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## **The Leisured Testes: White Ball-breaking as Surplus Masculinity in *Jackass***

In *Jackass: Number Two* (2006), Bam Margera allows Ryan Dunn to brand his posterior with a hot iron depicting male genitalia. Bam cannot tolerate the pain enough to remain perfectly still, so the brand touches him several times, resulting in multiple images that seem blurry or in motion. Bam's mother, who usually plays the role of game audience for his antics, balks when she learns that her son has been hurt as well as permanently marked. She asks Dunn why anyone would ever burn a friend. "Cause it was funny," Dunn answers.<sup>1</sup>

*Jackass* mines the body in pain as well as the absurd and the taboo, often dealing with one or more of the body's abject excretions. *Jackass* offers no compelling narrative arc or cliffhangers, presenting instead a series of discrete segments that explore variations on the singular eponymous focus of the show: playing the fool. This deliberate idiocy is the show's greatest strength, and its excesses seem calculated to repeatedly provide the viewer with a mix of schadenfreude, horror, and disbelief. Like Bam's mother, we watch and we recoil.

*Jackass* has enjoyed an impressive popular success. When it began in 2000 as a 30-minute reality program on MTV, it secured the honor of the network's most popular series to date and boosted its ratings considerably. The pranks and stunts in the program quickly became notorious for their danger, their stupidity, and the copycat injuries and deaths that ensued. Only months after the show's airing, a 13-year-old badly burned himself trying to re-enact the human barbecue he saw on the show the night before. In this stunt, Johnny Knoxville, the show's creator and star, dressed in flame-proof clothing,

soaked himself in lighter fluid, and laid down on a lit grill (Bianculli). Fearing legal costs, MTV took the show off the air.

Knoxville, undeterred, reinvented *Jackass* as a Paramount feature-length film.<sup>2</sup> The film was mostly shot on digital video (except the opening and closing sequences), and because it simply repeated the TV model (with fewer restrictions on content and language), it cost only five million dollars to produce. It brought in 22.8 million dollars its opening weekend, making it the number one movie in the United States (Lyman). More copycat injuries and deaths followed, and offended viewers and critics complained that the show encourages dangerous and anti-social behavior (Pearson, Eicher, Stephens, and Phillips). Still, the public kept asking for more, and Knoxville and his cast delivered. *Jackass: Number Two* (2006)—which set a new standard for pain, nudity, and risk—captured the number one spot its opening weekend, and ultimately made even more money than the first movie.<sup>3</sup> Knoxville followed with *Jackass 3D* (2010) and *Bad Grandpa* (2013). A number of *Jackass* cast members started their own franchises as well: Bam Margera premiered *Viva la Bam*, which features Bam beating his parents (2003-2005),<sup>4</sup> Steve Glover starred in *Wild Boys*, in which he risks his life with wild animals (2003-2006); Jason Acuña (Wee Man) appeared in *Armed and Famous* (2007), a show premised on the training of B-list celebrities to become police officers, but one which seems more interested in featuring physically painful and dangerous “necessary” activities, such as allowing oneself to be tasered.

Clearly *Jackass* scratches a cultural itch; it is harder, though, to explain why. TV critics and journalists (Breznican, Poniewozik, Steuver) hypothesized that the rebellion of the show, with its origins in skateboard culture, explains its appeal to young white men

