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MTV’s *Jackass*: Transgression, Abjection and the Economy of White Masculinity

SEAN BRAYTON

**ABSTRACT** In the post-civil rights era, it is argued that some white men have adopted a marginalized positionality. This ‘white male backlash’ is often described as a distorted attempt to wrest social privilege from civil rights, feminist, and gay/lesbian movements. Through ‘reflexive sadomasochism’ the white male subject is able to simultaneously express an aggressive and receptive identity. While this overt narrative of white male victimhood is a recurring theme in popular film it has only been discussed within the action-drama genre. In response, I rely on a textual analysis of the popular film and television series *Jackass* to explain an alternative version of white male victimhood, one that loosely resembles Bakhtin’s carnivalesque. *Jackass* complicates an already complex discourse of white male disadvantage by portraying an abject white masculinity through parody and humour. Heteronormative white masculinity is reframed as antiheroic and marginalized, but it is also exposed to relentless mockery. Several sketches of *Jackass* are loaded with homoerotic inflections that potentially trouble a rigid heteronormative masculinity. As an ambiguous text devoted to grotesque realism and the ‘low other’, *Jackass* might signify a contemporary form of burlesque. In this light, the film appears to reaffirm dominant assumptions of white masculinity even as it lampoons the values of bourgeois society.

**KEYWORDS:** Abjection, carnivalesque, white male backlash, homoeroticism

After two successful seasons on MTV and an audience of nearly three million people (Hedegaard, 2001), *Jackass: The Movie* was launched by Viacom Corporation in 2002. The film, like its small-screen namesake, presents a series of self-deprecating stunts performed by the unlikeliest of heroes. Led by professional stuntman Johnny Knoxville, the *Jackass* gang partakes in endless debauchery including ‘Tropical Pole Vault’ and ‘Anal Firecrackers’. In one scene, Steve-O unsuccessfully attempts to walk a tightrope wearing nothing but an athletic supportive cup and a crash helmet. Below the rope lies a murky pool filled with alligators, one of whom snatches bait from Steve-O’s jockstrap. *Jackass* is preoccupied with white male nudity, bodily fluids, and lampooning an unassuming American (and Japanese) public. In addition, the cast is almost entirely comprised of white men bent on self-injury. Intending to fail at each sordid stunt, the *Jackass* gang both contests and confirms ‘normative’ assumptions of white heterosexual masculinity.

With the incremental gains of the civil rights, feminist, and gay and lesbian movements, white heterosexual masculinity came under attack in the latter part of the twentieth century.
An ongoing crisis is readily identified by its wave(s) of 'white male backlash' (Faludi, 2000; Kimmel, 1996; Robinson, 2000; Savran, 1998). In the post-civil rights era, some white men have adopted a marginalized positionality in an effort to reclaim the tacit social privileges of being white, heterosexual and male. As such, the white male ‘simultaneously embraces and disavows’ the role of victim (Savran, 1998, p. 128). He is an increasingly familiar character in Western culture, poignantly presented by the popular films The Deer Hunter (1978), First Blood (1982) as well as Good Will Hunting (1997) and Fight Club (1999) (Kusz, 2001; Savran, 1998). These ‘masochistic narratives, structured so as to defer closure or resolution, often feature white men displaying their wounds as evidence of disempowerment, and finding a pleasure in exploitations in pain’ (Robinson, 2000, p. 11). Consequently, the white male is presented as an abject individual who is constantly at war with himself.

Although ‘reflexive sadomasochism’ (Savran, 1996) has been identified within action-drama films, it has received little if any attention in comedy. This begs the question, how does humour complicate our understanding of ‘white male backlash’? To unpack this query, I rely upon a textual analysis of MTV’s Jackass (both the film and select television episodes). As a form of satire, Jackass represents both an affirmation and a disavowal of ‘heroic’ white masculinity. The ambiguous nature of parody provides us with multiple and conflicting depictions of white masculinity that are curiously underscored by an ironic homoeroticism and a working-class disruptiveness. As a series of polysemic and paradoxical sketches, Jackass does not lend itself to one particular theoretical analysis. Instead, the indelibly complex film invites a variety of interpretations in an effort to comprehend that which is apparently and perhaps intentionally incomprehensible. In what follows, I trace the antics of Jackass to early forms of carnivalesque, charivari and burlesque, as well as the more contemporary politics of white male backlash. Finally, I explore possible audience interpretations of the film and offer some alternative reading strategies of these highly perplex sketches.

Reflexive Sadomasochism and White Male Abjection in the 1990s

White masculinity in North America is a historically unstable category, beset with continual anxiety (Kimmel, 1996). A new articulation of white masculinity appeared in the 1990s, one that was allegedly rooted in victimization and marked the maturation of a ‘white male backlash’ (Savran, 1998; Kimmel, 1996). A bevy of factors has contributed to a heightened social disempowerment perceived by middle- and working-class white men, from which emerges a complex discussion at the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality. The progressive yet limited gains of the civil rights, feminist, and gay/lesbian movements called into question the tacit socio-economic privileges enjoyed by white heterosexual men. According to the rhetoric of the conservative right, white males in America now constitute a marginalized sector of society such that the implementation of affirmative action, immigration, and multicultural policies have revoked their social entitlement (Robinson, 2000; Savran, 1998). Evidently, ‘unjust’ legislation created a formidable character in late twentieth-century US culture: the angry white man (Kimmel, 1996; Savran, 1998). As Michael Kimmel writes, “angry white males” . . . feel besieged by frenzied “feminazis” and a culture of entitlements, affirmative action, and special interests’ (1996, p. 300).
In a general sense, middle- and working-class white men have experienced reduced incomes in recent years, yet their annual earnings remain disproportionately greater than women and people of colour in North America (Winant, 2004; Wellman, 1997). So although affirmative action and multicultural initiatives are grossly misrepresented as the antecedents of this socio-economic displacement, a sense of loss, retracted privileges and collapsed incomes of some white men are quite real. A discourse of white male victimization has in many ways served as a problematic conjunction between the white middle and working classes insofar as women and people of colour are typically misconstrued as undeserving beneficiaries of social entitlements. This perceived dethronement has also produced a victimized articulation of white masculinity in popular culture (Faludi, 2000; Kusz, 2001; Robinson, 2000; Savran, 1998).

