bag, posing a threat to no one whatsoever, an implicitly understood claim, as evidenced by the reticence of parents permitting their children to let loose. Due to the fluidity of Knoxville’s whiteness, the social murkiness attached to this notion makes him a benign violation, since societal standards are lifted, or perhaps exempted. In overcoming such casual, grisly abuse to his reproductive region and laughing *at* it, the very *idea* of vulnerability becomes a joke.

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, castration anxiety in a young man represents the threat of losing an “imaginary” claim to ownership over his mother after he grows out of being the object of her desire through the physical, maternal bonding of breastfeeding. This can inspire an Oedipal complex, where the child views his father as a threat when he learns they both have a penis, implying that the mother desires something beyond the child himself. Beyond incestual implications, the separation from the mother, from a collective to a singular “I,” is crucial to the process of male identity formation. The subject must renounce his attempts to be the phallus for the mother, effectively eschewing his own phallus, acknowledging and confirming the status of the father. Worth noting, castration does not necessarily bear on the penis as a real, physical organ, but on the *imaginary* phallus, an abstract bastion of male power and sexual drive.

Bam Margera takes this concept to the extreme, through the recruitment of his mother and father as victims of chaotic pranks. He frequently humiliates them in their home, using firecrackers in their bedroom, dummy broken chairs, and once a live alligator

in the kitchen. In season one, Bam spends a full day freely punching, kicking, and tackling his father for sport, interrupting him at work and in bed, just because, as he says, “I feel like kicking my dad’s ass all day today.” This crystal clear Oedipal metaphor represents not so much a matter of tension involving sexual conquest of the mother, but physical mastery over the father. In performing these savage and violent pranks on his own parents, he intentionally regresses back to the phallic stage of development, enacting a psychopathic infantile fantasy, aiming not only to assert dominance over his father, but to even usurp the position of dominance as an alpha-male within the family, taking advantage of the fact that his father’s rotund figure substantially limits his ability to fight back. The fact that Bam is a grown man—no longer in the infant stages of identity formation and confusion of self—implies a need for personal control that weaponizes castration anxiety as a force for chaos, taking pleasure in his parents’ discomfort as a product of his own making, not to mention a relentless refusal to conform to recognized societal standards of familial and social etiquette. In this masochistic relation to the self, Margera bears witness to Carlo Strenger’s premise that masochism signifies “a profound expression of the desire for self-creation” (138, qtd in Walsh). Bam engages in a fierce projection of dickish immaturity that revels in the privilege the assertion of his metaphoric phallus affords him.

As the Jackasses refuse to compete with each other sexually for girls or in contests of size, stamina, and strength, the male phallus ceases to be seen as a “signifier of desire,” as Lacan puts it, but more a manifestation of an abstract, asexual manhood built on a proverbial “hardness” that aims to give meaning to suffering and derive catharsis from the concoction of such.

Meaning in Suffering

Sociologist Tony Jefferson suggests that normative masculinity involves "a certain indifference to the body" as well as "hardness," manifest in physical endurance. In the context of performative/competitive masculinity and *Jackass*, "hardness" involves not just strength but willingness "to risk the body in performance" (Jefferson 81). This hardness implies an emotional and/or moral interior barrier, where the types of manhood discussed in this paper are often defined by a rejection of the feminine, of reason, of good taste. This courtship of such physical risk in the mocking pursuit of hardness requires an abject and ambivalent relationship to suffering. Nietzsche wrote that "Man, as the animal that is most courageous, most accustomed to suffering, does not negate suffering as such: he wants it, even seeks it out, provided one shows him some meaning in it, some wherefore of suffering" (453). Nietzsche talks abstractly and neglects to specify the importance of self-awareness and *intent* in this pursuit of pain. In searching for (or engineering) meaning in one's own suffering, this implies a concept Steven Gardiner labels "heroic masochism." This certain brand of manhood

is the socially useful suppression of abject masochism. It valorizes sacrifice and finds meaning and purpose in suffering. Yet at the level of erotic arousal, its distance from abject masochism is never more than the flip of a switch. The selfish and the selfless merge in the uses of pain. (Gardiner 31)

This theory is often discussed under the context of military combat, a voluntary form of violence and man-making that institutionally rationalizes itself as the idea of working as a collective toward the abstract notion of "the greater good." This concept is used as a recruiting mechanism to assuage feelings of existential guilt and to cultivate male group

bonding, because “the warrants for masculine privilege have their roots in the notion that suffering is, or ought to be, good for the soul” (Gardiner 42). While suffering of any kind may not be ostensibly *good*, it can provide troves of catharsis if weaponized in the right ways.