who are either disenfranchised or alienated from mainstream opportunities and therefore reject them. Some point to the masochism on the show. For example, Knoxville allows miniature alligators to bite his nipples and hang from his chest; he paper cuts his eyelids, tongue, and the webbing between his fingers and toes. Others place *Jackass* in the gross-out genre of films like *There's Something About Mary*: the *Jackass* crew snorts wasabi and vomits, a cast member moves his bowels in the sample toilet of a hardware store, and Steve Glover urinates on the floor of the radio studio where he is promoting his comedy tour. James Poniewozik of *Time* magazine writes that the self-flagellation and self-loathing in the show is a mode of anti-authoritarianism, unlikely to be co-opted by the mainstream. Episodes in which Bam beats his parents or the jackasses block traffic evidence this. In this way the films offend baby-boomer values like tolerance, self-esteem and positive self-image. In my favorite bit, the Jackass crew hides in the bushes of a golf course, blowing an air horn each time a golfer swings and breaking his concentration, a satisfying sacrilege against a genteel and civilized activity. After failing to convince the pranksters to stop, the sportsmen take the offense by trying to hit the jackasses with high speed golf balls. Unperturbed, the jackasses honk the horn just before these shots as well, and the crass underdogs get the better of the snobs. In another segment, a cast member takes eighteen X-lax, puts on his jock strap, and soils himself while jogging, an inversion of the ubiquitous "Just Do It" ads featuring perfect physical specimens who nobly chase self-improvement.

Many of the segments ritualistically, obsessively, and ostentatiously expose the genitals to insult and injury. In order to appreciate the cumulative power of the content along these lines, I will catalogue them rather extensively: Steve-o staples his scrotum to

his leg. A Jackass rolls down a bowling alley head first on a skateboard while his buddies send bowling balls after him, crushing his testicles. The Jackasses sit in their underwear in a circle, feet together and legs flopping open, revealing bull's eye targets drawn on their briefs; they then take turns tossing golf balls at one another, and the participant who resists closing his legs to defend his manhood the longest wins.

Knoxville wears a thin athletic cup and his comrades throw oranges at him; later, they blast him with a fire hose. A cast member dressed in a skimpy mouse suit braves a floor full of traps and finds one clamped on his groin. Chris Pontius dresses his penis as a mouse and puts it through a hole into a cage with a snake. A cast member launches a ground rocket attached to his penis by a string, just to see how much it will hurt when the rocket goes off and yanks him. Jackasses fill their mesh briefs with live shrimp and then swim with whale sharks. Steve Glover puts raw meat in his jockstrap and walks a tightrope, unsuccessfully, over a pool full of alligators; he chances castration by letting the alligator eat the meat right off of him. He also applies leeches to his testicles. The Jackasses even apply electricity to their faces, hands, nipples, and, with the encouragement of "Daddy's got you," to their perineum and testicles.

Why this unremitting literal mortification of the genitals, and why for public show? The jackasses refuse to recruit the genitals for orthodox forms of masculine competition, such as exhibitions of size, potency, or stamina. This refusal to compete extends to representations of the entire body, which directly engage and reject codes of particularly white heterosexual masculinity. In *White*, Richard Dyer itemizes some of the physical attributes that characterize these norms: a hard, lean, dieted and/or trained body, one that is visibly bounded, privacy with respect to the bowels, and the ability to restrain

sexual desire (23-24).<sup>5</sup> He further notes that with the exception of muscle films that star a white champion or built body in a colonial context (Tarzan, Hercules, Conan, Rambo), it was rare to see semi-naked white men in popular visual fictions until the 1980's, whereas the non-white male body was routinely on display (146). The Jackasses systematically undermine these conventions. In addition to public defecation, they are nude or semi-nude during many sequences, displaying vulnerability. They are clearly detached from the ideal of the lean, built body, as most of them are unremarkable physically, and their cast includes a dwarf and an obese man. They do not compete for women. Knoxville sums this up nicely: "We're the least macho guys you'll ever meet" (White).

All this is, in a way, as the TV critics have suggested, terrifically subversive. The ethos that unifies the varied tomfoolery in the segments is waste. It is ceremony of uselessness; it is obstruction on parade. In its anti-social register, this gleeful rebuke of bourgeois respectability and conventional forms of masculinity signals a real white working-class male complaint. After all, patriarchy doesn't dole its favors out equally to all men. The Jackasses find themselves in a social position—many of them dropped out of high school—in which their most lucrative option is to reject gainful employment and harm themselves for public consumption. The harm is real. And yet, if we consider this waste in a political and economic register, it begins to look more like prerogative than anti-authoritarianism. I contend that it is the *prerogative* of uselessness, not its anti-authoritarianism, which best characterizes *Jackass*. Uselessness in the movie, far from dismantling social hierarchies, reinforces them in their most basic and intractable forms. From this perspective, what emerges is something less like white boys at play, and more

