

The Erotics and Politics of Masochistic Self-Abjection in *Jackass*

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Abstract:

This paper examines the role of masochistic self-abjection in the construction and operation of heteronormative masculinity in *Jackass: The Movie* (2002) with reference to the *Jackass* series, offshoot series, and *Jackass: Number Two* (2006). The paper begins by analysing how masculinity is constructed through masochistic acts, presented as if rites of initiation that involve the abjection, figurative castration and penetration of the male body. It also considers how males performatively control their 'object others' in the service of affirming a stable masculine core. The paper continues to assess the role played by comedy in the film, and questions whether *Jackass*, and its associated films/series, merely signifies the triumph of low culture or if it highlights a deeper problem with Western masculinity.

1 Within popular media circles in the 1990s, one of the recuperative strains of masculinity politics became known as 'laddism' or 'new laddism.' Central to laddism's various discursive inflections was the strategic infantilisation of males to the reductive stereotype that 'boys will be boys.' This infantilisation might well be seen as a highly manipulative discursive practice, designed to cultivate the association that laddish behaviour is innate but innocuous, and something that males will overcome with time. The term new laddism reframes laddish behaviour more definitively as a reactionary response to feminism; the prefixing 'new' implying that this behaviour pre-existed and even inspired the feminist movement. Critics that have looked upon discourses of male victimisation with suspicion have also seen in the discursive strategies of new laddism a calculated transposition of masculine norms, designed to license a whole range of negative behaviours, which are often homophobic and misogynistic. Commenting on this trend, Garry Whannel suggests that while new laddism has been defended and promoted as "a form of post-modern irony," it actually represents a reconstruction of pre-feminist masculinity, replete with "masculine fears of the female 'Other,' masquerading as desire" (257). In an equally doubting, tongue-in-cheek tone, Pat Stack reflects:

The new lad is apparently harmless. Unlike the traditional 'working class lad', the new lad is not violent, nor is he racist. He is an educated, middle class, witty character who is only reclaiming parts of harmless masculinity from the horrors of feminism and the terrible wimpishness of the 'new man' era. The new lad is, according to his defenders, only reaffirming the fact that men like a pint, like their sport, and find women sexually attractive. The new lad is still 'alternative' when it comes to comedy, but is free of the sexual prudishness of the original alternative comedy scene. (no pag.)

In its variously loud, aggressive and comic manifestations, laddism or new laddism has also become a highly marketable cultural phenomenon over the past decade. In more recent years,

it has found its greatest support in a range of television shows produced by MTV. At the forefront of this global mediation is the hugely successful *Jackass* series, which has inspired a number of offshoot productions such as *Viva La Bam* (USA, 2003), *Dirty Sanchez* (U.K., 2003) and *Wildboyz* (USA, 2004). All of these shows involve a large group of young, ostensibly heterosexual men — many of whom appear in a number of the shows listed — carrying out a range of laddish acts typically of a masochistic nature. In the context of these productions, masochism appears as a form of self-abjection that frequently involves revelling in scatology, submitting to physical harm and yielding to otherness.

2 This article examines the role of masochistic self-abjection in the construction and operation of heteronormative masculinity primarily through an analysis of *Jackass: The Movie* (2002), mindful of the fact that many of the non-linear film's scenarios, or enactments of a similar kind, feature in the *Jackass* series, numerous offshoot series, and the recently released *Jackass: Number Two* (2006).¹ The analysis of *Jackass* provided here begins by analysing how masculinity is constructed in the film through masochistic acts — presented as if rites of initiation — that involve the abjection, figurative castration and penetration of the male body. It also examines how males performatively control their 'object others' in the service of affirming a stable masculine core. The paper continues to assess the role played by comedy in the film, and questions whether *Jackass*, and its associated films/series, merely signifies the triumph of low culture or if it highlights a deeper problem with contemporary Western masculinity.

The Boundaries of Male Subjectivity

3 A central feature of *Jackass* is the exploration of the boundaries of male subjectivity through acts that involve scatological and fluidic abjection, figurative castration and the violation of the male body. While these are seemingly anti-phallic gestures; in male subjects' playful relationship to the acts and in their endurance and survival of them, the relationship between corporeal resistance (which does not necessarily rely on exertive muscularity) and an essential, inviolable male core is reinforced. Sociologist Tony Jefferson draws attention to the centrality of endurance to masculinity when he suggests that normative masculinity involves "a certain indifference to the body" as well as "hardness," manifest in willingness for endurance. He also suggests that this hardness is mental as well as physical. Inverting

¹ *Jackass: Number Two* was released at the time of this article's writing. However, it does not explore anything conceptually different to the first film or the series that would necessitate discrete analysis here. Nonetheless, its very production marks a culmination in the popular culture's representation of troubled masculinity that I assess in the closing paragraphs of this paper.

