National College of Art and Design

Communication Design
Faculty of Design

‘Crude or Camp? : The portrayal of masculinity in MTV’s Jackass’

Tom Davis

Submitted to the School of Visual Culture in Candidacy for the the Degree of:
BA Graphic Design, 2023

Contents

‘Crude or Camp? : The portrayal of masculinity in MTV’s Jackass’

Tom Davis
2023

Abstract:

MTV’s ‘Jackass’ can appear on the surface as a bold display of disruptive toxic masculinity, a crude and harmful heteronormative piece of media which seems far from many’s notions of what Camp is. This essay however argues that the portrayal of masculinity shown in Jackass is more nuanced than its appearance, and displays a transgressive and unusual form of performative masculinity that places it firmly in the realm of Camp’ media. For the purposes of clarity this essay will focus solely on the Jackass movies 1-4 (2002 - 2022) and media surrounding these films. This essay will also be broken into 5 distinct chapters:

1). Exploring ‘Camp’

2). The display of masculinity within Jackass

3). Content and connections: Jackass and ‘Pure Camp’

4). The Camp counter-argument.

5). The relevance of reframing Jackass.

1). Exploring ‘Camp’

When discussing the concept of Camp one can often run into the issue of defining an umbrella term that is by nature, enigmatic. Susan Sontag, one of the prevailing writers on the subject highlights this in her seminal essay ‘Notes on Camp’ saying : “Camp is esoteric - something of a private code, a badge of identity even” (Sontag, 1964, p.1). In order to help with the discussion of Camp this essay will define its own personal interpretation of what Camp is for the modern day, and show clearly how the works of Jackass fit within this framework.

Camp's etymology is unclear, though many believe it to have originated from the French term 'camper' : 'to portray/pose or Italian's 'campare' meaning 'to make something stand out'. Almost any form of media can encompass the label of Camp, however Camp as we know it today was undoubtedly created within the queer community: "I wouldn't say camp is synonymous with queer, but I would say that you can't have camp without queer." (Zhang, E cited in W smith 2019). So although it is deeply rooted in the Queer community, there is no innate need for the subject to be itself, Queer. In essence, the word Camp is a label used to define something as fitting into a certain aesthetic, personality and tone, as Sontag says:

> "Camp is a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of camp is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization."
> (Sontag, 1964, p.4)

This aesthetic quality of Jackass isn't something many people would consider in its discussion, however it fits perfectly within this context of a stylized, artificial sense of aesthetics. Andrew M. Shanken compares the Jackass aesthetic to Edmund Burke's definition of the 'sublime' which he describes as a 'comfort tinged with terror,' (Burke cited in Shanken, 2007). Shanken elaborates on this connection:

> "Minor torture, extreme stunts, and body mutilation are not, in and of themselves, sublime. But in this filmic state - photogenic, streaked with humour, and oftentimes cleverly conceived - they enter the realm of an aesthetic category. Burke set out to explain a class of aesthetic experience that beauty could not compass." (Shanken, 2007 p.52).

Shanken articulates this aesthetic as " one of young male bodies unleashed in space, breaking social and corporeal boundaries". (Shanken, 2007 p.50-51) It can be considered an anti-aesthetic, where the perceived gruesome, low-budget, chaos of the franchise fits perfectly with "The ultimate Camp statement: It's good because it's awful" (Sontag, 1964, p.33).

Furthermore Sontag makes a notable distinction in the reading of Camp, stating that there are in fact two forms of Camp; 'Pure' and 'Camping' arguing that:

> "One must distinguish between naïve and deliberate Camp. Pure Camp is always naïve. Camp which knows itself to be Camp ('camping') is usually less satisfying." (Sontag, 1964, p.13)

Pure Camp is the most noteworthy and important denotation of Camp, the most genuine. That is, subjects which are created without the *intention* of being labelled or defined as Camp. Given this distinction this essay will prove that Jackass does not simply fall under the possible larger umbrella of camping, or pseudo-Camp similarities, but is in fact clearly and distinctly a form of 'Pure Camp.'

2). The display of masculinity within Jackass

'Jackass' is an American stunt/prank based reality media franchise. It began airing as a reality comedy television series on MTV between October 2000 and August 2001. Created by Jeff Tremaine, Spike Jonze, and Johnny Knoxville the show was an instant hit, gaining infamy from it's controversial and dangerous stunts. The television show was short-lived but within its wake came the more popular media output: The Jackass films. The four films revolve around a motley crew of performers, led by co-creator Johnny Knoxville who stage elaborate stunts and pranks on each other, which almost always involve the performers being somehow harmed or put into dangerous/disgusting situations. They "draw on the perverse appeal of disgust, pain, risk, humiliation, and other forms of transgression" (Shanken, 2007 p.51). The cast is almost entirely male (up until its most recent film) and so the subject of the films are intrinsically linked to a display of some form of masculinity. This is where the focus of much of the essay will be located, in the exploration of masculinity within the franchise. Although the subject of gender does not innately correspond with Camp discussion, from examining the franchise it is evident that the display of masculinity in Jackass is an essential element of the show's appeal. As a male dominated cast, taking part in acts that are traditionally associated with male behaviour, the Jackass films evidently present masculinity as a key subject in their narrative. Gender theorist Judith Butler argues: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; ... identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (Gauntlett 2008 p.150). What this indicates is how the outward expression of one's gender is what

composes their identity, so if we are to consider Camp as relating to one's identity, then Jackass's relationship between the expression of gender, and a labelling of Camp are undoubtedly linked.

