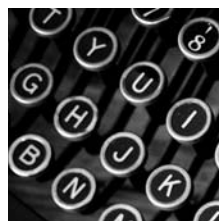


Jackass, Ritual Clowning, and the Comic Themes of Universal Occurrence

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ABSTRACT: The appeal of the *Jackass* television series and film franchise, centered around stunts wherein the performers deliberately hurt and humiliate themselves, has been considered a unique and peculiar mystery by cultural critics, one that can only be solved by looking at its particular historical and sociocultural context. In contrast, this article argues that *Jackass* constitutes a resurgence of a widespread form of comedy whose roots stretch far back into human history: ritual clowning. Comparing the stunts and gags of *Jackass* with those of ritual clowns in traditional societies around the world, both are shown to be characterized by four universal comic themes: pain, sex, the foreign, and the sacred. In contrast to previous critical readings that have attributed each of these themes in *Jackass* to its particular historical and sociocultural context, this article argues that they are all ultimately grounded in our evolved psychology as universal pressure points that humor can tap into.

KEYWORDS: *Jackass*, ritual clowning, humor, comedy, benign violations, biocultural criticism

WARNING FROM THE EDITORS: Accompanying this essay are several illustrations that some readers may find offensive. Having been so warned, you should understand that you may proceed to the illustrations at your own risk.

In the second installment of the *Jackass* film franchise, Bam Margera agrees to have the crude outline of a cartoon penis branded onto his right buttock with a hot iron by his close friend and fellow stunt performer Ryan Dunn. Margera instinctively squirms upon contact with the hot iron, causing the brand to touch him several times, leaving multiple branded

outlines of penises on his behind, much to the amusement of the rest of the *Jackass* crew. When Margera later proudly shows off his penis-branded backside to his mother, she quite reasonably asks Dunn why he would do such a thing to her son. "Because it was funny," he replies.

When asked about why they do what they do and why people watch it, this is the stock answer provided by all the members of *Jackass*: because it is funny (Cliver). Yet, cultural critics have been loath to take them at their word. What explains the *Jackass* phenomenon, and why has it found such a large audience? Critics have variously seen *Jackass* as a patriarchal "endorsement of masculine privilege" (Tourino 694), as a conservative "white male backlash" against changing social norms (Brayton 58), and as an expression of the "reflexive sadomasochism" of the post-Vietnam white male (Lindgren & Lelièvre 394).

Running through all of these explanations of the *Jackass* phenomenon is the idea that its existence and popularity is a unique and peculiar mystery that can only be solved by looking at its specific historical and sociocultural context. Here, I will explore an opposite idea. While *Jackass* emerged in a particular historical and sociocultural context, it constituted a resurgence of a widespread form of comedy whose roots stretch far back into the mists of human prehistory: ritual clowning. Ritual clowns appear in traditional societies throughout the globe (Charles), and their stunts bear an uncanny resemblance to the stunts of the jackasses in *Jackass*.

In the 1920s, the anthropologist Julian Steward identified four "comic themes of universal occurrence" based on his studies of ritualized clowning among Native American tribes. According to Steward, these themes are "rude and smack strongly of the soil and are not comparable to the fine-spun themes of the highly intellectualized European comedies, [but] they are nevertheless basic in all cultures" (189). As I will show, these four comic themes of universal occurrence are also what define *Jackass*. They are: physical or psychological harm; sex and obscenity; violations or burlesque of the sacred; and ridicule of foreigners or strangers.

In this paper, I analyze the stunts and gags of *Jackass* through the prism of the four comic themes of universal occurrence, comparing them with the stunts and gags of ritual clowns in traditional societies. Drawing on contemporary humor research that suggests humor to be an evolved

response to benign norm violations, I try to explain why these four comic themes reoccur across cultures and why they have come to define *Jackass*. In contrast to previous critical readings that have attributed each of these themes in *Jackass* to its particular historical and sociocultural context, I argue that they are all ultimately grounded in the evolved psychology of our species.

I proceed from the view that our basic motives and predispositions have evolved in an adaptive relationship with our environment through the process of natural selection (Barkow et al.; Pinker; Buss, *Evolutionary Psychology*). The cultural diversity of our species rests on these evolved foundations, and the arts depend on interacting with them (Boyd; Carroll; Gottschall). Accordingly, I argue that all four of Steward's universal comic themes—pain, sex, the foreign, and the sacred—are aspects of life around which evolution has saddled us with species-typical normative commitments that can be benignly violated to humorous effect.

Jackass, I contend, is in a sense a “pure comedy”: It is an example of the kind of comedy that emerges when performers are driving solely for laughs and are willing to go wherever that takes them, with neither inhibitions nor ulterior or impeding motives such as a political agenda, a desire to seem cultivated or to retain dignity, or even the healthy human fear of pain and personal bodily damage. Humor is an evolved response to benign norm violations, so the jackasses of *Jackass* violate anything and everything they can think of. This, I try to show, explains why the show has been an equal opportunity offender, receiving contradictory criticisms from all angles.

JACKASS AND RITUAL CLOWNING

Jackass was originally a television series that ran on MTV between 2000 and 2002, subsequently spawning a film franchise, beginning with *Jackass: The Movie* in 2002 and with the latest film, *Jackass Forever*, released in 2022. Beyond this, *Jackass* has spawned numerous spin-offs, including *Wildboyz* (2003–2006), *Viva La Bam* (2003–2005), and *Bad Grandpa* (2013). *Jackass* has been described as “reality slapstick” since many of its stunts involve the performers deliberately hurting themselves (Antony), but the show also includes other material like skits, pranks, and hidden camera footage of the crew behaving badly in public. The only thread

that runs through it all is an anarchic impulse toward outrageousness, unseemliness, and outright stupidity, with the jackasses of *Jackass* finding various excuses to behave in ways they should not, to humorous effect.