Freudian and Lacanian positions that suggest that masculinity is characterized by outward activity, he expands:

Muscular strength has long been associated with masculinity, as a symbol of perfection, a matter of beauty combined with strength in different ways. The muscular body offers both power and pleasure. How does this fit with hardness? The Freudian line suggests that muscular bodies are simply symbolic extensions of the penis and phallic mystique. But this is reductionist, barely saved by the Lacanian notion of the phallus as a symbol rather than an actual organ. (77-98)

In his revision of these psychoanalytic positions, Jefferson suggests that "hardness" involves not just strength but willingness "to risk the body in performance" (81). And it is through the taking of these risks that the so-called jackasses prove their masculine worth. This is also the line taken by Joyce Carol Oates in *On Boxing* when she reflects: "The Sweet Science of Bruising celebrates the physicality of men even as it dramatises the limitations, sometimes tragic, more often poignant, of the physical" (9). Although written specifically about professional boxing, Oates' thoughts are equally as applicable to all activities based on male-male contact and pain endurance.

Scatological and Fluidic Abjection

4 Discourses of abjection maintain that the abject emerges as that which defies borders. In Julia Kristeva's well-known contribution, faces, urine and mortification all amount to examples of the abject, as they seem to "come from an outside or an exorbitant inside" and they are "unassimilable." While the subject typically rejects the abject in the bid for a definable self, Kristeva suggests that "a pole of attraction and repulsion" (125) characterises the self-abject relationship, as it does in *Jackass*, which finds the self contemplating its relation to the abject in terms of "Not me. Not that. But not nothing either. A 'something' that I do not recognise as a thing" (126). Despite the feeling of attraction and repulsion that the abject excites and mobilises, the self faces annihilation when it acknowledges that the abject is actually part of the self. This recognition sparks the experience of abjection, when "the subject finds the impossible in himself: when he finds the impossible in his very being, discovering that he is nothing other than abject" (128).

5 A recurring motif in *Jackass* is the wilful celebration of scatology and the opening of the body to apparent vulnerability. In an extended scene of the film, for example, Dave England prepares for a task that involves defecating in a display toilet in a hardware store. In advance of entering the shop, England and his *Jackass* comrades sit in the crew van, where England confesses to desperately needing to use the toilet. With that, the men push him around the van and press on his intestines, forcing him to defecate in the cramped vehicle. In

response, the group roll about laughing, until some of the men tumble out from the van and others vomit. Later in the day, England returns to the store and undertakes the task as planned. When reproached by staff, he pleads ignorance, and leaves the store. This occasion of public excretion mirrors a scenario from Season Two of the television series that involves Chris Raab defecating on the side of the road, provoking disturbed looks from passers-by, and laughter from his *Jackass* companions. These instances also resonate with scenes from Season Three, such as one involving Knoxville's nephew being recorded passing wind and defecating in the living room of his family home, while being watched by Knoxville and his grandfather, as if in some kind of male rite of (back) passage.

6 This revelling in scatology is evidenced in numerous other scenes in the film. Steve-O's "Tropical Pole-Vaulting" task sees the masochist vault around palm trees, volleyball nets and public spaces. His exercise culminates in an effort to leap across a sewerage-filled river. As expected, he fails to traverse the river completely and plunges in, only to develop an infection later on. The performer's distinctive penchant for ingesting the abject is further evidenced in his snorting of wasabi in a sushi restaurant, which results in him vomiting all over a plate, to his own delight and to that of his fellow jackasses. For Steve-O, this pattern is well established: in Series One, he snorts a live earth worm and coughs it out through his mouth.

7 One of the film's most grotesque scatological experiments is the "Yellow Snow Cone" scene. Set at night-time, it involves Ehren McGhehey forming a cone out of snow. Once the snow is packed, McGhehey urinates on it and proceeds to eat the cone, as the crew urge him on. Despite their encouragement, McGhehey shows signs of reluctance and begins to vomit in the snow. With that, Dave England runs towards him and kicks him in the testicles, forcing him to fall on the snow, and vomit again. England's enthusiasm is rooted in the fact that he is particularly accomplished at consuming his own bodily waste. In the second season of the television series he eats the raw ingredients for an omelette — onion, peppers, butter, cheese, tomato, milk and eggs — before regurgitating them and cooking the substance into an omelette, which he subsequently eats. And in Season Three of the series, England consumes the excrement from dirty diapers. Here, the abject does not devour England, as Kristeva suggests it inevitably does (127); rather in a bid to master his corporeal impulses, he repeatedly devours and expels it.