like white masculinity limning out the scope and reach of certain of its brutal possibilities.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Jackass* scholars agree that the show both endorses and critiques prevailing masculine norms. Brayton writes that *Jackass* is simultaneously “a spectacle of emasculation” and “a reassertion of the masculine” (69); Lindren and Lèvière write “on the one hand *Jackass* can be seen as a critique of prevailing norms of hegemonic masculinity. But, on the other hand it can be read as reaffirmative of those exact norms” (406). They both begin their analysis by exploring the conservatism in the show, which they understand in terms of “white male backlash” and “reflexive sadomasochism” (Brayton 58; Lindgren and Lèlièvre 394). “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 social traction since the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as groups like women (of all races and sexualities), blacks, gays, and immigrants have made halting progress (Kimmel 1996, Faludi 1999, Robinson 2000). “Reflexive sadomasochism” describes a trait common to popular depictions of the post-Vietnam male: these angry white men turn their aggressive impulses on themselves in ways that simultaneously prove their downtrodden status and rehabilitate their sense of power (Savran 1998, Kusz 2002).<sup>6</sup>

Both scholars move on to consider the transgressive elements in the show. Brayton sees dimensions of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque—parody, irony, self-deprecation—and argues therefore that the show is also potentially unruly and transgressive, especially with regard to homoeroticism and working class disruptions. Brayton argues that the show is, then, irresolvable, rich, paradoxical, and best understood as postmodern

spectacle: fragmented, promiscuous, unintelligible, a dialogue of multiple and conflicting masculinities. Lindgren and Lèvière instead argue that since gender subjectivities themselves are fluid and change with their context (following Butler, 1990), these contradictory impulses in the show indicate an “ongoing and complex process wherein gender subjectivities are constantly renegotiated” (408). Hegemonic and subordinated masculinities, then, are not a paradox; they are in fact “blended and synthesized in *Jackass*” (408) through a “dialectical process of transformation.” (408) What we are watching, then, according to Lindgren and Lèvière, is a renegotiation of gender stereotypes in which we are invited to participate, and through which they hope “a blended a maybe more balanced gender model might be achieved” (409).

I appreciate the optimism of these conclusions, but I fear that they perhaps overstate the play in the system between alternate or negotiated masculinities. The show seems to me to be far more clearly an endorsement of masculine privilege than either Brayton, or Lindgren and Lèvière, concede, not because parody always implies the norm it is sending up, but because this parody itself performs a kind of extremely stable norm. What interests me here is to unpack further the conservative impulse in the show, the consequences of which have not yet been fully considered, and which are especially regressive for men of color and victims of torture. For many of these men, there is no semiotic field on which to romp because they’ve been excluded from the political process that constitutes that field in the first place.

I’d like to begin, then, not with the “white male backlash,” but, improbably, with Thorstein Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). Although Veblen famously wrote about the conspicuous consumption of the refined, still, his work usefully unmask



the ways in which the Jackasses hoard and deploy social capital. The Jackasses do not complain of losing their privilege to encroaching minorities as the “white male backlash” suggests. They are not angry. But neither does their hilarity guarantee that what we have here is ludic free play. Instead, they perform—indeed, they rehearse and rehearse—their claim to surplus.

Veblen explains the salient difference between the leisure and working classes: the leisure class is unproductive.<sup>7</sup> He writes, “the upper classes are exempt from industrial employments, and this exemption is the economic expression of their superior rank” (1). Following customs established in early tribal cultures, the lower classes are held to productive occupations while the able-bodied men are reserved for war, politics, public worship, public merry-making, and learning. Early leisured classes engaged in exploit rather than industry; their work asserted prowess not diligence. As these employments are framed as spiritually ennobling rather than vulgar drudgery, they underscore how productive labor becomes a taboo for the upper classes. This exemption is made possible by the lower classes, as well as the ownership of women and slaves, on whose labor the leisure class depends.