This unifying theme of *Jackass* is one that they share with the ritual clowns of traditional societies. "Clown" here refers to the type of person whose highest skill and mission it is to make the people around them laugh. In traditional societies, the role of the clown is typically one that certain people take upon themselves on societally designated occasions, mostly during ritual ceremonies, hence the term "ritual clown." Clowns and acts of ritualized clowning have been documented across the globe in traditional societies of all subsistence types, from African hunter-gatherers through highly agricultural societies across the Americas (see Charles). As the anthropologist Mahadev Apte has documented, a running thread of ritual clowning that reappears in descriptions of it around the globe is that of "contrary behavior" (156–57).

Apte characterizes the contrarian principle of ritual clowning in the following manner:

In every society people essentially follow established cultural ways of eating, dressing, sleeping, playing, talking, and carrying out other routine tasks. Interpersonal interaction in social situations is also governed by cultural norms, as is behavior appropriate to specific roles. During rituals, humorists often do the opposite. Anthropological literature commonly refers to such conduct as contrary behavior, inverse behavior, or reversal (156).

Sometimes the antics of clowns stand in contrast to an otherwise serious ritual. At the spirit performances of the Baka in Southeast Cameroon, for instance, a performer may take on the clown-spirit known as "emboamboa" and entertain the crowd with transgressive jokes and outrageous behavior (Tsuru 63–78). Elsewhere, clowns' contrarian antics are the very point of the ritual.

The most developed and well-documented system of ritual clowning is found among Native American tribes. Here, performers may be recruited to be clowns for life and belong to fraternities of likeminded clowns (Nesper). Different types of clowns wear specific elaborate, often

ridiculous costumes and have specific characteristic gimmicks and gags, but the common thread is contrariness: they may enter houses through the roof, wear their clothes inside-out, ride their ponies backward, say yes when they mean no, wear giant phalluses, which they fondle in public, and generally engage in rude and childish behavior that violates rules of propriety (Nelson). Barton Wright describes how a favorite skit for a group of clowns among the Hopi “involves tying [themselves] together by their penises and declaring a tug of war” (44).

An important characteristic that the members of *Jackass* share with the ritual clowns of traditional societies is a monomaniacal dedication to getting a laugh out of audiences, even at the expense of their own dignity or well-being. Probably not coincidentally, they also share a number of demographic characteristics with the type of people who become ritual clowns in traditional societies, one being that they were all relatively young men when they started out, most in their twenties. It is not without reason that the clown-spirit of the Baka is said to be “for young men” (Tsuru 78). Young men, at the peak of their testosterone production, are the group of people most likely to engage in the kind of risky and transgressive behavior that constitutes the backbone of both ritual clowning and *Jackass* (Wilson & Daly). Being at the peak of their health, endurance, and physical abilities also makes them suited for the physicality of their stunts.

Ritual clowns’ single-minded dedication toward getting a laugh has been characterized as manic. Among many North American tribes, clowns are directly associated with madness (Nesper 186). Polimeni and Reiss suggest that since descriptions of the most outrageous antics of ritual clowns “can resemble psychotic symptoms, one naturally wonders whether this reflects underlying mania in the individual” (358). Multiple members of *Jackass* have been open about having mental health issues, including diagnoses of bipolar disorder in the case of Brandon “Bam” Margera and Steven “Steve-O” Glover, which involve literal spells of mania (Niles). The frontman of *Jackass*, Johnny Knoxville, has attributed his own daring to extreme impulsivity (Schube). A degree of mania may also contribute to *Jackass*’s antics.

Just as ritual clowning in traditional societies is a cultural niche ideally suited for manic and otherwise potentially maladjusted young men, so

too the members of *Jackass* have created for themselves a cultural niche ideally suited for just their temperaments and predilections. Whereas their personalities and defects could easily lead to personal ruin and malfunction, and have indeed done so for many of the cast outside of the show, through *Jackass*, they found a way of channeling their particular streak of mania into careers of making people laugh, generously compensated with fame and multimillion-dollar paychecks. To understand why the members of *Jackass*, in their quest to make audiences laugh, ended up creating a form of entertainment that is strikingly similar to the antics of ritual clowns, we have to turn to the nature of humor as a psychological response.

THE NATURE OF HUMOR AND THE COMIC THEMES OF UNIVERSAL OCCURRENCE

Humor consists of the positive emotion of amusement and the physical tendency to laugh (Martin). For millennia now, scholars have argued about what characterizes the stimuli capable of eliciting this response—what kinds of things tend to strike us as funny (Morreall). A new and fruitful approach to this question takes its starting point in the evolutionary origins of humor, which lie in mammalian social play, with an antecedent of humorous laughter manifested in the distinctly laugh-like panting vocalization that accompanies the so-called “play face” of some of our closest related primates like chimpanzees (Provine). Among mammals, social play typically takes the form of play fighting (“rough-and-tumble play”), during which the participants will play at physically violating each other’s boundaries by wrestling, biting, chasing, and the like.