8 In *Jackass*, the men repeatedly seek out the abject within the self. However, they do not recognise the abject to "the point where meaning collapses" (126). Rather, they excrete and ingest the abject in a mood of irreverence and nonchalance, attempting to deny its

disturbance of identity. As an example of abjection, Kristeva describes the body's rejection of spoiled milk. She writes: "'I' or the self does not want the milk: 'I' do(es) not assimilate it, 'I' expel(s) it" (127). And in this process of expulsion, the body rejects itself as it rejects the milk, a dynamic which frames abjection as the simultaneous repulsion of what the self is not as well as what the self is. On the contrary, the *Jackass* team actively seek out the correlates of spoiled milk; not to confirm the fragility of male identity, but through the masochistic defiance of a self-object or self-other relationship, to assert the indestructibility of the male subject's identity. In other words, self-abjection is not an anti-normative, queer gesture. Rather, in exhibitionistically enduring and surviving it, male self-abjection signifies the subject's triumph over vulnerability and violability.

9 The shows leading man, Johnny Knoxville, shows a particular affinity for fluidic, above scatological, abjection. In one scene of the film, Knoxville stands on a lawn while a great wave of water is released from a shoot overhead, forcing him to stand his ground in its wake. Arising from his drowning, Knoxville immediately asks the cameraman "How did it look?" in a moment that foregrounds the narcissistic, self-conscious nature of his masculinity. This scene is reminiscent of one in Series Two, which involves Knoxville positioning himself in front of an emergency services water hose, emitting water at a rate of 325 gallons per minute. Assuming a range of positions that include free standing, sitting on bike and reading a newspaper, Knoxville attempts to withstand the great elemental force. The will to survive the oceanic is understood by figures such as Kristeva and Klaus Theweleit as symptomatic of a desire to withstand the threat posed by maternal and feminine sexuality. In his study of the relationship between misogyny and fascism entitled *Male Fantasies I: Women, Floods, Bodies, History* Theweleit sees in recurring phobias of water and fluidic destruction a fear of dissolving the boundaries of male identity, related to a reactive need to affirm the body's hardness and invulnerability. This affirmation is precisely what Knoxville seeks when he addresses his crew.

Castration

10 Castration is one of the most recurrent tropes of both the *Jackass* series and the film. In "Approaching Abjection," Kristeva associates abjection to castration, linking the experience of abjection to the knowledge of castration. The first episodes of both Series Two and Three of the *Jackass* series begin with scenes that relate to this theme. In the second season a group of children are invited to kick Johnny Knoxville's cupped testicles as hard as they can, encouraged from the sidelines by their mothers and Knoxville himself. Following

this endurance test, other members of the crew hit Knoxville's testicles with tennis balls, pool balls and a sledgehammer. While these scenes play upon the threat of castration, they ultimately foreground the fact that castration has *not* taken place, as it has with female sexuality in the writings of Freud. It is for this reason that Freud describes the castration complex in "Analysis Terminable and Interminable" as a "rejection of femininity" (211). In this orchestration, the male 'victim's' indestructibility as a phallic agent is reinforced, a premise established by Knoxville at the beginning of the *Jackass* phenomenon when, in the first episode of Season One, he is shot from a cannon and runs around with a large dildo in his pants.



Fig. 1.

11 One of the film's most elaborate and dangerous performances of castration takes place as part of "The Muscle Stimulator" scene. Here, Pontius, Knoxville, Ehren and England place muscle stimulators at high voltage around various parts of their bodies. Sitting semi-naked around a table, they all take turns, with one placing the pads on his face, another on his thumbs and another on his chest. Once the pads are in position, they are activated by the other men, who laugh hysterically at the genuine pain of their comrades. When one of the men reacts with particular discomfort, Knoxville urges him on with "You ok. It's cool. Come on. Daddy's got ya. Daddy's got ya." And so, reminded by the 'Father' (replete with its Lacanian associations) of the masochism inherent in their homosocial bonding, he willingly endures the

pain. With that, Knoxville calls for someone brave enough to step forward and have his testicles electrocuted. Both England and Pontius oblige, their pain rewarded with affirming applause and laughter from their male colleagues. In this moment the relationship between the *Jackass* men resonates with that between the Narrator (Edward Norton) and Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) in *Fight Club*, a film which also explores the erotic relationship between masochism and masculinity: "Hit me again," the Narrator says to Durden, following their initial exchange of blows. "No, you hit me," Durden replies.

12 The scene entitled "Bungee Wedgie" requires the *Jackass* team to wear underpants, suspended with bungee ropes from a tree, from which they ritualistically jump off. The task's objective is to endure the pain caused by the impact of the drop. When Chris Raab dives, he injures himself so badly that he bleeds, to the delight of Knoxville, who cheers: "the bloody, shitty underpants," which the camera duly focuses on. "The bloody, shitty underpants" is not a sign of abject defeat, however, but a trophy of endurance. In this, the scene repeats the terms inaugurated by Knoxville in Season Three, when five of the *Jackass* team hit each other with balls in the testicles, under the order "whoever can't take getting hit in the bullseyes anymore will be the loser and the other guy will be the victor." In this abiding hunger for suffering, *Jackass* dramatically validates the thesis forwarded by David Morris in *The Culture of Pain*,² that pain is the defining illness of our self-absorbed era; symptomatic of a desperate will for control.