‘Reflexive sadomasochism’ is a term often used to explain the popular depictions of white masculinity in the post-Vietnam era (Savran, 1996; Silverman, 1992). Unlike the corporate, success-driven male of the 1950s, the post-Vietnam white male – epitomized by Sylvester Stallone’s ‘Rambo’ character – assumes a victimized identity (Savran, 1996). As David Savran writes, this ‘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’ (1996, p. 129). In other words, a masculinized self inflicts punishment upon a feminized self. Through reflexive sadomasochism, the white male becomes ‘the fractured hero, making a spectacle of himself, driven to distraction, and pleasurably tortured by his multiple selves, the one who “has a sadomasochist in his closet”’ (Savran, 1998, p. 130). This display of a downtrodden, bruised, and battered subjectivity has often been discussed within a framework that resonates with Julia Kristeva’s concept of the ‘abject’ (1982).

Situated heavily in Lacanian psychoanalysis, Kristeva’s abject is a pre-Oedipal component of the self that is neither subject nor object (1982). It is something that must be rejected for the healthy subject – the ‘I’ – to develop. Since the abject is neither a part of us nor apart from us, it disrupts the boundaries of ‘identity, system, order’ (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). In Kristeva’s terms, it is ‘the jettisoned object [which] is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses’ (1982, p. 2). In this manner, ‘the abject haunts identity with the impossibility of clear borders between the filthy and the clean, … disorder and order required by the symbolic’ (Cooklin, 2003, par. 2). Thus, where there is abject, there is also the sacred (Kristeva, 1982). Following Mary Douglas (1966), the removal of the abject, or dirt, is not based on any hygienic anxiety but rather an arbitrary paradigm that presents itself as an economy of the sacred and profane. Examples of the abject include vomit, urine, faeces, saliva, semen, tears (Chow, 2002; Grosz, 1992). These are things that threaten the subject/object divide, and therefore must be expelled if the ‘I’ is to unfold. Ultimately, then, the abject ‘appears as a rite of defilement and pollution … [it] persists as exclusion or taboo’ (Kristeva, 1982, p. 10). As a desired source of expulsion, Kristeva’s abject has multiple applications.

The abject can easily be grafted onto the immigrant body, which is often conceived as something to be excluded in order to preserve a coherent yet racist national imaginary (Hall, 1997). Dealing with the abject means ‘throwing it out’ (Hall, 1997). In this sense, marginal groups are situated beyond the ideological frontiers of the national subject. Their constitutive exclusion is used to maintain a ‘normative’ national identity. In the post-civil rights era, however, the abject has been a positionality adopted by middle- and working-class heterosexual white men. Expressions of such can be located in the white male ‘indie
rocker’ of the 1990s (Newitz, 1997; Wald, 1997) and even ‘hard country’ music singers like Hank Williams and Merle Haggard (Ching, 1997). In both cases, the espousal of an abject identity ironically works to restore the cultural importance of the white male subject. Self-derogation functions to erect a safe perimeter around the self, making the white male ‘impervious to criticism’ (Newitz, 1997, p. 146). This process, of course, is based on the misleading assumption that abject white masculinity is somehow more fundamentally significant than the experiences of those individuals historically marginalized because of their race, gender, and sexuality.

A handful of recent films marks the popularity of the white male victim narrative. For example, critics have identified *Falling Down* (1993), *Good Will Hunting* (1997), and *Fight Club* (1999) as suggestive of an ‘imaginary’ white disempowerment (Kusz, 2001, 2002; Savran, 1998; Tuss, 2004). Having internalized social displacement the angry white male of these films adopts both a passive and an aggressive identity (Robinson, 2000; Savran, 1998). This is presented in *Fight Club* by the splitting of the narrator’s ego into the characters played by Edward Norton and Brad Pitt. Indeed, ‘the reflexive sadomasochistic imaginary is popular today because it allows white men to imagine themselves as victims of society and, at the same time, adequately strong, virile, tough, and in control of their lives’ (Kusz, 2002, p. 469). Similar themes abound in *Jackass* insofar as self-deprecation converges with representations of white masculinity.

**Doing ‘the Gooch’: *Jackass* and the Abject White Male**

The body, Peter Roubal reminds us, ‘is our most reliable, continuous and comprehensive metaphor for life and its meaning’ (2003, p. 3). It is my contention that ideologies of the abject and white male victimhood are written on the bodies of the *Jackass* gang, but not without an ironic complexion. 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. In other words, the victimized white male is depicted in a way that subsumes the variegated histories of racial, gender, and sexual ‘minorities’, or groups that have been and continue to be denied political representation by predominantly white heterosexual men in North America. It is in this sense advantageous to read certain scenes of *Jackass* through a narrative of white male backlash while acknowledging the partiality and insufficiency of such a critical framework. The shifting value of the abject, from something that disrupts identity formation on a psychoanalytic level to a social group that is downtrodden and marginalized, permeates the discourse of *Jackass*. It appears through an engagement with bodily fluids and a complex metaphor of social displacement.