During rough-and-tumble play, play signals like chimpanzees’ play face and its accompanying panting serve to indicate that all physical violations are intended and construed as benign, ensuring that no misunderstandings occur that could accidentally escalate the play fighting into actual violence. Such play signals are thought to be accompanied by amusement-like positive affect, spurring on further play. The first stimuli to have elicited laughter are thus thought to have been the benign physical violations that constituted the rough-and-tumble play of early humans,

constituting a kind of “protohumor” (Gervais & Wilson). Such play is adaptively functional in that it allows mammals to explore what their own bodies can do and endure, training them in the skills needed for actual fighting, while also serving as a medium for amicable social bonding.

Accepting that humor originated as a response to benign physical violations, the psychologists Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren have suggested that humor, during the course of human evolution, was expanded to include other kinds of benign violations, like linguistic violations (e.g., puns and wordplay), social violations (e.g., doing something improper or indecent in public), or moral violations (e.g., black humor and cruel jokes). This is the “benign violation theory” of humor. According to this view, humor is a response to benign violations, stimuli that are simultaneously appraised as a violation (i.e., somehow wrong, bad, or threatening) yet ultimately benign (i.e., normal, harmless, or okay). In the face of a benign violation, amusement serves to motivate us to explore and play with its implications, while our laughter invites others to join us.

The benign violation theory can be considered a variation upon the traditional “incongruity theory” of humor, which can be traced all the way back to Aristotle (Morreall). The incongruity theory posits that humor is a response to “incongruity,” which typically means something that violates our expectations. Jokes, for instance, have a “set-up” that *sets up* an expectation that their “punchline” then violates. The benign violation theory goes beyond this, specifying that the violations required for humor must have a negative valence. For something to be humorous, it must violate not our expectations of how things usually are but rather our normative sense of how they “ought” to be, hence, slipping on a banana peel is stereotypically considered funny while winning the lottery is not, despite both scenarios being incongruously unexpected.

For a violation to elicit humor as opposed to purely negative emotions, the benign violation theory further specifies that it must ultimately be appraised as benignly non-worrisome, hence, slipping on a banana peel is considered funny, while a more serious violation like being diagnosed with cancer is not. Firmly grounded in our modern understanding of the evolutionary origins of humor in play, the benign violation theory thus improves upon the traditional incongruity theory by narrowing the

definition of a violation and including the condition of benignity. Just as play is a medium through which animals benignly explore their own physical boundaries, so too humor serves as a medium through which people benignly explore the endless different kinds of normative boundaries that characterize human life, like a culture's reigning linguistic, social, or moral norms.

Here, we see the origin of the principle of contrariness that characterizes both the antics of ritual clowns and *Jackass*: humor relies on normative violations, so clown-figures can reap humor through violating any and all norms available to them, doing anything wrong, bad, or stupid they can think of—anything, crucially, that goes against how people think things generally “ought” to be or people “ought” to behave. Yet, for a violation to elicit humor it must ultimately be appraised as benignly non-worrisome by audiences. Here, ritual clowns have a leg up on the jackasses of *Jackass* since people in traditional societies *expect* them to violate traditional norms on societally designated occasions, helping them to appraise their antics as benign. The fact that ritual clowns are expected to violate traditional norms in effect constitutes a meta-norm, which excuses their violations. By contrast, the jackasses of *Jackass* have had to engineer and fine-tune conditions for their own antics' benignity along the way.

Theoretically, the “free play” of animals could go anywhere, with a pair of playmates exploring any and all aspects of their own physicality. Yet, this is not what we see: rough-and-tumble play among mammals generally converges around a few stereotyped high-stakes scenarios that are pertinent to the given species, like wrestling, chasing, and fleeing (Aldis). So too humor tends to converge around a handful of psychological pressure points for our species, aspects of human life around which we tend to have definite normative commitments that can be violated for humorous effect. These are the four comic themes of universal occurrence identified by Steward in the 1920s. Guided by a monomaniacal dedication to getting laughs, both the antics of ritual clowns and *Jackass* have ended up converging around these four basic themes.

Steward's four comic themes were distilled from cross-cultural observation, not evolutionary theory. While they may not be exhaustive, they all correspond to distinctive areas of life in which evolution has exerted

strong pressure in shaping our predispositions. The first comic theme, physical and psychological harm, derives from our animal aversion to pain. A suite of negative feelings has been instilled in us by natural selection to steer us away from things that are harmful to our health and survival, and universal norms reflect these aversions (Nesse). The second theme, sex and obscenity, derives from the central role that sex plays in human life, as indeed it does in the lives of all sexually reproducing animals (Buss, *The Evolution of Desire*). The central importance of sex to human life means that societies everywhere have developed norms to regulate sexuality, including rules of modesty and gender expression.

While Steward's first two comic themes thus respectively correspond to the core evolutionary principles of survival and reproduction, the third and fourth themes derive from our social natures as creatures with cares beyond our own immediate genetic interest. A key part of the evolutionary strategy of our species involves congregating in social groups united around sacralized norms and institutions with strong emotional significance (Graham & Haidt). This is the third comic theme, the sacred. The final theme, the foreign, in turn derives from the fact that outsiders and other social groups inevitably differ from the salient norms of our own culture (Moffett). While the third theme derives from in-group concerns, the fourth thus derives from feelings toward out-groups and their members. I will explore each of these themes as they are manifested in *Jackass*.

It makes adaptive sense that humor should naturally tend towards these psychological pressure points. If humor serves as a medium through which we benignly explore the normative boundaries that characterize our lives, then the areas of life around which we have our strongest normative commitments because of their evolutionary significance should also be the areas of life that are granted the most exploration through humor. Like the play it evolved from, humor also serves a bonding function (Gervais & Wilson). By laughing at a benign norm violation together, people may bond over both their shared norm and their shared sense of its violation's benignity. This is only enhanced by laughing together at benign violations of the norms they are most committed

to, and evolution makes it likely that these will either concern pain, sex, the foreign, or the sacred.