13 While these scenes of 'castration' may be bound up on some level with an identity crisis, or at least anxiety; they are ultimately exploited to confirm that the threat of castration is repeatedly survived. In *Jackass*, injuring the genitals is a mark of masculine prowess — which is authorial and ostensibly personal; the ensuing sensation alerting the subject to the biological connection between the penis and the right to the symbolic phallus. In Lacan's writing, the fear of castration is linked to a series of other anxieties surrounding body dismemberment and fragmentation, understood to originate in the mirror stage. During this phase of development, anxiety is provoked by the individual's perception of difference between its image of synthesis and its feeling of fragmentation, which precipitates the development of the ego and the pursuit of specular unity. In "Aggressivity and Psychoanalysis" Lacan claims that the subject is forever threatened by memories of the original sense of fragmentation, which manifest themselves in "images of castration, emasculation, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, bursting open

² Morris claims that contemporary Western culture is increasingly absorbed by the notion of pain. With reference to history, art, literature, psychology and medicine, Morris explores how pain is both a 'biological fact' and 'an experience in search of meaning.'

of the body" (11). To appease this threat (which seems to be the main objective of the *Jackass* rituals) the men attempt to confirm the unity of the body through its ability to either resist or recover from violation. In this masochistic relation to the self, the men bear witness to Carlo Strenger's premise that masochism signifies "a profound expression of the desire for self-creation" (138).

Violating and Penetrating the Male Body

14 In addition to scatology and castration, the violation of the male body is a central feature of the film's construction of masculinity. Culturally speaking, the male body, unlike the female body, is considered to be a closed form; its physical integrity supporting the perceived stability of masculinity. In *Jackass*, however, it is the endurance of and recovery from the violation of the body which accrues masculine worth. In another of the film's most gruesome scenes, the *Jackass* team gather in a hotel room while Johnny Knoxville slices in between his finger and toes with paper. He grimaces and screams initially, but when his friends cheer, he too starts to laugh hysterically. In the excitement, Knoxville's fellow performer Steve-O is prompted to sever the sides of his mouth with paper. As happens on more than one occasion, the action becomes too much for one cameraman who vomits and faints. Whether genuine or orchestrated, the implicit message is that not all men are as hard as the self-abjecting *Jackass* performers.

15 One of the film's most critically noted tasks involves Johnny Knoxville being shot with a beanbag projectile travelling at 250 foot per second.³ In preparing for the task, an instructor avows that contact with Knoxville's chest will be avoided as it runs a higher risk of mortality. Once shot, Knoxville immediately drops to the ground in apparent agony, and is quickly brought to a hospital. Two days later, he reveals the extensive tissue damage incurred. It is worth noting that this is not the first time that Knoxville has been shot. In the MTV series he shoots himself with a 30-calibre handgun. He has also posed being shot by a paint gun for the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine, a mark of the iconicity of his masochism. As the leading jackass, it is no surprise that Knoxville undertakes the most dangerous tasks in the film and in the series; in fact, it is his very willingness to repeatedly risk his safety and endure pain in this way that secures his position as the dominant male.

16 "Ass Kicked by a Girl" involves Ryan Dunne fighting the World Women's lightweight boxing champion Kumagai Naoka. It is one of the few representations of women in the film, constructed in the likeness of the phallicised, dominant female featuring in Sacher-

³ The enactment clearly references Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971), a 'performance' that involved the artist shooting himself.

Masoch's *Venus in Furs*.⁴ Although Dunne seems to mock his own and possibly even his opponent's participation by wearing female underwear in the ring, he confides to the camera his fear of being "about to get the shit kicked out of me by a girl." His friends do not show a similar concern; rather they excitedly surround the boxing ring in various states of undress. From here, in a homoerotic mosh, they chant and cheer as Dunne is repeatedly beaten by Naoka in the ring; even as his jaw bleeds and he is nearly knocked unconscious. Jefferson writes about boxing's unique power structure, claiming that the sport provides "the ultimate arena for the display of hardness" because boxers require the ability to "soak up punishment as well as dish it out" (83). In the context of the *Jackass* scene in question, Jefferson's insight, like that of Oates offered earlier, implies that a man's ability to "soak up" punishment from the female other, which runs the risk of fracturing the male ego, would not only validate his physical but also mental strength.



Fig.2.

⁴ In Sacher-Masoch's 1870 novel on male masochism, *Venus in Furs* (London: Penguin, 2006), the leading character Wanda von Dunajew is asked by Severin von Kusiemski to treat him in progressively more degrading ways. In literature, Wanda stands out for her phallic construction. Notable critical responses include Gilles Deleuze's *Sacher-Masoch: An Interpretation* (1971).