This animus around distinctions in employment persists even in modern societies. The leisured classes demonstrate their rank to others by conspicuous leisure, that is, by doing nothing. The men of *Jackass* abide by this ancient tradition of predatory culture that shuns productive effort (39).<sup>8</sup> Conspicuous abstention from productive work—to which their ethos of waste is in fact a blanket threat—puts the wealth of the Jackasses in evidence (38). One might complain that the brutal and vulgar stunts of the Jackasses are hardly comparable to the shows of leisure—grammar, manners, and conspicuous

consumption—that Veblen identifies. Certainly Veblen was not writing about the part of the social formation from which the Jackasses spring. Still, Veblen’s model does allow us to see the conservatism of the show in a fresh way: the *Jackass* stunts, infused with a certain discipline, ceremony, and ritual, follow repeatable formats as predictable and reassuring as the conjugation of a verb or the rules of etiquette. They meet Veblen’s highest standard of good breeding, gentle blood, and high-mindedness: “the requirement of a substantial and patent waste of time” which often correlates with “protracted contact with accumulated wealth or unbroken prerogative” (51, 55).

*Jackass*, then, poses as subversive, but may actually be conservative in its ideological function. Given the viewer profile of the show, we might speculate about how it operates for viewers. *Jackass* is watched mainly by people between the ages of 12-17 and 25-34 (given the success of Steve Glover’s fraternity tours, this range likely includes college students as well, although the Nielsen ratings do not track that group). In the spring of 2001, after *Jackass* had been on the air for one year, MTV’s ratings surged 33% for 25-34 year olds and 17% for 12-17 year olds (Beatty). In terms of class status, 47% of viewing households had an income of 50K, 22% earned 75K, and 42% of viewers had some college.<sup>9</sup> This group, then, includes working-class men, college students, and middle-class men. 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. For college students facing a market regime upon graduation that demands productivity and threatens downsizing, and for whom the “You’re fired” mantra of Donald Trump’s *The Apprentice* simultaneously titillated and terrified, *Jackass* is a sort of stay of execution. For middle-class white men as well,

*Jackass* offers the pleasure of rejecting codes of behavior that insist on enterprise, efficiency, and restraint.<sup>10</sup> The social credentials of the performers themselves underline this function: Bam Margera dropped out of high school and Johnny Knoxville left college.

But this suspension of social hierarchy is temporary. The viewers of *Jackass* return to a reality where their impulses are confined by codes of conduct with which they cannot easily dispense. Knoxville and Margera have themselves made a successful business out of the performance of failure; they have ridden their rejection of middle-class norms to the protected class status of the celebrity. 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. *Jackass* is for men what romance novels are for women: a fantasy that helps them explore their frustrations or imagine a different existence, but does not offer strategies for changing their lot.

Veblen defines the privileged classes as those who can make a credible showing of “protracted contact with accumulated wealth or unbroken prerogative.” If we extend Veblen’s economic model about literal capital, like time, to other kinds of metaphorical or cultural capital, like masculinity or whiteness, then we see that the Jackasses, again, routinely perform their surplus of this capital by their willingness to, in a sense, waste it. The Jackasses assert their dominant rank through their inclination to occupy the subject position of the debased. Marginalized communities of men often perform their masculinity in exaggerated, inflated ways that require expertise, wit, and courage: think of Black hip hop artists, Latino zoot suiters, and drag queens. In Veblen’s class terms,

this demonstration of masculinity resembles working-class competition through industry and workmanship. 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. These Jackasses enjoy a certain leisure of the testes.

Women, for example, are irrelevant to the Jackasses except as a measure of insult and as an indication of their misogyny. One cast member, dressed in a bra top and shorts, is roundly beaten by a female kickboxer: a symbolic emasculation, humiliating because he is even more female than an actual female. In “Bungee Wedgie,” a cast member sits in a tree in only briefs, with a maxi pad inserted for protection. The briefs are connected to the tree limb by a bungee cord, and when he slides off the branch, he is suspended by his underwear in such a way that his maxi pad becomes covered in feces and blood.