COMIC THEME #1: PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL HARM

The leitmotif of *Jackass* is pain. In contrast to traditional stuntmen, the jackasses of *Jackass* set themselves up for failure with their stunts, ensuring that they get hurt. This is, in fact, the point.

Examples are numerous. Some stunts are simple, resembling childhood shenanigans. In the pilot for *Jackass*, some of the cast ride shopping carts off of steep ledges and into curbs and bushes. In *Jackass: The Movie* (2002), Ryan Dunn similarly rides a BMX bicycle off a ramp to purposely land in a group of cacti (see Figure 1).



Figure 1 · Physical harm: “What a dumbass idea,” Ryan Dunn exclaims after driving off a ramp with his BMX-bike and purposely landing himself in a group of cacti in *Jackass: The Movie*.

Some stunts are more elaborate. In the first movie, *Jackass*-member Ehren McGhehey crawls across a floor completely filled with mousetraps to get a piece of cheese on the other side of the room while dressed as a mouse. At their most extreme, the stunts of *Jackass* are life-threatening, with many involving dangerous animals like alligators, bulls, and buffalos. A skit from

Jackass 3D entitled “Roller Buffalo” consists of Knoxville wearing roller skates in a muddy buffalo pen as he is charged and thrown by an unruly herd of buffalo while the Roger Miller song “You Can’t Roller Skate in a Buffalo Herd” plays, proving the song’s conceit to be true (see Figure 2).

Cultural critics who write about *Jackass* all seem to feel that the show’s focus on pain must say something profound about its performers, its audience, or the time and place in which it was created. The show, for instance, is proposed by multiple scholars to evince the “reflexive sado-masochism” of the post-Vietnam white male, who supposedly feels victimized as the latter part of the twentieth century has seen other social groups—like women, blacks, and immigrants—make social progress, impinging on their status (Brayton; Lindgren & Lèvière). As a result, the theory goes, “angry white men turn their aggressive impulses on themselves in ways that simultaneously prove their downtrodden status and rehabilitate their sense of power” (Tourino 693–94). *Jackass* is thus thought to reflect a “white male backlash” (Brayton 58).

Yet, slapstick—humor centered around physical pain and misfortune—has been a mainstay of American screen comedy since its inception. Indeed, the silent comedies of slapstick comedians like Charles Chaplin and Buster Keaton were popular not just in their country of origin but worldwide, evidencing the genre’s universal appeal (Charney). Laughter at pain, mishaps, and misfortune has likely been around for as long as there has been humor. It is frequently mentioned in the ethnographies of hunter-gatherers (see Polimeni & Reiss 359). Lorna Marshall, for instance, writes of the Ju/’hoansi Bushmen in the Kalahari Desert that they “shriek and howl” with laughter “at mishaps that happen to other people” (“Sharing”). She recounts a band laughing both at people falling over in real life and at people mimicking that act of falling over later for comic effect (*The Kung!*).

Given that the evolutionary origins of humor lie in the physical violations of rough-and-tumble play, it is hardly surprising that physical violations in the form of slapstick also feature prominently in humor. Indeed, the archetypal example of a comic scenario, someone slipping on a banana peel, is an example. Slapstick humor is universal because the norm it violates, the norm that pain is bad and ought to be avoided, is universal. Our animal aversion to pain predates our species by millions

of years and serves a vital function, steering us away from the physically harmful situations that elicit it (Broom). Yet, the exposure to pain can be humorous if it is benign, if it is not something we ultimately need to worry about—say, if it happens to someone other than ourselves, perhaps someone who does not make ready demands on our empathy.

Clowns are such people. Like the Ju/'hoansi recounted by Marshall, we may laugh at seeing even those whose well-being we care about the most fall over since falling over is an ultimately harmless exposure to pain. But ritual clowns go much further, deliberately courting much greater harm for their audiences' amusement. Steward recounts a "Navajo stunt" performed on "the last day of the Mountain Chant ceremony": The performer "totters into the dance space, where he stumbles on a yucca plant and howls with pain. In his effort to find it, he lacerates himself thrice more" (353). A clear parallel can here be drawn with Ryan Dunn's stunt of deliberately landing himself in a group of cacti. As with the antics of the jackasses of *Jackass*, this Navajo stunt is carried out to the surrounding audience's great amusement at the pain its performer endures.

The ritual frame and the cultural associations of ritual clowns prime audiences to find their pain, even if severe, benignly humorous. Elaborate costumes and their erratic behavior may serve as continual reminders that clowns are not like other people, and as such, their pain and misfortune are not appraised as that of normal society members. Emory Sekaquaptewa even relates how a Hopi clown, upon his death, was carried to the roof of a central plaza building, where his family swung his lifeless body around with shouts of "Yaahahay!" until they released it, letting him fall to the ground in a final posthumous stunt. While preexisting norms and expectations were not in place for audiences to appraise the pain of the jackasses of *Jackass* as benign at the franchise's beginning, they have managed to engineer conditions for this along the way.