17 While the violation of the male body poses a threat to male authority, penetrating the male body runs the risk of terminally disrupting the codes of heteronormative heterosexuality. This is largely due to the fact that penetration is a more complete gesture that reveals, without ambiguity, the violability of the male body. This threat is also due to the fact that the penetration of the male body is associated with male homosexuality, male heterosexuality's abject correlate that defies the border-controls of paternal Law. For this reason, scenes involving the participation in and reaction to the penetration of the male body in the film are most revealing of the boundaries of acceptable heterosexual male activity. Two scenes focus explicitly on this motif. The first involves Steve-O — one of the most daring of the group — being challenged to insert a glass bottle in his anus. Although he does not turn down any other task on screen, he refuses to undertake this one, fearing that his father would disown him. One of the crew, surprised by his response, asks "You said that you didn't want to do it cause your dad would disown you? [. . .] You drank wine of a dudes ass crack!" Steve's only defence of his stance is "My dad never saw that; never told him that." It is worth noting that Steve does not have any problem with inserting fireworks in his anus, as he does in the film and in the series. However, for a dominant male like Steve, prolonged anal penetration, which runs the risk of appearing pleasurable, is a step too far. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that he has his buttocks bolted together in season three of the television series.

18 In Steve-O's refusal, the task is taken up by Ryan Dunne, one of the more junior members of the group; a gesture which frames the action almost as an initiatory rite. In a bedroom, in the presence of a medic and other *Jackass* members, Ryan inserts a blue toy car (an object-choice which attempts to rescue his masculinity) into his rectum. Although Dunne was actually assisted in this task, some careful editing makes it look like he does it himself, in order for the film to avoid sodomy legislation active in some U.S. states. When, during this process, another man walks into the room, Dunne calls out "Tell me I'm a man!" He does not get an answer yet, however; the status of his masculinity is strictly dependent upon how successfully he endures the process.

19 In the collection of essays of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, entitled *The Shell and the Kernel*, the psychoanalysts contend that identification belongs to the realm of incorporations, which sees the prohibited love object of the Oedipus Complex settle in the ego "in order to compensate for the lost pleasure and failed introjection" (113). Judith Butler takes up this point in *Gender Trouble* to question where the incorporated bodily space might be: "If it is not literally within the body," she queries, then "the body must itself be understood as an incorporated space" (86). In the *Jackass* scene under discussion, the "incorporated space" is

literally "within the body." While the toy car is an object of masculine identification, its actual bodily incorporation sees identification moves dangerously into the realm of desire. However, in presenting the task as an act of endurance, Dunne manages to rescue his heterosexuality.

20 Once the car is inserted, Dunne attends a doctor for an x-ray, reporting to be experience pains following a fraternity party. When the doctor discovers a toy car in his rectum he calls a colleague and confides: "They were having sex with each other, and stuff like that." Referred to someone else, Dunne leaves the clinic with a caution from the doctor: "You just go to the doctor. You don't talk to anybody [. . .] to your girlfriend, to your boyfriend, to whomever [. . .] You don't tell nobody, all right. He already knows [pointing to the one of the crew] — that's too many people." Despite the doctor's sympathies, many of which relate to fears of gender and sexual transgression, Dunne's 'suffering' is merely a reflexively affirming contrivance; what psychoanalyst Robert Stoller refers to as "fraudulent suffering": "A creator of the performance, the masochist is never truly a victim, because he never really relinquishes control, and in that sense the whole scenario is known only to portray fraudulent suffering" (229).



Fig. 3.

The Abject Others of Stable Masculinity

21 In addition to those self-abjecting acts that test and ultimately affirm the masculinity of the enacting male subjects, *Jackass* includes many less painful, less dangerous scenarios of

a prankster variety. Thematically, these centre on infantilisation, ageing, obesity and aberrant male physicality; all of which are typically anti-normative positions/relations associated with the abject end of the masculine spectrum. Despite the light, comic rendering of these enactments, I argue that they are also part of an effort by the male subjects to performatively control feelings of vulnerability induced by exposure to otherness that have, could or will inevitably undermine masculine authority.

22 At the beginning of this article, I elucidated the relationship between laddism and male infantilisation. In this conflation it is inevitable that many of the scenarios in *Jackass* involve an element of juvenility. Here, juvenility functions as a stratagem that licenses a range of anti-social behaviours, extending the boundaries of acceptable male behaviour. This is most clearly evidenced in the frequency of activities that involve children's toys or children's activities. As mentioned earlier, many of the *Jackass* cast come from skateboarding backgrounds and this is reflected in the number of tasks which involve skateboarding and bike-riding. In one scene in the film, Johnny Knoxville attaches bottle rockets to the back of a pair of skates and goes roller-skating. In another, entitled "Roller Disco Trunk," Bam Margera, Steve-O, Chris Pontius, Johnny Knoxville and Ryan Dunne all dress up in seventies clothes and roller-skate in the back of a truck. When Preston starts driving the truck haphazardly, the men are knocked about inside, and fall to the ground, laughing. In another scene, Johnny Knoxville tries to skate down the handrail of steep outdoor steps. He falls, but laughs regardless. Similar acts recur in the television series, and include the cast ice-skating over barrels, skating on ice-blocks, snowboarding naked and rolling down golf courses (all from Season Three). This air of juvenility also acts as a ruse for the acceptable cultivation of hard, sporting masculinity, which, despite its presentation here, is based upon "muscularity, a lack of sentiment, acceptance of pain" and a will to "reassert a traditional masculinity [. . .confronting. . .] dishonorable feminised men" (Whannel 256).