This disposition to occupy the position of the debased in *Jackass* is most evident in their homoerotic play. Like the feminine position, that of the gay male violates the white male heterosexual principle of the visibly bounded body by inviting the possibility of invasion. The anus is routinely jeopardized. The invention and sheer quantity of sequences on this theme is again impressive: A cast member bends over, his colleagues pour birdseed between his buttocks in the middle of a pigeon-filled plaza, and he lets the birds graze peacefully. One inserts a stick attached to a firecracker into his anus and launches a rocket from his backside. In a pretend carnival strongman test, a cast member swings a hammer that sends a golden dildo up into a colleague sitting at the top. Steve-o accepts a yard of beer into his colon. Ryan Dunn places a toy car in a condom, applies

lubricant, and in the presence of the team, inserts it in his rectum. He then complains to an unsuspecting family doctor that he thinks he broke his tailbone at a fraternity party where he passed out. The doctor discovers the toy car on x-ray and struggles for the words to set the man straight. Other homoerotically charged moments include an effort to drink horse semen and the harvesting of the gang's own pubic hair to paste onto a crew member in imitation of a beard.

The racial component of their leisure—their white privilege—may be the slipperiest to fix. Hank Stuever of the *Washington Post* claims that race is not an issue in *Jackass*: “Though the cast members are all white, they seem to transcend race.” Stuever’s impression likely reflects the opinion of most casual viewers, and is itself an indication of the racial privilege under study here. Putting race in evidence as a prerogative means flouting norms of whiteness. These norms are notoriously hard to see, as they do their work most efficiently when they are least visible.<sup>11</sup> At least in racial terms, the cast members of *Jackass* perform from the subject position of the center, and then play at temporarily adopting that of the margin. In doing so, the Jackasses are working in a comic tradition that goes back at least as far as minstrelsy. 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 (25).” Lott’s observation extends to Veblen’s notion of class leisure: in terms of race, the performance of surplus means the ability to blacken up in order to secure the racial superiority of the performers.

In *Jackass*, sometimes this blackface is overt, but more often it takes on an almost flickering, holographic quality.<sup>12</sup> Like the surprise image hidden in the wavy lines of a

magic eye book, blackface in *Jackass* is initially very hard to see, but once you get a fix on it, you realize that it was there all along. Such blackface anchors a wide variety of *Jackass* episodes. The seemingly innocent trademark sequences in which the Jackasses ride shopping carts down the street, for example, allow them simultaneously to play at and enjoy distance from urban destitution and the homelessness. In another sequence, two cast members dressed in black clothing and masks fall through the ceiling of an office building and pretend to rob the place at gunpoint. The whites get the joke but the lone black worker runs out of the building in terror. This gag hinges on the temporary suspension of the white privilege of relative freedom from fear about the safety of one's person on the street or at work; it also underlines the humor of the show as largely by and for whites. The sequences shot in India for *Jackass: Number Two* put this dynamic in relief as well. India provides a kind of playground for the Jackasses, and the Indians, a stunned and offended audience. Wee Man chases the heaviest Jackass, both in their underwear, down a street to the dismay of Indian passersby. In another scene, the Jackasses buy leeches from a traditional Indian healer. Although this man tells them not to apply leeches to their testicles because they are unclean, Steve Glover does it anyway, ignoring the authority of the healer and visibly upsetting him. This is not mere lack of taste or cultural insensitivity; this is a performance of white impunity in a culture largely made up of people of color, some of whom lack the economic resources of the Jackasses.

*Jackass* stages a complex swapping of races and classes in a sequence with the Oscar-winning Memphis rap group Three 6 Mafia. The Jackasses dress as white country bumpkins, and Juicy J and DJ Paul offer to pay them \$200 to eat horse manure, saying "Swallow it, nigger." Here, the Jackasses pretend to be poor and allow the rich rappers to

boss them; the rappers play the white master to the (temporarily) black Jackasses. Black masculinity is staged as an angry, racially-motivated will to power in a dominant position over whites. For this bit of theatre to work, the audience must forget the economic power of the Jackasses, who may, in fact, be paying Three 6 Mafia to bully them in ways that corroborate reactionary white stereotypes of black men. The rappers, then, are themselves in a kind of blackface as well, selling a particular form of black masculinity to a white audience.