Much like ritual clowns, the *Jackass* crew seem to have figured out that garnishing their stunts with elaborate setups, costumes, and props makes their pain less upsetting to audiences and thus more benignly humorous. Hence McGhehey dressing up as a mouse to crawl across a floor full of mousetraps to get a piece of cheese or Knoxville dressing up as an attendee at a 1970s roller disco to act out the meaning of Roger Miller's

“You Can’t Roller Skate in a Buffalo Herd.” The cartoonish premises, props, and costumes of all of these stunts—an increasingly common attribute throughout the franchise’s history—lend them a sense of unreality and prime audiences that the pain they feature is not to be taken seriously.



Figure 2 · Physical harm: Johnny Knoxville in *Jackass 3D* wearing roller skates and being charged by a buffalo herd, acting out the meaning of Roger Miller’s “You Can’t Roller Skate in a Buffalo Herd.”

Yet, the most effective device with which the jackasses of *Jackass* prime audiences not to take their pain seriously is arguably one they

have availed themselves of since the franchise's beginning, namely their own laughter. Typically, the performer of a stunt will himself laugh even as he is experiencing pain, sometimes in between shouts of pain, and throughout the rest of the crew can always be seen or heard offscreen laughing hysterically at the pain their fellow jackass is experiencing. Originating evolutionarily as a play signal, the very purpose of laughter is to signal that its eliciting violation is benign, something that is not to be taken seriously. *Jackass* milks this signal and its social contagiousness for all it is worth, inviting audiences to join in with the crew themselves in finding their oftentimes extraordinary levels of pain a fitting object of humor. Their laughter is a continual reminder that the performers are willing recipients of the pain.

Just like ritual clowns, *Jackass* garners humor not just from physical pain but also psychological pain in the form of negative emotions like fear. This may not just be their own fear but also the fear of others. Pueblo clowns, for instance, have been known to snatch children from their mothers and throw them in the river—not to hurt them but to “scare the hell out of them” (Lee). The *Jackass* crew play pranks on each other that exploit each member's deepest fears, such as Margera's phobia of snakes. In *Jackass 3D*, he is lured by his crew mates to walk onto a false floor. When he falls through, he finds himself trapped in a pit into which the rest of the crew throw dozens of live snakes—to the point that Margera cries from fear while his friends laugh hysterically. While Margera himself does not show levity in the situation, his friends' laughter is here a reminder that the cast have all mutually consented to be exposed to such horrifying experiences by virtue of signing up for the show.

Both *Jackass* and ritual clowns similarly mine the negative emotion of disgust for humor. Disgust evolved to keep us away from things that contain pathogens, including human bodily excretions like urine and feces (Schaller & Park). Zuni clowns are renowned for engaging in urine dances and scatological feasts, competing to see who can ingest the most repulsive things (Coxe Stevenson 437). The *Jackass* crew similarly try to outdo each other in this regard, and there is no bodily excretion that they have not ingested at some point, from urine and feces to sweat and sperm. Typically, this leads to vomit, which they do not shy away from ingesting

either, such as in the second episode of the second season where Dave England consumes the ingredients of an omelet before throwing up, cooking the vomit, and eating the resulting “vomelette” with Steve-O.

COMIC THEME #2: SEX AND OBSCENITY

The comic theme of sex and obscenity refers to humor generated from violating the norms of what is thought proper in terms of the expression of sexuality and the exposure of sexual organs.

Oftentimes, obscenity will be mixed in with pain as a central element in stunts. *Jackass Number Two* features a bit entitled “Puppet Show,” wherein Chris Pontius dresses up his penis as a mouse and sticks it through a hole into a terrarium with a live snake in order to make the snake attack his penis as if it was prey (see Figure 3).



Figure 3 · Sex and obscenity: In *Jackass: The Movie*, Chris Pontius dresses up his penis as a mouse and sticks it through a hole into a terrarium with a live snake in order to make the snake attack it.

Jackass also derives humor from violating the norms of masculinity and heterosexuality. In *Jackass Number Two*, for instance, Margera sits atop a strength tester machine, the carnival game where contestants try to hit a lever with a hammer with sufficient force to launch a puck high

enough to hit a bell at the top of the machine, except that this particular machine has a dildo attached to its puck. When the puck hits the bell, the dildo penetrates his rectum (see Figure 4).

As with the theme of pain, cultural critics have also seen the prominence of sex and obscenity in *Jackass* as indicating something important. For some, it constitutes a timely “rebuke of bourgeois respectability and conventional forms of masculinity” (Tourino 693). Yet others see it as regressive, with the show’s obscene humor being the focus of those who condemn it as juvenile. Emily Chivers Yochim sees the show’s “adolescent humor” as indicative of the “never-ending adolescence” of some white males (112). Critics are also split on the question of whether the show’s “ironic homoeroticism” mocks homosexuality or celebrates it (Brayton 58, 66–67). The show has been condemned as homophobic by some while nevertheless being embraced by gay culture, receiving numerous awards from gay publications (Doig).

As with the theme of pain, a preoccupation with sex and obscenity is not specific to *Jackass*. If *Jackass* is to be derided for its “adolescent humor,” then surely this critique must also be extended to the indigenous clowns who wear giant phalluses, which they fondle in public, and who tie their penises together to perform a “tug of war” (Wright 44). Ritual clowns have often been known to make rude advances on and fondle onlookers (Steward 351–53). In fact, sex and obscenity appear to be a common theme of ritual humor everywhere, with everyone from adolescents to adults and both men and women participating (Apte). Steward notes that it has also been a stable theme of the Western comic tradition from the phallic songs of Bacchic dancers in Ancient Greece through the medieval “Feast of Fools” and onward (353). It is also typical for clowns everywhere to violate the norms associated with their gender (Janik).