The model of masculinity the Jackasses and their contemporaries so enthusiastically embody could as such be labeled as “anti-heroic masochism,” in which the harnessing of masochistic tendencies and attitudes are put to the use of perverted play, actively trying to break any and every rule of human decency and what “belongs” on television. The end credits of the first and third *Jackass* movies are scored by the song “If You’re Gonna Be Dumb, You Gotta Be Tough.” Written and performed by country artist Roger Alan Wade (a cousin of Knoxville’s), this ditty could be said to represent a mantra for the entire show and its ideology. Wade sings,

I took advice no fool would take // I got some habits I can't shake // I ain't the
 sharpest knife in the drawer // But I know enough to know // If you're gonna be
 dumb, you gotta be tough // If you're gonna be dumb, you gotta be tough! // When
 you get knocked down, you gotta get back up // That's the way it is in life and love
 // If you're gonna be dumb, you gotta be tough.

This sentiment expresses an apparent satisfaction in the exasperation of life, a stubborn and smug pride in one’s own mediocrity. It expresses the view that manhood is measured (if such things even deserve to be measured) by one’s own endurance of feats of “toughness” and “hardness,” but more importantly on one’s overall attitude of supreme uncaring, of loving and touting one’s “dumbness” and imperfections, in spite of and in direct response to what authority figures and society may say. This stalwart resoluteness in one’s own self-

image is characteristic of the neo-Hipster emphasis on the value of implicit knowledge, an apriorism based on values the Hipster inherently believes to be true (Broyard), a steadfast proclamation that asserts, “I am who I am, and I ain’t gonna change for nobody.” If the Hipster dances, he dances to the off-beat, his actions markedly tinged with irony. He wouldn’t *dare* be seen looking like or doing the same things as anyone else, and from this is whence his hubris arises.

The *Jackass* cast’s pursuit of suffering manifests itself as a rejection of all meaning, where the assertion of their privilege is not necessarily aimed at social domination, but at the repudiation of self-seriousness, of boredom, of Squareness, of being a cog in the proverbial machine. Ardent in their renunciation of meaning in general, the *Jackass* crew generally advises against staunch scholarly analysis of their content (sorry, dudes). In a *Rolling Stone* interview, when pressed to answer why he does what he does, Knoxville responded, “Well, I guess I don’t really intellectualize it.” He later goes on to add, “you know, you can take what we do and reduce it to this clinical synopsis that’s just devoid of any spirit or charm... it’s just kicks. It really is just kicks.” Perhaps the pedantic study of this kind of humor is, as E.B. White famously quipped, “like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies of it.” “Just kicks” or nay, this humble disavowal represents a “collapse of meaning within a symbolic order” (Brayton 61), eschewing general responsibility over one’s actions and prizing spontaneity and chaos.

Online Savagery

How has this culture evolved from then to now? Keep in mind, *Jackass* was created and broadcasted at the very beginning of the 21st century, a time period before the internet as we know it, before Facebook, before YouTube, before reality TV. Since then, the market

for such DIY content has become heavily saturated and diluted. With the advent of smartphone cameras and user sharing sites, it has become easier than ever for young people to find creative ways to wreck their bodies for a laugh. It is considerably more rare and difficult now, however, for something to break through the zeitgeist and capture such national attention and create legitimate controversy anymore. In many ways, *Jackass* wrote the code for viral fame. No one before had ostensibly come out of nothing and become a celebrity for being stupid onscreen, toeing what Knoxville calls “a fine line between bravery and stupidity” in short, digestible segments, an impressive feat, considering what many perceived a lack of real talent. Nowadays, this seems to be its own category of celebrity.