*Jackass* also appropriates excessive masochisms historically associated with non-white targets for white sport. Privilege here takes the form of a kind of white imperviousness to persecution. Electrocution of the genitals is a regular strategy of dictatorships, but in *Jackass*, it is a form of entertainment. Knoxville allows a tactical weapons expert to shoot him with a 40 gram bean bag; he also is blasted with a fire hose. Images of these crowd control strategies are most recognizable in footage from the Civil Rights era. During such episodes, *Jackass* 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. The Jackasses are tased, thrown into locked trunks, and hung from trees.<sup>13</sup> The Jackasses pluck these masochisms and their targets out of their political and social contexts and re-tool them as the stuff of discrete, repeatable horseplay. That is, they put themselves at risk in ways that are formally identical to the risks of those on the margin, but the Jackasses (nearly) always come out unharmed.

Torture as entertainment resonates disturbingly in the movie; one thinks of the brutalization of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers at Abu Ghraib in late 2003. In the photos that emerged in 2004, we see smiling American soldiers, giving their thumbs up,

as they humiliate and hurt Iraqis in ways that eerily repeat the sorts of things the Jackasses do to one another: electrodes on the genitals, female underwear on prisoners' heads, sodomy, nudity, masturbation, assuming a position for fellatio, and all for the camera and therefore easily distributed (Hersh). In the public conversation about the photos that followed their release, Rush Limbaugh famously defended the soldiers when he agreed with a caller who said that the photos looked like fraternity pranks.

Of course these events are distant cousins at best: the Jackasses are willing participants, whereas the Iraqis are helpless victims. But what, if anything, do the Jackass pranks and the torture of Iraqis by American soldiers have in common? Both the Jackasses and the soldiers, in spite of their privilege (as men, whites, or Americans), are relatively disenfranchised, working class, uneducated whites; the only capital they have to exploit is their body. They engage in alternate ways of asserting their authority, and enjoy camaraderie as a result. They cannot acknowledge the damage they do as a problem; instead they celebrate it as a thing of their making.

The similarities, then, do not excuse the torture so much as indict the Jackasses for perhaps helping to produce and reflect a masculine subjectivity that we find in the war on terror and the invasion of Iraq.<sup>14</sup> In this light, the Jackass stunts are less like cogent anti-authoritarian working class complaints, and more like a display of latitude. Al Gore, in a speech he delivered on May 26, 2004, argued that the abuses of Abu Ghraib flowed directly from the incompetency of the Bush team, and from Bush II White House policies like preemptive war, contempt for the rule of law, and the Patriot Act. The ugly insistence of the *Jackass* performers on their privileged position of surplus masculinity is repeated and enlarged in the brutal surplus of power of the perpetrator over the victim.



*Jackass* shares with Abu Ghraib a performance--anxiously, ritualistically, and to excess—of dominance with impunity.

Anti-Muslim sentiment is central to membership in this fraternity. Even kidnapping and terrorism become white fun in *Jackass*. “Terror Taxi” is the longest sketch in *Jackass* or *Jackass: Number Two*, and the only sketch with any narrative development. The Jackasses dress one of their members as a terrorist from somewhere in the Middle East. They paint his face with brown make-up, put him in a white robe and headdress, and strap a fake bomb to his body. To complete the costume, they paste an imitation beard on his face which the Jackass thinks is made of legitimate make-up but which is actually the pubic hair of his mates. This “terrorist” will take a taxi ride to Burbank airport and make his cabbie believe he plans to blow up his flight. But we discover that this prank is really on one of the Jackasses’ own. The crew has hired Jay Chandrasekhar, a comedian and director of Indian descent, to play the part of the cabbie.<sup>15</sup> When the disguised Jackass delivers a few insults to his driver, Chandrasekhar stops in a deserted parking lot and pulls a gun. The “terrorist” at first threatens to detonate the bomb, but quickly drops his fake accent and demands that Chandrasekhar let him go. The Jackass insists that he is merely playing a joke with Bam Margera, who is “famous.” Bam even comes out of hiding and pretends to try and save his buddy, but, according to plan, Chandrasekhar is undeterred. He forces the “terrorist” into the trunk at gunpoint. The Jackasses make a ruckus, imitate gun shots, and Chandrasekhar drives around in an angry circle. Because the “terrorist” is mic’d, we can all hear him say he thinks he will die. The Jackasses then release him from the trunk, where he is delighted to learn that the whole thing has been a joke.