Given the obvious evolutionary significance of sex and its central position in human affairs as an instigator of both amity and strife (Buss, *The Evolution of Desire*), it is hardly surprising that there exist everywhere social norms regulating how sexuality is expressed and discussed, norms that can be violated to humorous effect. Like the jackasses of *Jackass*, ritual clowns have followed this trail of humor to the extent of virtually

engaging in sexual activity with each other, man on man. An observer of a Pueblo clown performance in 1880 writes: "Sodomy, coitus, masturbation, etc., was performed to greatest perfection, men accoupling with each other on the ground or standing, and to the great delight of the spectators (certainly over one hundred), men, women, girls and boys, not the slightest indecent look on the part of the women, and applauding the vilest motions" (Lange 303).

One can sometimes see the jackasses of *Jackass* being driven toward obscenity in their pursuit of laughter in real-time throughout their stunts. A bit that did not start out obscene may gradually become so as the jackasses follow their own laughter and intuition of what is funny. In a bit for *Jackass: The Movie*, Knoxville, Pontius, England, and McGhehey take turns shocking themselves with a muscle stimulator. The body parts they shock at first are innocuous, starting with their cheeks, their fingers, and their chests. Halfway through the bit, however, Knoxville exclaims, "Who's gonna do the gooch?" referring to the space between the anus and scrotum. England does so naked with his legs spread in the air, and to ever-increasing laughs, the bit becomes progressively depraved from there until Pontius finally shocks his testicles to the hysterical laughter of the others.



Figure 4 · Sex and obscenity: In *Jackass Number Two*, Bam Margera sits atop a strength tester machine and has a dildo shot into his behind at high speed.

Since being embraced by gay culture, the *Jackass* crew have been more conscious of cultivating the gay/queer aspect of their image, even changing the logo of their production company *Dickhouse* to a rainbow in 2006 (“Dickhouse”). In later interviews, they have sometimes made out that the gayness of their show was a consciously progressive decision from the start, with Steve-O calling their “homoerotic humor” a “humanitarian attack against [the] homophobia [of] a heterosexual *MTV* generation” (Spitznagel).

There are reasons to doubt this self-lauding account, not least other explanations they themselves have given in different interviews. A famous stunt from the first movie features Ryan Dunn shoving a toy car up his anus before going to a doctor to get x-rays of himself while on hidden camera. Margera explains that no one in the cast wanted to be the one to perform this bit because of its homosexual undertones: “I was like, ‘This is way too gay. He’s going to be known as the gay dude on *Jackass*.’” Indeed, Steve-O was originally slated to do it but backed out, fearing that his father would “disown” him, so Dunn reluctantly stepped up. When this bit became the funniest and most lauded skit in the movie, Margera explains, this led himself and the others to lean heavily into incorporating homoerotic elements into their stunts. The *Jackass* crew’s ventures into the realm of sex and obscenity, even their explicitly cultivated homoeroticism, can thus be accounted for by their willingness to go wherever the laugh takes them.

COMIC THEME #3: THE SACRED

The third comic theme pertains to humor derived from violations or burlesques of the sacred—that is, the revered customs, persons, and institutions that are traditionally held to be inviolable.

Sometimes this includes things from the realm that is traditionally most associated with the sacred, namely religion. A bit for the fourth episode of *Jackass* entitled “Satan vs. God” stars Pontius, dressed up as the Devil, walking around the streets of Downtown Los Angeles with a sign proclaiming, “Keep God out of California” (see Figure 5). The bit’s climax comes when an enraged passerby rips his sign from him, snaps it in half, and starts a fistfight with him that ends with the two of them grappling with each other on the ground.



Figure 5 · Mocking the sacred: In the fourth episode of season one of *Jackass*, Chris Pontius walks around the streets of Downtown Los Angeles, dressed up as the Devil protesting God.

Yet, as Todd White notes, “what is held ‘sacred’ to any society or culture is not restricted to the realm of religion” (34). Rather, the term applies to anything that is held in high esteem and traditionally deemed inviolable. Consider, for instance, the respect and honor that children are traditionally expected to pay their parents. *Jackass* has garnered humor from violating this custom all throughout the franchise’s history. A recurring bit involves Margera pranking his parents, such as by planting a live alligator in their living room in *Jackass: The Movie*, or physically assaulting his father Phil, such as the bit “Bam Beating Phil for a Day” in the third episode of season one. As the title implies, Margera intermittently pounces upon his father throughout the course of a day, spasmodically punching him until his father becomes annoyed enough to retaliate.

Jackass’s debasement of the sacred has provoked strong reactions among conservative and traditionalist commentators. For instance, *Movieguide: The Family Guide to Movies and Entertainment* gave *Jackass: The Movie* one star with these words: “Intentional blasphemy, evil, gross immorality, and/

or worldview problems. (To be avoided).” Similarly, the prominent Christian evangelist Rod Parsley has cited *Jackass* as an example of everything wrong with the “upside-down culture” of modern America (124). Curiously, however, most cultural critics have had little to say about *Jackass*’s violations of the sacred. Its burlesques of religious figures are largely skirted over. At most, Margera’s treatment of his parents is chalked up to the show’s immaturity. For Chivers, it reflects “an adolescent masculinity impervious to rules” (127).