Appearing in the small-screen series, Dave England parodies a generic televised cooking programme by preparing, and later ingesting, what he calls a ‘vomit omelette’ (it is as it sounds). There is a discomfort produced by England’s consumption of the ‘in-between, the ambiguous, the composite’ (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). That which is taboo and cast off to an unspeakable periphery is returned to the social order. It becomes a disruption to our ideas of the sacred and profane. In the film version, England saunters into a hardware store toting a newspaper and proceeds to defecate in the display toilet. Hidden cameras capture the reaction of the employees, much to the audience’s enjoyment and/or disgust. While preparing for the sketch, however, England accidentally defecates in the tour van, which creates a sequence of vomiting among
the camera crew (all captured on film, of course). Here the abject, as both bodily fluids and the *Jackass* gang, is that which ‘does not respect borders, positions, rules’ (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). The presence of the abject in *Jackass* signals the collapse of meaning within a symbolic order. It also signals the functional breakdown of a particular version of white male identity.

In a scene titled ‘Ass Kicked by Girl’, Ryan Dunn squares off with a Japanese kickboxing champion named Kumagai Naoka. On the one hand, the scene undermines any attempt to rescue masculinity through a physical domination that has come to define the tenacious sporting male (Connell, 1995; Whitson, 1990). An athletic masculinity asserted at the expense of the feminine is sardonically subverted by Dunn. Dressed in a sports bra, he unabashedly gets his ‘ass kicked by a girl’. On the other hand, the punishment of the white male body is a lucid reflection of backlash rhetoric. The sketch presents a literal assault on the white male subject at the hands of a multicultural feminism, embodied here by the kickboxer Naoka. Dunn, as the pulverized white male body, signifies ‘the putative loser of affirmative action programs’ which also positions women of colour as a dominating group (Rasmussen et al., 2001, p. 6). A racialized and gendered Other emasculates the white male as the catchy tunes of the female punk band, Sahara Hotnights plays in the background. The feminist angst of the screaming vocals and whaling guitar riffs provides an acoustic license for the pugnacious Naoka. ‘Ass Kicked by Girl’, then, is consistent with a deflated white male ego vis-à-vis identity politics and feminist activism.

A sketch played by head-jackass Johnny Knoxville is an additional metaphor of social disempowerment. During ‘Riot Control Test’, Knoxville is willingly assaulted by a beanbag projectile fired from a rifle. Such munitions, of course, are commonly used by law enforcers during riot control. When Knoxville steps into the rifle’s crosshairs he is undertaking an imagined status of ‘urban predator’, a category notoriously reserved for racialized inner-city males (Gilroy, 1987; Gray, 2004). Here the target of police fire becomes the white male body rather than the marginalized black abject. Knoxville is, to play on Sally Robinson’s text, a ‘marked man’ not unlike a litany of black and Hispanic victims of excessive ‘policing’. Elsewhere, Knoxville is brutalized by pepper spray, a taser, and even a small calibre handgun fired into his Kevlar vest. In these events, the white male is a provisional victim of police brutality. Such scenes, however, trivialize ‘the true nature of oppression in the United States by blurring the difference between voluntary and forced outsiderism’ (Van Elteren, 1999, p. 90). While the sketch appears to ridicule excessive law enforcement tactics, the white body is problematically (re)situated at the social margins in a way that obscures the historically racist underpinnings of police brutality and criminal profiling. Unlike a racialized counterpart, Knoxville is able to step out of his victimized role (if only to further punish the self).

The narrative of white male victimhood is also revealed by ‘Bungee Wedgie’. In this sketch, Chris Raab slides from a tree branch wearing only white brief underwear, which is, as the title suggests, linked to a small bungee rope. His first attempt fails as the underwear rips, sending Raab plummeting to the ground. After reinforcing the stunt with additional pairs of underwear, Raab hangs from the tree for several seconds. The sketch ends with a camera close-up of Raab’s ‘bloody, shitty underpants’ (as Knoxville describes them). To a certain extent ‘Bungee Wedgie’ functions as a symbolic social critique. It presents a satirical censuring of high school jock culture (cf. Wilson, 2002), the presumed perpetrators of wedgies. In this sense, the anti-jock group appears to be appropriating criticism; ‘nothing you do to me will ever be worse than what I do to myself’
(Newitz, 1997). ‘Bungee Wedgie’ is such an exaggerated prank that any further abuse by jock culture will pale in comparison. This has the ironic effect of denigrating oppressive high school cliques and also protecting the white male body. When Raab introduces himself as a ‘complete fucking idiot’, he’s beaten us to the punch, so to speak; but the presentation of ‘Bungee Wedgie’ also mimics a more profound spectacle of victimization.

As the scene’s climax, Raab dangles in a naked and inverted pose. His cohorts, rolling with laughter, surround the tree from which Raab is suspended. Such imagery – of the tree, the dangling body, and the assembled white crowd – is eerily suggestive of another type of torment: the lynching of black men in the southern US. As David Marriott (2000) writes, ‘The act of lynching is part of a racial imaginary, a primal scene of racist culture ... in which black men bear the brunt of a hatred which seems, at times, to know no bound’ (p. 10). It is an ‘ideological narrative’ that casts and castrates the black man as sexual and social pariah (Marriott, 2000). Because of the historical significance of lynching in America, ‘Bungee Wedgie’ is unsettling, to say the least. During the lynching of black men, ‘an image of white identity emerges from a spectacle of annihilation’ (Marriott, 2000, p. 6). In ‘Bungee Wedgie’, the collective fears and fantasies that reaffirm the solidarity of the group are projected onto the suspended and humiliated white male body. Raab signifies an embellished social displacement, an imagined castration that, on the one hand, lampoons the pejorative tactics of the jock and, on the other hand, touches upon a spectacle of racist violence which cannot be indubitably rewritten through the white abject. Unlike ‘Ass Kicked by Girl’, this scene features the gang castrating the white male before the multicultural or feminist Other is given the opportunity. 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’. The diegetic spectators of ‘Bungee Wedgie’, however, share in the victim’s degradation through laughter.