The humor of this sketch relies on the thoroughgoing racism of its participants and its audience. Palpable here is an obvious hostility to Muslims: in the caricature of middle easterners, the brown make-up, the usage of pubic hair in place of a beard indicating religious devotion, and the wish fulfillment inherent in the fantasy of killing a terrorist. The Jackass wears brown make-up because he takes for granted the racism of his cabbie: if the Jackass has brown skin, the cabbie will more likely take him for a terrorist. His only strategy for escape is to shed his brown-face disguise and rely on his privileged status as a white man who is making a movie with a celebrity. The release comes when the Jackass realizes that Chandrasekhar is actually a member of the group, and therefore, not dangerous. The whole terrifying gag is a gift to the Jackass because it reminds him that he is untouchable, a belief that may be shaken when even Margera fails to save him, but something he believes deep down inside all along. Even if the Jackass momentarily believed he may die in the trunk, he would understand the threat as outrageous given his protected status. The most convincing indication of his certainty with respect to his privilege: the Jackass is not in the slightest bit angry until he learns that he is wearing pubic hair on his face. This, he sulks, is an unnecessary hardship.

Immune by definition from the possibility of actual suffering, the Jackasses can “brown up” or not at their pleasure.<sup>16</sup> Risk is always only a rehearsal. The terrorist scenario, like the uselessness and the debasement, airs and secures the entitlement of the Jackasses and their viewers.<sup>17</sup> Despite their pretense of lawlessness, the Jackasses do not, in effect, rebel against anything. Every outrage instead claims privilege. *Jackass* makes its viewers uncomfortable, but not with themselves<sup>18</sup>, because it never poses any questions. Like a crèche or a diorama, each segment is a scenic display connected

principally by the common hub of white masculine prerogative. Conspicuous foolishness becomes—purely and simply—a stable convention of surplus, comforting its audience with the repeated message that joshing, no matter the damage, is its birthright.

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Notes

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<sup>1</sup> *Jackass Number Two*. Ensuing references to *Jackass Number Two* are from this film.

<sup>2</sup> See *Jackass: The Movie*. Ensuing references to *Jackass* are to this film.

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<sup>3</sup> *Jackass Number Two* cost \$11.5 million dollars to produce and made \$28.1 million its opening weekend, outstripping *Jackass* and taking the number one spot at the box office its opening weekend again (Germain).

<sup>4</sup> *Jackass* seems to have multiplied itself into a spate of similar spectacles. Steve Glover has taken his comedy act, “Don’t try this at Home” to universities, bars, and frat houses. *Jackass* has also likely encouraged other similar reality programs such as: NBC’s *Fear Factor* (2001) where contestants perform frightening and sickening tasks for money, and MTV’s *One Bad Trip* (2003) where hard party-ers get a chance to go wild, but don’t know they are being watched by family and friends (See Keveney). Canada has a spinoff called *Kenny vs. Spenny*. *Jackass* has also encouraged other highly-grossing, cheaply made video films like *The Real Cancun* and *Girls Gone Wild*.

<sup>5</sup> Dyer establishes this list by tracing characteristics supposedly indicative of the superior spirit of the white race, beginning as early as early Christianity and the founding of European nations through the sixteenth century, and picking up speed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (18).

<sup>6</sup> Films most often cited for their battered, angry male victims heroes are *Falling Down* (1993), *Good Will Hunting* (1997), and *Fight Club* (1999); *Rambo* (1982) is the Ur-text (Brayton 59-60; Lindren and Lèlièvre 395).