23 Perhaps more telling of male anxiety are scenes that involve the characters' dressing up as old men. Wearing customised silicon masks, they carry out a range of unlikely events in public, including rapping in streets, riding mopeds down flights of steps and freewheeling down hills. Another recurring portrayal is that of an 'old man' shoplifting, deliberately provoking shop staff and security to confrontation. The punch line seems to be that an 'old man,' assumed by the social majority to be impotent, is extremely physically and mentally competent in defending himself. This trope of preserving strength in old age is most vividly manifest in a scene which involves Johnny Knoxville, dressed as an old man, weightlifting in a gym. The gym instructor, anxious for his safety, asks if he needs assistance.

Soon after Knoxville has turned down the offer, he falls on the ground with a weight pressed against his neck, prompting the instructor to frantically hurry to his help. Knoxville rises, coughing, amused by his diversionary tactic. These performances that draw on representations of youth and old age collectively signify the male aspiration for continuous, inviolable presence and strength. As explicit masochistic self-abjection reflexively empowers the enacting subject, these performances of vulnerability are exploited to assert the indestructibility of the *Jackass* males.



Fig. 4.

24 In contrast to these depictions, the film has a particularly negative take on obesity. There are numerous scenes that centre on the comic spectacle of obesity, pitted in direct contrast to the discipline of the masochist's body. In one scene a morbidly obese man, who is eating on a bench, breaks it. In another incident, a BMX cyclist tries to tow away a couch on which an obese man sits. Similarly, in a scene entitled "Sweaty Fat Fucks," Bam and his two friends, Matt Hoffman and Tony Hawk, are padded to appear grossly overweight and skate around a park. Unable to move as agilely as normal, they fall around the ring, injuring themselves and snapping their skate boards. This depiction resonates with one from Season Three that involves Bam Margera costumed as if overweight, and repeatedly falling off a treadmill.

25 In contrast to this spectacle of impotent masculinity, the masculinity of Jason Acuña — known as "wee man" on account of his dwarfism — is celebrated. Although masculine

prowess is typically associated with physical size, potency is also determined by a capacity for hardness. Acuña validates his masculinity via his ability to endure rather than inflict. His culturally aberrant size is celebrated for it permits him to endure unique circumstances, unavailable to the other men. For example, he dodges crowds while being chased and eventually attacked by a sumo wrestler; hides under a traffic cone in order to obstruct crowded streets, and kicks himself in the head for the amusement of the group. In the recording of a video for the singer Shaq, shown in Season Three, Acuña allows Shaq to repeatedly simulate sex with him.

Becoming M-Animal

26 Many of the film's rituals of self-abjection involve animals. On one occasion, Knoxville's powers of endurance are tested when a baby alligator is deliberately placed in front of his chest until it bites down on his nipple. His feat in the film, however, does not upstage his performance in Season Two, when he plays matador to a number of ranging bulls, or when he covers his face with leeches to contrive Abraham Lincoln's beard. In another scene from the film, Chris Pontius (dressed in a bikini) tries to ward off alligators in a pond while Steve-O attempts to walk a tightrope overhead. In advance of the action, Pontius speaks directly to the camera, saying: "Any of these alligators try to ruin our swimming; I'm going to wrestle them down and probably have my way with them." When Steve falls into the water, Pontius helps him get back up safely, but this time he attaches a piece of meat to his underwear, and dangles it over the alligator's heads. One bites, as the *Jackass* team look on cheering, but Steve-O remains untouched. The jackasses' penchant for alligators is also evident in the scene described earlier, which involves Bam Margera placing one in his mothers' kitchen. On another occasion, Steve-O and Pontius scuba dive with whale sharks, first filling their underwear with shrimp in order to entice the sharks closer, and foreground the threat of castration. When the sharks only eat the shrimp, the men's survival is presented as a phallic triumph, despite Pontius' emerging awareness of the discrepancy between his physical phallus and its symbolic referent: "My penis looks really small right now. I can't really look cool right now." During the same diving expedition, Steve-O and Pontius are told by their diving instructor that sea anemones release white fluid when scared. When underwater, they both grab hold of anemones and rub them in a masturbatory fashion, until they omit the seminal fluid. In another scene, Pontius dresses as a mouse and goes into a cage with a cheetah that lashes him with her paw.