Self-deprecation in Jackass is often directed toward the groin area. The targeted body parts include the testicles and the frenulum between the genitals and the anus, or what the gang calls ‘the gooch’. Using a muscle stimulator, Knoxville and the group take turns electrocuting various body parts with moderate volts of electricity. The sketch culminates in Dave England’s shocking of ‘the gooch’ and Chris Pontius’s ‘testicular electrocution’. Entirely naked, with his legs elevated and the group engrossed by the gooch, England shocks his nether region. Strangely, most of the gang are topless by the time Pontius insists on his turn at the testicles. The selection of the punished body parts is not without significance.

For England, the shocking of the gooch foreshadows the film’s abject theme. In a way, the gooch itself is a form of abject. It is neither a part of the genitals nor a part of the anus, but rather an anatomical ‘in-between’. As a symbol of abjection, the gooch epitomizes the importance of Jackass. Both the white male and the gooch are depicted here as the victim of a displaced identity; they are naturally present, yet socially rejected (Persels & Ganim, 2004). As a result, the gang performs as if it was the waste of civilization, with no particular place of belonging and most certainly no claims to social entitlement. As for Pontius, the testicular electrocution is clearly a form of castration. The white male body is both feminized and remasculinized through self-castration. Pontius is rejecting and redeeming his manhood by punishing its essence. 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’ (1996, p. 129).
Because of its parodic nature, however, *Jackass* presents a version of abject white masculinity that may overwhelm essentialist readings of white male victimhood in Hollywood. It is an irreducibly rich film that expresses a legitimate concern of working-class discontent and yet it also demonstrates an ambitious irreverence toward all social constructions of identity, especially that of white heterosexual masculinity. For this reason, reductive critiques of white male backlash and the appropriated abject are hopelessly incomplete and demand a more developed understanding of the intricacies of white masculinities within satirical formations. That is to say, the apparent identity politics presented by *Jackass* are at once sympathetic toward working-class discontent, white male backlash, and carnivalesque transgression.

**A Parade of Fools: *Jackass* as Carnivalesque**

Carnivalesque is a term Mikhail Bakhtin uses to describe the celebrations and festivities of the medieval period. The carnival, he argues, involves a ‘temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men and of certain norms and prohibitions of usual life’ (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 15). In the Middle Ages, this took the form of billingsgate oath, or an art of profanity, and also the parodic performance of the monarchy. Here ‘the king’s attributes are turned upside down in the clown’ (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 370). The purpose of such degradation is to present rituals of death and rebirth, of a potential collapse of authority and a rejuvenation of a utopian ideal (Bakhtin, 1984). The carnival also featured elements of grotesque realism, which elevates the lower stratum above the upper regions of the body; rationality and mental resolve are replaced with bodily fluids and defecation (Bakhtin, 1984; Stallybrass & White, 1997). As Bakhtin writes, ‘In order to degrade the high images … [one] stresses the trivial material bodily images’ (1984, p. 304). Elements of the carnival – including the grotesque, exaggeration, and parody – underwrite many scenes in *Jackass*. Indeed, ‘the most ancient rituals of mocking at the deity have … survived’ (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 12). The carnivalesque is presented in *Jackass* by a ritual of degradation through grotesque realism.

In the television series, Preston Lacy – an overweight white man – occupies a portable toilet located in a congested urban area. After conspicuously alluding to the labours of defecation, Jason ‘Weeman’ Acuna exits the stall (rather than Lacy). In carnivalesque style, this represents a ‘typical comic pair based on contrasts’: grand and miniature (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 201). Lacy groans excessively and ultimately ‘gives birth’ to Acuna. The scene illustrates a process of death as defecation, but also renewal in the form of Weeman. An enormous man vanishes and a male midget emerges. The hyperbolic exchange of identities, which is here mediated by defecation, suggests a form of carnivalesque play. For Bakhtin, ‘the exaggeration of the inappropriate to incredible and monstrous dimensions is … the basic nature of the grotesque. Therefore, the grotesque is always satire’ (1984, p. 306). Herein lies a parody of ideal body image as well as the discretion of bowel movements such that the alleged vulgarities of the ‘low other’ or working classes are dramatized onscreen. As this sketch illustrates, ‘the events of the grotesque sphere are always developed on the boundary dividing one body from the other and … at their points of intersection. One body offers death, the other is birth, but they are merged in a two-bodied image’ (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 322).

The marrow of grotesque realism ‘is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract’ (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 19). This is perhaps the raison d’etre of *Jackass*. 
Both film and television episodes are imbued with male nudity, the penetration of orifices, and exaggeration. A celebration of the lower bodily stratum and ‘low culture’ is exemplified by the scene titled ‘Muscle Stimulator’. Zooming camera angles of the low others playing with their own low others (i.e. the gooch and testicles) convey a certain homoeroticism that troubles a dominant cultural discourse of not only civility and the moral order, but also heteronormative masculinity. Male viewers and cast members, for instance, are invited into a visual economy of homoerotic desire and its cathartic repression. As Savran notes, the hypermasculinity of physical violence works to assuage the potential anxieties caused by a displaced heterosexuality (1998). A rigid masculinity rooted in physical domination is redeemed through the ironic befuddlement of masturbation and electrocution. Reflexive sadomasochism reassures the ‘straight’ sensibilities of homosocial bonding by punishing not only the protagonist’s genitals but also the queer gaze of the male viewer (Savran, 1998). A hierarchy of competing masculinities is reproduced even during moments of apparent emasculation.