As Steward notes, “[t]he clown is the person par excellence who is privileged to ridicule, burlesque, and defile the most sacred and important ceremonies, persons, and customs. . . . Those mores which are ordinarily observed most rigorously and which are held in great esteem are the subjects of the most pleasurable comedy” (349). The humorous blasphemy of *Jackass*’s “Satan vs. God” has many equivalents around the world. Steward recounts how Native American ritual clowns often speak to gods in officially forbidden ways, just as the Samoan clown’s dance mocks the sacred “taupo,” the woman of highest rank and divinity (348–50). Similarly, he notes how the tribal Khond in India even “permitted ridicule of the goddess to whom human sacrifice ha[d] been made” (350). The drive to violate the sacred for humor is thus pervasive.

It makes sense that violations of a given culture’s most sacred norms should make for the most explosive but also the most controversial humor. However, the apparent universality of humorous violations of the sacred challenges conservative critiques of *Jackass* as morally corrosive or necessarily indicative of a culture gone awry. Ritual clowning in traditional societies demonstrates that people are perfectly capable of laughing at violations of sacred norms, values, and institutions in one setting while still endorsing the sacredness of those norms, values, and institutions outside thereof. Indeed, anthropologists have often conceived of ritual clowns as serving to confirm the social order by humorously showing its mirror opposite, whether purposefully or not (White 34–5).

A similar analysis could be applied to Margera’s pranks on his parents and his physical attacks on his father. On the surface, these skits could be seen as representing a total societal breakdown of parental respect, with Margera acting like a petulant child whose parents do not know how to control him. On the other hand, the skits are supposed to be funny

precisely because they violate a norm that the show presupposes that its audience has internalized, namely that of respectful behavior toward parents. Margera sets an awful example of how to behave, but the same could be said of the ritual clowns in traditional societies who behave in the exact opposite manner of what people are supposed to. The jackasses of *Jackass* do not strive to set a good example of how people ought to behave—they strive to do the exact opposite for comic effect.

So too, *Jackass*'s violations of the religiously sacred cannot be taken *prima facie* as anti-religious any more than their deliberately painful stunts can be taken as a repudiation of the idea that pain is generally bad. Consider "Satan vs. God." This stunt evinces no discernible critique toward Christianity specifically nor religion in general, and in interviews, the *Jackass* crew do not claim to have any gripes with either (Spitznagel). The skit is pure provocation for the sake of humor, and the thrill of it lies just as much in seeing people's reaction to Pontius as he walks the streets of Downtown Los Angeles dressed up as the Devil protesting God. Indeed, the climax of the bit comes at Pontius's own expense when he is attacked by an enraged passerby. As Margera puts it in an interview, "We're the ones getting punched in the balls . . . Not God" (Spitznagel).

When *Jackass*'s violations of the sacred are mostly not remarked upon by cultural critics, this may well be because the traditionally sacred institutions and values violated by *Jackass* are not the institutions and values that cultural critics generally care about. It is clear that there are still a lot of people who subscribe to the sacred things that *Jackass* mocks and parodies—or else Pontius would not have been physically assaulted in the street for dressing up as the Devil and protesting God. To see what cultural critics hold sacred, we only have to look at which of *Jackass*'s humorous violations actually provoke their ire and condemnation. For this, we have to turn to the fourth and final comic theme of universal occurrence: ridicule of foreigners.

COMIC THEME #4: THE FOREIGN

When *Jackass* parodies other cultures, it is typically an accoutrement to a stunt that already deals in one or more of the other comic themes of universal occurrence, but part of the humor in these skits nevertheless

comes from hamming up the parts of foreign cultures that seem strange or ridiculous from an American perspective. In episode four of season one, Knoxville sumo wrestles a professional Japanese sumo wrestler, except instead of wearing the traditional mawashi loincloth he wears a diaper, playing up the strangeness of the Japanese sumo wrestling uniform as seen from an American perspective. In between being dominated in the sumo ring, he is struck on the back with a bamboo stick by a sumo trainer for “motivation,” adding physical pain as an element in the skit. Gradually, he also has his diaper ripped off of him, adding obscenity.

Such stunts that play off the exotic aspects of foreign cultures are spread throughout the show’s run, and in the first two *Jackass* films, the crew actually travels across the globe to exotic locations in order to incorporate the local culture into their stunts. In the second film, they go to India, where they visit a leech healer and accordingly apply leeches to Dave England’s testicles and to Steve-O’s left eyeball (see Figure 6). Once again, this stunt mixes in the other comic elements of universal occurrence: pain from the leeches and obscenity in the form of England’s testicles.



Figure 6 · Mocking the foreign: In *Jackass Number Two*, the crew travel to India, where they visit a leech healer and accordingly apply a leech to Dave England’s testicles.

The progressive slant of cultural critics and their typical focus on matters of identity and power structures have led many readings of the show to foreground the cast of *Jackass*'s status as white American males. While Chivers grants that the show postures at being transgressive, she posits that it "all the while remind[s] us that white boys rule" (118). For Christina Marie Tourino, "the humor of the show [is] largely by and for whites," and she impugns "the thoroughgoing racism of its participants and its audience" (697–9). The rest of *Jackass*'s subversive antics, per this reading, are mere window dressing for its driving "conservative impulse" (694).

It is a universal feature of human psychology to form in-groups defined by the qualities that distinguish it from out-groups (Moffett), hence, humor derived from highlighting the aspects of foreigners that violate the local standard of how people "ought" to look or behave is another theme that occurs around the world. Steward recounts how among Native American clowns, this may either be targeted toward their neighboring tribes or toward their white neighbors (355). A custom of the Southern Maidu, for instance, involves burlesquing the dance of their northern neighbors (355). The "bull and horse" ceremony in Santo Domingo depicts "the first arrival of the white men, missionaries and traders, in ludicrously ragged costumes" (355). Similarly, countless anthropologists have described finding themselves become the butt of the joke when staying with indigenous tribes all over the world, their outsider status mocked (White 37–38).