27 In this attraction to animals for masochistic pleasure, the *Jackass* males reveal a power differential between the masochist and the sadist, which privileges the former. For with animals, the men enjoy more control and predictability than with human encounters. In this, they exemplify Deleuze's imagining of the masochist as "a victim in search of a torturer" (*Masochism* 20), less than they "become-animal," as in his and Felix Guattari's non-subjective explication of the term in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. This attraction to animal pain is also a variation of the attraction to the inanimate abject, for both relationships are marked by an indifference towards the structural parameters which create system, order and identity. However, humanity and animalism do not mix here as they do in Mikhail Bakhtin's grotesque animal-human hybrids, which are capable of negotiating a multiplicity of identities (25). Despite Johnny Knoxville's threat to inseminate a cow himself in Season Two, males unquestionably supersede animals and masculinity is bolstered by distinguishing its prowess from the undisciplined variety of animals, which the men are ultimately in command of.

The Triumph of Low Culture?

28 One of the most frequent interpretations of the *Jackass* phenomenon is that it represents the triumph of low culture in late capitalist society. Reading *Jackass* in this light, one might come to see the phenomenon as a developmental fusion of decades of action movies, sporting obsession and reality television, carefully constructed here as a series of quick-fix fragments of 'real-life' riotous carnival. However, owing to the fact that *Jackass* has spawned so many similar shows which dominate our screens and popular cultural references, such interpretations seem reductive. In support of the reading I offer here, which considers the role of self-abjection in the dynamics of gender and sexuality, I'd like to first dismiss suggestions that *Jackass* is merely the carnivalesque eruption of low culture into the public arena. As Bakhtin saw it, one of the most important features of the aesthetic of carnival is the critique of dominant discourses: "Carnival promotes a ludic and critical relation to all official discourses, whether political, literary or ecclesiastical" (Stam 134). On the contrary, *Jackass* is not critical of dominant ideologies. Rather, the show is extremely narrow in its points of focus, which almost exclusively relate to issues of male gender and sexuality. This relationship, though presented as playful, is not critically examined. Further, while these male bodies are pushed to their limits, they are not the elastic, malleable, unfinished forms of the carnival tradition. Conversely, gender and sexuality are treated without the celebration of alterity which Bakhtinian representation requires. It was this very quality of Bakhtinian

thought which inspired Kristeva to seek ways of transcending the metaphysical category of difference in her concept of the semiotic and in her reworking of the concept of the carnivalesque, to the point where "discourse attains its 'potential infinity' [...] where prohibitions (representation, 'monologism') and their transgression (drama, body, 'dialogism') coexist" (Kaplan 33).

29 Reflecting on Bakhtin's contribution to Leftist cultural critique, Robert Stam warns of the dangers of co-opting Bakhtin's theories for the discernment of "redeeming elements even in the most degraded cultural productions and activities" (135). Drawing specifically on the example of fraternity films, such as *Animal House* (1978), Stam cautions how some 'carnavalesque' behavior actually supports the dominant power structures it is presumed to critique: "It would be wrong, for example, to see the beer-fuelled carousing of fraternity boys in *Animal House* as a Bakhtinian celebration of people's culture, since fraternity boys and their macho rituals form an integral part of the power structure which authentic carnival symbolically overturns" (135). Stam's comment reads like a timely reservation for those who claim that *Jackass* is merely an example of laddish, low culture which is funny, foolish and harmless. Even aside from the gender dimension, surely no film or show produced by MTV can call itself carnival in the Bakhtinian sense of the term. In *Jackass*'s near dominance of the station, reflected in the series repeats as well as in off-shoot series, there is no sign that this is "the oppositional culture of the oppressed, the official world as seen from below" (135).

30 In "Sliding Off the Stereotype: Gender Difference in the Future of Television," William Galperin suggests that televised action and sporting events, of which I consider *Jackass* to be a contemporary example, might be seen to give form to male fantasies, giving men access to a power they otherwise lack. Galperin argues that such representations cultivate "an absorption of men by men" (149). Inflecting a paternal metaphor, Galperin makes a distinction between action sports and soap operas: "If televised sports can be said, on occasion, to render the divine incarnate — to mystify the human in the image of the Father — soap operas tend rather to retrace this movement back to the very structure that requires God to be a *father*" (155). Although Galperin refers specifically to sport, his comments are as relevant to other action-based performances, not least of all to *Jackass*. In its celebration of the omnipotent male, it also 'renders the divine incarnate,' and in this it might be seen to exemplify the trend in cultural representation that Galperin identified embryonically in the late 1980s. For David Savran, this may well explain the show's appeal: "It may be that the macho stunts on *Jackass* strike a chord with some viewers at a time when cultural changes

have diluted traditional ideas of masculinity [. . .]. The humiliation proves you're a man, proves you're tough" (Savran qtd. in Breznican, no pag.).