The sketches of Jackass are indisputably riddled with both transgressive and conservative tendencies. In a sense, they might resemble forms of carnivalesque known as ‘charivari’. During the seventeenth century the practice of charivari was pervasive in France, often directed by groups of youth known as the ‘Abbeys of Misrule’ (Davis, 1971, p. 43). In the British context, E.P. Thompson describes a similar tradition called ‘rough music’ (1991). Both performances typically involved a mockery consisting of effigies, satirical drama, and most notably song and dance amidst a cacophony of clamouring drums, pots and pans (Davis, 1971; Wadsworth, 1984; Thompson, 1991). As Natalie Zemon Davis explains, charivari was a ‘hazardous instrument of social control’ that often involved a ‘boisterous mixture of playfulness and cruelty’ (1984, p. 42). What is more, charivari and rough music were used to adjudicate deviance from community values, especially those surrounding marriage customs. To restore the gendered hierarchy of the community, for instance, an abused or ‘henpecked’ husband was paraded on a mule throughout the village as the Abbeys of Misrule mocked both victim and offender (Davis, 1971). The charivari was an alternating spectacle of ‘folk justice and festive humiliation’ designed to uphold austere marriage customs (Davis, 1984, p. 54). While the festive ridicule occasionally targeted political authority, ‘domestic rough music was socially conservative in the sense that it defended … male-dominative tradition’ (Thompson, 1991, p. 524). The transgressive mockery prevalent in charivari and rough music doubled as ‘the vehicle for correcting or chastising an assumed violation of a social code’ (Wadsworth, 1984, p. 71).

In this light, Dunn’s ‘Ass Kicked by Girl’ sketch alternately disrupts and preserves normative conceptions of athletic masculinity. Although an intrinsically tough masculinity is exposed as fraudulent, the principles of ‘proper’ manliness are reinforced through a contemporary form of charivari. Whereas charivari and rough music involved a ruckus of ad hoc instruments, the festivities of Jackass rely on an equally biting punk soundtrack. The chorus repeated by the screaming female vocalist echoes ‘alright, alright … here’s my fist, where’s the fight’. The henpecked Dunn is ridiculed by his co-stars in a way that ironically maintains a myth of masculine brawn. Although the inverted gender performance of Naoka’s physical domination is potentially troubling to a patriarchal logic, it is nevertheless contained by marking the abused male through mockery. During rough music, Thompson reminds us, ‘both parties were satirized in the public disgrace, since the husband had failed to establish his patriarchal authority’ (1991, p. 493). In other words, the
weak male and by extension the strong female are ridiculed rather than celebrated in charivari, rough music, and in this case *Jackass*. As a gender commentary, the sketch percolates between ‘the mockery of authority and its endorsement, the appeal to tradition and the threat of rebellion’ (Thompson, 1991, p. 482). Above all, there is an ambiguous gender parody at play that reaffirms as it disavows competing versions of masculinity and femininity. By this order, *Jackass* is bursting with the sensibilities of burlesque.

Although it is often mistaken as little more than striptease, burlesque was originally associated with a sardonic genre of theatre that played against larger social norms of the mid-nineteenth century (Allen, 1991). Burlesque typically consisted of all-female theatre troupes performing travesties or ‘send-ups’ of so-called high culture. As early as the 1840s, ‘these works entertained the lower and middle classes in Great Britain and the United States by making fun of (or “burlesquing”) the operas, plays and social habits of the upper classes’ (Kenrick, 1996, p. 3). Moreover, the characteristic gender parody of burlesque shows, by which women assumed the roles of men, disrupted bourgeois ideals of femininity epitomized by the modest and reserved damsel of American melodrama (Allen, 1991). Indeed, ‘burlesque took wicked fun in reversing roles, shattering polite expectations, brazenly challenging notions of the approved ways women might display their bodies and speak in public’ (Trachtenberg, 1991, p. xii).

While original forms of burlesque differ significantly from *Jackass*, both cultural forms are indebted to the performance of ‘the lower body, the profane, the working classes’ (Allen, 1991, p. 146). Burlesque and *Jackass* immodestly exhibit what is normally concealed in public. Whereas the burlesque performance questioned Victorian ideals of femininity during the mid-nineteenth century, it may function in *Jackass* as a modern-day parody of heteronormative athletic masculinity. ‘Alligator Tightrope’, for example, foregrounds the homoerotic undertones and grotesque realism endemic to many sporting practices in North America. As an alligator reaches for Steve-O’s ‘baited’ jockstrap the naked male body becomes a site of revulsion and scopophilic desire. The ‘burlesquing’ of athleticism and its open invitation of the male homoerotic gaze becomes an ‘arena for “acting out” cultural contradictions’ of sporting masculinities and the damaging guise of enforced heterosexuality (Allen, 1991, p. 27). Much like original burlesque, the skits of *Jackass* are underwritten by a discourse of ‘irreverence, inversion, the grotesque, and sexual display’ (Allen, 1991, p. 39).