<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to Bruce Campbell for first suggesting Veblen in connection with *Jackass*. Bruce has contributed his extremely sharp critical apparatus to several episodes under study in this paper, especially those involving class and race.

<sup>8</sup> Veblen writes that “purposeful effort comes to mean effort directed to or resulting in a more credible showing of accumulated wealth” (34).

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<sup>9</sup> See *MTV Music Television Profile*.

<sup>10</sup> Underlining the conservative function of the *Jackass* phenomenon for its middle-class demographic is its appropriation by Toyota in 2004 to sell its SUVs. Toyota's ads picture five men, probably college students, who engage in recognizably fraternity hazing play and they do so in the "exotic" spaces to which their SUV (and their class privilege) provides them access. One commercial in particular shows the boys driving down an impossibly rugged and narrow road to arrive at a beautiful, pristine waterfall. Once atop, they dare one another to jump; one does a visibly painful belly flop. Swept up in an emotion somewhere between the back-slapping hysteria of a good prank and the already nostalgic glow of shared camaraderie, the daredevil's buddies carry him back to the SUV and drive off. Here, the belly flop and the leisure it implies serves commercial purposes as *Jackass* viewers are incorporated and positioned as consumers. See Toyota. Also, see "Jungle Waterfalls and Jaguars" for a description of the advertisement and the Costa Rican waterfall at which it was filmed.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Dyer notes "There is no more powerful position than that of being 'just' human (2)" and "The invisibility of whiteness as a racial position in white (which is to say dominant) discourse is of a piece with its ubiquity (3)."

<sup>12</sup> I borrow the idea of flickering with respect to blackface from Eric Lott, whose work on minstrelsy has greatly influenced my thinking about *Jackass*. Lott writes: "My study documents in early blackface minstrelsy the dialectical flickering of racial insult and racial envy (18)."

<sup>13</sup> Sean Brayton also noticed this in his excellent article, "'MTV's *Jackass*: Transgression, Abjection and the Economy of White Masculinity." Brayton points out



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that “A symbolic parallel between the white and black victim is taken to a horrifying new level as one ‘jackass’ stares into the camera and claims, ‘Dude, this is like worse than a hanging’” (62). Although we disagree about the most salient features of the *Jackass* franchise, I think Brayton is right when he concedes that “Although representations of abject white masculinity in *Jackass* are potentially valid critiques of working-class subjugation, they may also resubordinate the historically marginalized through erasure” (60). In my favorite moment of his article, he sums up: “An ironic white masculinity is produced, one that is self-marginalizing and therefore implausibly victimized” (69).

<sup>14</sup> Here, I mean to extend the insights of Susan Jeffords on masculinity into the Bush II era. Susan Jeffords, in her book *Hard Bodies*, argues that the hard body in action films of the 80s (like *Rambo* and *Lethal Weapon*) constructed a masculine subjectivity that prized Reagan-era ideals of toughness and assertiveness; she further argued that the narratives that feature these hard bodied heroes reflected and helped rationalized Reagan’s attacks on Lybia and Grenada. I propose that *Jackass*, in its centering of masculine license, may work in a similar way.

<sup>15</sup> Chandrasekhar’s filmmaking credentials put him solidly in the *Jackass* camp: he has made *Beerfest*, *Super Troopers*, and *The Dukes of Hazard*.

<sup>16</sup> Such “gotcha” setups could certainly work to opposite ends: in *Borat*, Sasha Baron Cohen addresses terrorism and racism, but he does so from a marginal position in solidarity with those who live daily with these social threats. When he draws out the hatred of Muslims of rodeo cowboys, or the racism of male college students, he does so not to enact privilege but to expose it.

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<sup>17</sup> With the phrase “air and secure,” I again borrow language from Eric Lott: specifically, his description of how the minstrel show operates on working class values and desires (68).

<sup>18</sup> I am grateful to my teacher, Ariel Dorfman, for the idea that a work of popular culture makes us uncomfortable but not with ourselves.