31 In addition to being a masculinising practice, masochistic self-abjection in *Jackass* also allows the male subjects to form apparently close heterosexual male relationships. In *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick examines the boundaries separating sexual and nonsexual male relationships. For Sedgwick, homosocial and homosexual relationships are not diametrically oppositional: "'Homosocial desire,' to begin with, is a kind of oxymoron. 'Homosocial' is a word [. . .] [that] describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed with analogy with 'homosexual,' and just as obviously meant to distinguish from 'homosexual'" (1). For Sedgwick, homosocial and homosexual relationships may be seen to exist on a continuum, which she sees evidenced in the "erotic triangle" of Victorian literature, comprised of two males in active pursuit of a "passive" female (21). However, in *Jackass*, no female is pursued. Rather, masochism functions like the apex of Sedgwick's erotic triangle, giving the male subjects access to homosocial relationships which are intimate and sometimes erotic, but ultimately aggressive enough to avoid entering the domain of the homosexual. In this omission of female subjectivity, and also in its refusal of homosexuality, *Jackass* performs the Law-sustaining and male-privileging masochistic relationship which Freud describes in his analysis of beating fantasies ("A Child is Being Beaten") and which Savran sees as patriarchy's chief mode of cultural reproduction, that "reveals and conceals [. . .] the homoeroticism that undergirds patriarchy and male homosocial relations" (32).

32 While this article has maintained that self-abjection functions as a masculinising strategy in *Jackass*, which simultaneously affords males access to homosocial intimacy, the film concludes with a scene called "Son of Jackass" which, in a genuinely parodic fashion, imagines the behaviour of the cast in 2063. In a reworking of the film's opening scene, the men, made up to look old, emerge from the smoky distance to *O Fortuna*. Now, however, they are not aggressively riding in a shopping trolley but are attached to intravenous drips, riding on geriatric bikes and holding walking sticks. Like the opening scene, there is an explosion here too, but now the men are not immune to harm. Instead, they are killed by exploding cars; engulfed by flames and decapitated by shrapnel. This concluding scenario would seem to acknowledge — contrary to other claims in the film and in the series — the ultimate destructibility of the male performers; the fact that there will come a time when their endurance testing will not confirm anything about their masculinity, but rather their mortality.

And yet, in Steve-O's final exclamation, lurched at the camera — "Yeah Dude!" — the jackasses seem to relish in this nihilism, which only gives urgency to their masochistic, self-abjecting exploits.

Points of Enunciation and Deconstruction

33 Throughout this analysis I have maintained that *Jackass: The Movie*, like the series, is primarily concerned with the relationship between male masochistic self-abjection and heteronormative masculinity. It is a film which reveals the centrality of masochism to stable male identity and one which charts the efforts of the male performers to control the abject others of stable male identity. Although almost frivolously presented as a series of fragmented, comic scenarios, Jackass cannot be applauded for being parodic of its subject matter or dismissed as merely popular postmodern entertainment, comprised of an excess of signs that avoid precise signification. For although Allan Bloom and Jean Baudrillard have accused mass culture of devaluating meaning, in the early days of MTV production, before *Jackass* was ever conceived, figures like Ann Kaplan warned of the dangers of depoliticising its output:

Narrative/non-narrative is no longer a useful category within which to discuss videos. What is important is, first, whether or not any position manifests itself across the hectic, often incoherent flow of signifiers which are not necessarily organized in to a chain that produces a signified, and, second, what are the implications of the twenty-four hour flow of short (four-minute or less) texts that all more or less function as ads [. . .]. In line with Baudrillard's theory, MTV partly exploits the imaginary desires allowed free play through the various sixties liberation movements, divesting them, for commercial reasons, of their originally revolutionary implications. (36)

Although it is blatant in its exploration of the relationship between masochistic self-abjection and masculinity, Jackass is rarely critical of it. There are very few incidents which reveal the performers' inability to endure these rituals, and when this does occur, it is usually affirmative of the codes heterosexual masculinity, as when Steve-O refuses to insert a bottle in his anus. In fact, the film seems to endorse the recuperation of a masculinity defined by its powers of endurance rather than by its powers of productivity; a masculinity which is qualified by submitting the male body to reflexively empowering laws of endurance. If any form of masculinity is critiqued in the film, it is the mainly absent kind that rejects the connection between the enduring male body and the accrual of power and authority; that hard vessel that feminism has tried to penetrate for decades. In the context of laddism, *Jackass* may well be seen to respond to a real crisis in Western masculinity but, over the influential course of the phenomenon's duration — and here we think of the sequel — it might also be seen to

signify the arrested commodification of genuine problems. Slavoj Žižek argues that significant moments of social change incorporate the abject as norm: "This moment of change is the moment at which the system restructures its rules in order to accommodate itself to new conditions by incorporating the originally subversive moment" (328). In its pervasion of popular culture, I suggest that this is precisely what the *Jackass* phenomenon signifies at this moment in time: the management and assimilation of real social problems by the symbolic order.

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