‘In the upside-down world of burlesque’, Robert Allen writes, ‘masculinity was but a caricature of itself’ (1991, p. 148). The overlapping masculinities of *Jackass* may present a similar if equally as complex gender parody. In one scene, Knoxville confronts the professional prizefighter Eric ‘Butterbean’ Esch, only to receive twelve stitches and a concussion. The boxing match is held in a department store amidst several bewildered bystanders. Knoxville’s slim musculature, unwittingly passive posture, and conspicuous pink trunks accentuate the ‘grotesque’ physicality and aggressive masculinity of Butterbean. The maiming of Knoxville painfully lampoons a dominant form of masculinity ‘associated with success in athletic contests’ (Whitson, 1990, p. 19). In addition, Butterbean’s oversized features are underscored by trunks emblazoned with American stars and stripes. The homology of American patriotism and overzealous physical aggression perhaps signifies a compelling if unarticulated mockery of an exacerbated American militarism. If the ‘ritual display of strong … and disciplined bodies’ is reflective of national leadership (Roubal, 2003, p. 3), the abject bodies of *Jackass* might signal a crisis of authority, which, of course, marks the successful outcome
of the carnival. And while ‘burlesque constructed a body that was a horribly pretty parody of masculinity’ the physical abuse withstood by Knoxville and others reproduces the very mechanisms of manliness in which the sketches are designed to undermine (Allen, 1991, p. 174).

Burlesque directed its barbs at ‘high culture’, capturing a particular class-consciousness that sought to lampoon social hierarchies. Indeed, the burlesque performer ‘was a transgressive other, whose “business” was predicated on subverting and perverting the very essence of the legitimate theatre. She was a low other, dragged up from the netherworld of the working-class saloon’ (Allen, 1991, p. 125). The particular emphasis on the lower region of the performer’s body was homologous to the usurpation of high cultural tastes on the burlesque stage. Much like Jackass, the early burlesque shows orchestrated by Lydia Thompson and William Mitchell were ‘grounded in the aesthetics of transgression, inversion, and the grotesque’ whereby the ‘debased, dirty, and unworthy’ were promoted from the taverns of the working classes to the stages of bourgeois society, making the actors objects of revulsion and desire (Allen, 1991, p. 26).

With its antiauthoritarian bent, Jackass often relies on class distinctions as satirical fodder. At the height of their mischief, Knoxville, McGhehey, and England partake in a scene called, ‘Air Horn Golf’. Dressed in hunting fatigues and shielded from view, the group sounds an air horn during the backswing of various golfers. The stunt, of course, forces the upper-class golfers to squander their strokes. What is ultimately parodied is the earnest concentration of the privileged golfers. The game and its participants are exposed as not only frivolous, but also entirely too uptight. The scene underscores an interesting class dichotomy that positions the camouflage-clad jackasses against the elitist golfers. Visually, there is a stark contrast between the working-class garbs of the ‘redneck’ and the primp attire of the affluent golfer. Class distinctions are reproduced if only to be ridiculed. Thus, the juxtaposition of classes results ‘in a period of the radical breaking up of the world’s hierarchical picture’ (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 426).

The scene’s degradation of bourgeois culture represents a temporary inversion of social hierarchies rooted in the distribution of wealth. Here the redneck or low other creates a counter-discourse that enunciates class conflict and contests ‘the right of higher discourses to determine the vertical order of culture’ (Allen, 1991, p. 26). Similarly, the rough music of air horns and laughter permeate the skit as the ‘youth of misrule’ evoke a certain folk justice of the commons. Incidentally, as rough music developed in England during the seventeenth century, it was also ‘used for upholding common rights . . . against enclosure’ (Thompson, 1991, p. 519). Since the golf and country club has traditionally prohibited the low other, the trespassing rednecks disrupt bourgeois claims to space and leisure but also reinforce high cultural ideas of the working-class and youth as incorrigibly ignorant. Thus, ‘resistance to authority can be deflected and redirected into a discourse of resubordination’ (Allen, 1991, p. 36). Caricatures of class are simultaneously disruptive and conservative insofar as ‘misrule always implies the rule that it parodies’ (Davis, 1971, p. 45).

Jackass is a media text heavily situated in paradox, not the least of which surrounds the polysemic possibilities of the abject. On the one hand, the abject is a complex if largely misguided metonym for a downtrodden white heterosexual masculinity claimed by the conservative right in the post-civil rights era. On the other hand, it represents an ahistorical disruption to psychosocial borders of the symbolic order. In Jackass, ‘cultural suppression becomes subcultural revelation as what was once rejected as waste is now valued as inspiration’ (Persels & Ganim, 2004, par. 7). Yet the burlesque aesthetics of the film
foreground a third level of abjection, one that is perhaps the most disruptive of all. In a very tangible way, homoerotic desire is the penultimate abject of Jackass. Although homoeroticism punctuates the contradictions of sporting masculinities it is also the subject of disavowal through physical abuse. Ironically, it is repressed and spectacularized ‘in fundamentally contradictory and ambivalent ways that elicit both repugnance and fascination’ (Allen, 1991, p. 26). If the homoerotic abject threatens the heterosexual subject with the impossibility of closure and clarity, the flagrance of male nudity in Jackass might problematize larger cultural prescriptions of what it means to be ‘masculine’. In part, the film presents an open-ended if paradoxical sexual uncertainty.