Instagram, the popular photo and video sharing app, has become the new locus of this subculture, giving way to a new genre I am labeling “savage comedy.” The Urban Dictionary defines a savage as “someone who does not care about the consequences of his or her actions. Usually the savage will do things that make other people say, ‘What the fuck are you crazy?’” This identity implies a rebellious and reckless attitude toward others, oneself, and the world, and is unquestionably appealing to young people online today.

The word “savage” originates from the latin *salvaticus*, which translates to “wild” or “from the woods.” Historically, this word has been used as a diminutive and racist insult against indigenous and enslaved peoples, giving the impression that they are uncontrollable, violent, and undeveloped, like animals, and as such, plainly deserve to be colonized or dominated. In the modern age, the word has been reappropriated within internet culture, the definition softened to suggest something more comparable to “awesome” or “radical,” but with a dangerous and rebellious edge. The word could be used

to describe anything from a buzzer-beating three-pointer to a catty schoolyard insult. Pop mogul Rihanna even named her signature lingerie line “Savage x Fenty,” perhaps to signify power and fierceness. Even when divorced from its racial context, this colloquialization “glorifies the imagined wildness that the word once sought to quarantine” and reverses barbarity into what now becomes a positive trait, “sapping its dehumanizing intent and allowing for more elasticity” (Morris). In this context, a young person who is a “savage” eschews societal rules of decency and self-respect, in favor of senseless displays of crudeness, often in pursuit of a laugh, a groan, and/or a follow. Seeing that they “get away with” all their savage escapades, this behavior is lauded, rewarded, and seen as admirable and empowering from those hip to the lingo, but protested and condemned from square authority figures and parents who, like the classic Will Smith rap, “just don’t understand.”

Through the mainstream popularization and cultivation of hip-hop aesthetics and shift in prominence from beer culture to marijuana culture, the modern savage turns his racial fetishization back from a firm White identity to an urban, Black ethos. The hubris associated with white racial impunity has morphed into the brazen and unscrupulous recklessness associated with the consumer excess of modern rappers. Laden with face tattoos, designer clothing labels, and gold chains, this new crop of jackasses smashes their scrota, sprays lemon juice in their eyes, raucously shoplifts, and destroys public and private property, among other barbaric stunts, all in the pursuit of “clout,” a signifier of internet popularity and street credibility.

Knoxville, Steve-O, and Bam made their name when there was no existing system of rewarding such behavior. These online “clout chasers” operate within the lens of late capitalism, where fame is a more mainstream and attainable goal (especially in young

adults who grew up with/on the internet/reality TV) and the economy is such that people will resort to wrecking their body in disgusting and creative ways if it earns them a buck or a moment in the spotlight. Where this personality was formerly seen as reckless, brainless, and disruptive (it still is), now these qualities are validated in what has become a fairly straightforward career path: make shocking and consistent online content, build an audience of followers, garner sponsorships, sell merchandise, then inevitably start producing your own rap tracks. Though achieving this kind of success is clearly not that simple, influencers like Jake Paul (12.7 million followers), Supreme Patty (6.7 million), and Mason Ray Parker (1.6 million) have all made major bank from their online personas as self-identified “savages.”

This question of authenticity is what distinguishes this modern culture from its *Jackass* forefathers. Their pranks were never staged and their stunts never faked. There were no viral trends to copy and not much money to be made (at least before the show took off). The earnestness factor is all but gone. Knoxville and company were not necessarily thinking “this is the one that will get me viral,” but rather, “this will make my buddies laugh.” Online savage culture could not exist without all the precedents *Jackass* set for it, but one thing is for sure: young men still feel compelled to demolish their own bodies on camera, if it means someone will look at them.

Whether it is apparently worthy of academic analysis or not, it is becoming evermore clear that *Jackass* cultivated a new paradigm for modern masculinity, where one is free to forge one’s own purpose through the breakdown of traditional values and expected articulations of manhood. Knoxville and his crew have achieved and spread a

twisted liberation of masculinity through making entertainment of the madness and messiness of being human.

Or perhaps it's all just stupid fun.

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