I am not insensitive to the difference that might lead cultural critics to condemn *Jackass*'s burlesques of foreigners while not condemning the same practice among indigenous tribes. As white Americans mocking foreign cultures, the jackasses of *Jackass* are seen as coming from a place of comparative privilege and power that is not there in indigenous tribes' ridicule of other tribes or their white neighbors. Nevertheless, the ubiquity of ridicule of foreigners across the world as a component of humor should at least temper us from labeling it the true dark and hidden core of *Jackass*. It may merely be one component, as it seems to be elsewhere. A genuinely anarchic spirit of all-embracing irreverence cannot be expected to keep any pieties in mind, including progressive pieties that would preclude humor derived from mocking or burlesquing the otherness of outsiders.

The animating spirit of *Jackass* cannot properly be labeled conservative or indeed xenophobic. If the ultimate intent of the *Jackass* crew was to denigrate other cultures to assert their own dominance, then they would seem to have gone about this in perhaps the least efficient way imaginable, their stunts almost without exception involving their own pain and humiliation. Indeed, even in the skits that incorporate elements of foreign cultures, it is always the crew themselves that end up getting hurt and looking like “jackasses” by being dominated in sumo wrestling or having leeches latch onto their balls as they stand screaming in the streets of India with an Indian leech healer looking confusedly at them.

Let us consider in greater detail the skit that Tourino singles out as demonstrating the racism of both the *Jackass* crew and their audience. It is called “Terror Taxi” and appears at the very end of *Jackass 2* as its climax. The skit is a prank on Erin McGeheey, who himself thinks he is pranking a random cab driver by posing as an Arab terrorist on his way to the airport to commit a terrorist act. In actuality, the “cab driver” is the actor Jay Chandrasekhar, who retaliates against McGeheey by pulling out a gun, physically assaulting him, and finally locking him in the trunk of the cab. Yet, the climax of the skit only comes after McGeheey is let out of the trunk and let in on the prank when he is informed that the fake beard that has been glued onto his face, supposedly to make him look like a terrorist, is made entirely out of the shaved pubic hair of the rest of the *Jackass* crew.

At the beginning of “Terror Taxi,” Margera looks into the camera and announces, “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the best skit of this movie.” The skit does indeed seem to be the apotheosis of *Jackass*, combining every comic theme that characterizes the franchise. It centers on the physical and psychological pain of McGeheey, who is not only beaten up and humiliated by the “cab driver” but also made to fear for his life when he is threatened at gunpoint. To this is added obscenity in that his beard is made entirely of the crew’s pubic hair, the revelation of which causes him to throw up. Indeed, the skit even encroaches on the sacred by making light of terror while America was still healing from the cultural trauma of its greatest national tragedy in modern history, 9/11 (the film was released in 2006). To top this off, McGeheey is dressed up as and impersonating a foreign character for most of it.



Figure 7 · Mocking the foreign: Ehren McGhehey being dressed up as an Arab terrorist in *Jackass Number Two*, unaware that his fake beard is made entirely out of the rest of the crew's shaved pubic hair.

To say that the skit exposes the “thoroughgoing racism” of *Jackass* and its audience is unwarranted. In fact, more than anything, McGhehey's impersonation of a stereotypical Arab terrorist, together with the fact that he himself is trying to pull a prank, serves as moral cover for the psychological terror of the real prank on him. As he has his costume applied to him, including the beard of pubes, he works on his character, with the crew gathered around him laughing and pulling faces at him behind his back (see Figure 7). Wrongly thinking that they are laughing at his painfully unfunny impersonation of an Arab terrorist, he hams up the impression, exaggerating the accent and making it even more offensive, which makes the psychological hell he is about to go through seem like karmic retribution instead of purely unwarranted cruelty.

In every possible way, “Terror Taxi” is deliberately over the top, pushing against the limits of how abhorrent a violation an audience can be made to laugh at. In this, it reflects the jackasses of *Jackass's* general tendency toward violating anything and everything they can think of to get a laugh. Yet, as with most of *Jackass's* stunts, it is ultimately at one of their crewmember's own expense, and if the purpose was to show that “white boys rule,” it seems ineffective to have McGhehey be beaten up

and humiliated by an Indian actor pretending to be a cab driver. The skit, as with most of *Jackass*, seems bereft of any message: humor for humor's sake and at the expense of anything else.

A RORSCHACH OF SMEARED SHIT

Jackass can be seen as a continuation of an ancient tradition of ritual clowning, but in one central respect, it differs: It lacks the sacral framing that characterizes ritual clowning in traditional societies. The inveterate violations of traditional ritual clowns are sanctioned by custom and offered ritual, even sacred status, protecting them from critique despite their outrageous nature. *Jackass* enjoys no such privilege and has accordingly been attacked from every angle by progressive and conservative critics alike. I hope here to have shown that these critiques do not hold up to scrutiny. Perhaps it is precisely the fact that *Jackass* is characterized by such primal comic themes, driven not by wanting to make any kind of point but simply by wanting to make people laugh, that makes it an ideal target of criticism. As the writer Joseph Earp has put it, "You can read whatever you want into the show and its ensuing movies—the franchise is a Rorschach test of smeared shit, just vague enough to be contorted into whatever form the viewer desires."

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