The carnivalesque in Jackass is indebted to the male rectum, taking ‘societies’ anxieties about disorderliness, decay and corruption’ and placing them centre stage (Vertinsky, 1995, p. 42). Moreover, the film centralizes rather than conceals the inherent homoerotic contradictions within the supposed heterosexual bastion of athletics. It constructs an audience around a ‘perverted’ form of sports spectatorship, yet denies the viewer coherence and closure in its sketches. As a form of burlesque, Jackass evokes ‘desire and at the same time disturb[s] the ground of that desire by confusing the distinctions on which desire depend[s]’ (Allen, 1991, p. 148). The homoerotic abject denies a certain heterosexual cohesion in a way that reveals and even celebrates the very crisis of sexual ambiguity often veiled in dominant cultural texts. In Bakhtin’s terms, a ‘heteroglossia’ emerges whereby competing dialects of masculinity and sexuality engage each other in a single text (1982). This has the potential to disrupt the ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ of male bonding by accentuating paradox and diversity rather than closure and consensus (Sedgwick, 1985; Rubin, 1996).

‘Reading’ and ‘Writing’ Subject Positionings of Jackass

Textual analyses may sensitize an audience to the particular subject positionings made available by the media text. However, ‘it is in and through the very practices of media consumption – and the positionings and identification they solicit – that gender identities are recursively shaped’ (Ang & Hermes, 1996, p. 337). Indeed, a critical analysis of Jackass invites a substantive investigation of audience reception alongside textual interpretations. Here I would like to comment upon the politics of spectatorship and the articulation of ‘subject positions’ in the film, ones that may inform a more empirically based audience reception study of Jackass.

Jackass most clearly presents a paradoxical set of masculinities. While this analysis focuses on the rich juxtapositions of athletic masculinity and homoerotic desire we cannot assume an exclusive male viewership. The programme’s claimed target audience is eighteen–twenty-four year-old males (Stillman, 2002) but media texts are often consumed by unintended groups in unintended ways. For example, the ostensibly masculine film and television genres of science fiction, violence and horror have attracted an unanticipated and substantial female audience (Jenkins, 1992; Hill, 1997). Thus, as Jen Ang and Joke Hermes contend, ‘non-gendered identifications may sometimes take on a higher priority than gendered ones, allowing for a much more complex and dynamic theorization of the way media consumption is related to gender’ (1996, p. 339). Further studies in audience reception might clarify some of the actual uses of Jackass, the negotiation of dominant or preferred meanings, as well as viewer demographics.
All this is to suggest that viewers actively engage and pilfer from various media to construct and negotiate meaningful identities which ‘cannot be dictated by the text’ much less textual analysis (Ang & Hermes, 1996, p. 328). Viewers bring to any particular text a series of experiences and values, or what Annette Hill calls ‘portfolios’ of interpretation that enable an audience to negotiate meanings in an often social manner (1997). Similarly, 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’ (1992, p. 23). They may become, in effect, ‘textual poachers’ in a semiotic struggle waged on a discursive terrain between viewer and producer (Jenkins, 1992). Although the actual consumption of Jackass is unclear some of its viewers have made headlines in recent years.

There have been several ‘copycat’ incidents involving teenage males replicating the stunts of Jackass in both North America and the United Kingdom (Stillman, 2002). Some viewers have solicited their own videotaped pranks to MTV, a mode of amateur production that resembles Jenkins’ discussion of ‘fan culture’ (1992). Yet a triage of broken limbs and third-degree burns received from vehicle impacts and ‘human barbeques’ might suggest that, despite their productive capabilities, some audiences at least have interpreted Jackass in a more literal sense. While the ironic (hetero)-masculinities of Jackass are imitated in practice, they seem markedly less ironic when the injuries received are substantive and quite serious. Jenkins warns, ‘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”’ (1992, p. 63). It is possible, even likely, that the ironic sketches of Jackass may be read ironically by different viewers. Intimations of white male backlash, antiheroic bravado, and carnivalesque may be punctuated or lost depending on the (often fragmented) social audience and the experiences they bring to the film.

These incidents underline the complex patterns of consuming media texts among various audiences. In short, ‘readers are not always resistant; all resistant readings are not necessarily progressive’ (Jenkins, 1992, p. 34). Certain audience groups may be attuned to elements of the film that pass unnoticed in other viewers. The negotiation of gendered, racialized, and sexualized identities presented by Jackass assumes new meanings across a diverse spectrum of viewership. This means that mediated positionings are ‘multiple and partial, ambiguous and incoherent, permanently in process of being articulated, disarticulated, and rearticulated’ (Ang & Hermes, 1996, p. 339). Gender is also and always expressed in Jackass through representations of race, class, and sexuality which viewers may be sensitive toward depending on their social location. Thus, a discussion of male and female audiences is rather meaningless without considering the fractured nature of these mistakenly coherent binary oppositions (Ang & Hermes, 1996). As Ang and Hermes suggest, ‘we should not only attend to both female and male self-identified readers (and arguably non-readers as well), but also pay attention to the multiple feminine and masculine identifications involved’ (1996, p. 333).

Whereas audience responses would help to clarify the cultural currency of Jackass, the act of textual poaching from a theoretical stance is equally as valuable. That is, the above viewing strategies, while informed by various theoretical frameworks, are modes of consumption that situate myself within a poacher’s camp as well. Enlisting the sketches of Jackass to explain emerging cultural politics and substantive social theory is a potentially useful pedagogical strategy that relies upon the very consumptive and productive
processes discussed by Jenkins, Hill, and Ang and Hermes. The contradictions of *Jackass* may be used to discuss the reiterative as well as disruptive uses of popular film and television. It is important to emphasize the ways in which media representations and narratives construct a multiplicity of sometimes contradicting cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity, which serve as subject positions that spectators might take up in order to enter into a meaningful relationship with the texts concerned.

(Ang & Hermes, 1996, p. 327)

**Conclusion**

Relexive sadomasochism, the abject white male body, and laughter are characteristic elements of *Jackass*. The film presents a spectacle of emasculation that is also a reassertion of the masculine. It foregrounds the representation of a marginalized or disempowered white male that many social commentators have read within the reactionary discourse of white male backlash (Kusz, 2003). In *Jackass*, the credits roll to a twanging country song titled, ‘If You’re Gonna Be Dumb (You Gotta Be Tough)’, underscoring a romanticized abjection that Barbara Ching has identified with hard country music performers (1997). Similar to charivari and rough music, *Jackass* marks the merging of the conservative underpinnings of reflexive sadomasochism with the transgressive potential of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque. An ironic white masculinity is produced, one that is self-marginalizing and therefore implausibly victimized. But it is also disruptive to a symbolic social order. The spectacle of failure in *Jackass* is complicated by the concomitant presence of ironic identities.

In a general sense, critiques of white male backlash have successfully identified a reactionary form of white masculinity, one which seeks compensation for the alleged loss of social entitlements during the post-civil rights era (Savran, 1998; Kusz, 2002; Robinson, 2000). On the surface, an abject white masculinity of *Jackass* partially aligns with backlash rhetoric. Because they are often prone to discussing masculinity and whiteness in reactionary and essentialist terms, however, the charges against white male backlash fail to explain the rich paradoxes displayed by *Jackass*. The film invites us to consider multiple and conflicting masculinities infused with the ironies of race, class and sexuality without resorting to heteronormative assumptions of white male backlash. The film’s opening scene features Knoxville entering a demolition derby using, and later returning, a modified rental car. The working-class white masculinity of the redneck derby is spectacularized and curiously juxtaposed with Knoxville’s crash helmet, which bears the ‘rainbow flag’ insignia of gay/lesbian solidarity. The ‘double-voicing’ of heteronormative and homoerotic sensibilities ‘refuses resolution into either pole; the doubleness is held in tension always’ (Hutcheon, 1991, p. 12). For this reason, the discourse produced by *Jackass* is not so coherent as to reflect either backlash politics or transgression exclusively. Rather, ‘popular culture has a contradictory nature – it contains “dominant”, “negotiated” and “oppositional” meanings, often blended in the same text’ (Horrocks, 1995, p. 27).

At its best, *Jackass* offers an oxymoronc travesty of heteronormative masculinity and bourgeois society shrouded in a spectacle of ambiguity. This is partly the result of a media culture that rewards and prioritizes a depoliticized narcissism of youth rebellion *qua* consumption rather than articulated political commentaries uttered by the low other (Allen, 1991). Alas, the spectacle of abjection displaces its political antecedents. MTV and
Viacom are willing endorsers of *Jackass* as long as its grotesque humour generates revenue and fails to disrupt any particular fulcrum of power. In Néstor García Canclini’s words, these ‘are restricted transgressions that have a defined period in which symbolic efficacy can be exercised. When they seek to reach a real efficacy, then repression appears’ (1993, p. 81). Embedded within the irrational pranks and parodies, however, lies a potentially unruly discourse that might be appreciated for its pluralization of fractured and incongruous identities. A refusal to singularize or anchor the meaning of white heterosexual masculinity provides the sketches of *Jackass* with a doubleness that is simultaneously reiterative and transgressive of dominant cultural values. As a result, the film and television series are authorized to tread in expansive areas of popular culture that are usually off-limits to more articulated social criticisms (Horton, 1991). In this sense, *Jackass* is ‘inescapably implicated in that which it contests’ (Hutcheon, 1991, p. 140). Despite its critique of social hierarchies, the film has earned a total international gross of $79,493,831 (*Jackass: The Movie*, 2004), and has created the spin-offs *Wild Boyz*, *CKY*, and *Steve-O World Tour*. Evidently, the cast is financially fused with the very bourgeois culture which it allegedly rejects.

The multiple contradictions in *Jackass* invite a mélange of theoretical approaches derived from identity politics, psychoanalytic theory, as well as the literary studies of Bakhtin. Despite the adaptability of these concepts we may find an element of the film that ultimately eludes explanation. This, of course, is the strategic function of ambiguity in carnivalesque. As Allen explains, ‘to discuss the “meaning” of burlesque was in a sense to miss its central point: it worked by turning meaning inside out. With the pun it exploded the possibility of stable meanings’ (1991, p. 147). Although many scenes of *Jackass* resonate with the rhetoric of white male backlash, they also burlesque heteronormative masculinity. The promiscuous adoption of multiple masculinities at the intersections of race, class and sexuality forestalls the emergence of any textual coherence much less political solidarity. The film ‘makes no attempt to bring all its parts together into a unified and ideologically monovocal whole’ (Allen, 1991, p. 28). Thus, deferred intelligibility in *Jackass* is entirely congruent with the inversion of the symbolic order during carnivalesque, charivari and burlesque. Through a burlesque aesthetics, *Jackass* rejects ‘the legitimacy of rationality and its power to impose order and meanings’ and instead affirms the ‘right of the nobody to question the stature of the somebody’ (Allen, 1991, pp. 146, 147). This is accomplished by a series of parodic performances that reiterate as much as challenge the stability of normative social identities and power structures.

**Note**

1 The term ‘minorities’ may reduce the complexity of social struggle to an underlying numerical issue. It falsely suggests that a simple increase in the number of marginalized peoples, one that turns the ‘minority’ into a ‘majority’, will somehow readjust skewed power relations. The term is used here in quotations to acknowledge its shortcomings but also to recognize the disproportionate access to socio-economic resources faced by marginalized groups.

**References**