When discussing the performance and perception of gender two important concepts for this essay are 'Hegemonic masculinity' and 'toxic masculinity'. Hegemonic relates to Hegemony: "the winning and holding of power and the formation (and destruction) of social groups in that process . . .it is importantly about the ways in which the ruling class establishes and maintains its domination." (Donaldson 1993 p.645). This concept of hegemony then further relates itself to masculinity, thus denoting 'Hegemonic Masculinity'. In recent years the term 'toxic masculinity' has risen to the forefront of gender discussion, and much of the foundation of 'toxic masculinity' stems from its connection to preserving hegemonic ideals. Bryant W. Sculos in his writing on Toxic masculinity describes it as 'a loosely interrelated collection of norms, beliefs, and behaviours associated with masculinity, which are harmful to women, men, children, and society more broadly'. He outlines 'hyper-competitiveness, individualistic self sufficiency, tendency towards or glorification of violence, Chauvinism, sexism, misogyny, rigid conceptions of sexual/gender identity and roles, heteronormativity, entitlement to sexual attention from women, objectification of women, and the infantilization of women' as the norms, beliefs, and behaviours that are often associated with toxic masculinity (Sculos, 2017). The term 'toxic masculinity' is often met with an immediate criticism from (mostly male) readers, who incorrectly view the label as a broad attack on masculinity, which is entirely inaccurate:

> "There is a mistaken impression out there that 'toxic masculinity' means that everything about masculinity is somehow toxic. But that's not the case. In fact, the term toxic masculinity is used very deliberately to try to differentiate the more damaging or destructive male behaviours from more positive male behaviours" (McIntosh, 2016, 5:26)

On the surface the masculine identities pushed in the Jackass films could be viewed as re-affirming the traditional, harmful forms of masculinity. It is widely accepted that the broad gaze of male-led extreme reality stunt shows include many entries that fall under the label of 'toxic masculinity'. Much of the hyper-masculine

behaviour featured within these media performances quickly devolves into abiding by the hegemonic ideals outlined above. However, from the information gathered in examining the franchise this essay argues that Jackass remains an outlier from its toxic counter-parts. It does so both by a lack of abiding to hegemonic principals, and furthermore in an understanding of its reading as a uniquely Camp performance of masculinity, which both allow it to escape the same harmful labelling.

3). Content and connections: Jackass and 'Pure Camp'

Jackass's essence as a parodic, comedic series is what first anchors the franchise to the realm of Camp:

> "The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely Camp involves a new, more complex relation to 'the serious'. One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious."(Sontag, 1964, p.26)

By centering itself within the comedic genre it allows for the subversion of typical ideas around societal norms in typical Camp fashion. This extends into Butler's suggestion "that existing gender forms could be undermined through parody" (Butler cited in Gauntlett, 2008, p.152). The main content of this franchise; its stunts & pranks, can be interrogated by how they fall into the discussed category of Camp. With the series spanning decades, and featuring hundreds of stunts for the sake of brevity and equity this essay will take one example from each mainline film entry to examine.

'Jackass The Movie' (2002) 'Air Horn Golf'

An example from the first Jackass movie would be 'Air Horn Golf'. A sketch in which members of the cast Knoxville, McGhehey, and England disrupt a golfing match:

(Fig. 1)'Air Horn Golf'

> "Dressed in hunting fatigues and shielded from view, the group sounds an air horn during the backswing of various golfers. The stunt, of course, forces the upper-class golfers to squander their strokes. What is ultimately parodied is the earnest concentration of the privileged golfers. The game and its participants are exposed as not only frivolous, but also entirely too uptight." (Brayton 2007, p.66).

This contrast within class groups is a tool used often throughout the series; "With its antiauthoritarian bent, Jackass often relies on class distinctions as satirical fodder" (Brayton 2007 p.66). This distinction immediately aligns the sketch with the transgressive and disruptive elements of Camp, however from my point of view it's the hunting fatigues that pushes a scene like this over the edge: If Camp is an aesthetic of 'artifice' then the absurdity of wearing full camouflaged disguise, while simultaneously blowing an air horn in almost clear view is a proud display of this aesthetic. This degree of stylized absurdity and extravagance within these stunts is a running theme throughout the series, with many scenes sharing this satirical appearance that rejects the more combative, serious tones of other male-centred media properties.

'Jackass Number Two' (2006) 'Big Red Rocket'

In a similar vein of aesthetics is 'Big Red Rocket' in which Knoxville saddles onto a large, Looney Tunes-esque rocket dressed in the style of stuntman Evel Knievel,

with the aforementioned comical aesthetic quality pushed even further. In this example, although the visuals reflects a humorous tone, the stunt in reality was extremely dangerous: “During the "Big Red Rocket" stunt, Johnny Knoxville nearly suffered severe/fatal injuries when a rocket misfired out of the side of the big red rocket, missing him by inches” (IMDB, 2006) Knoxville, laughing afterwards, flippantly ignores the seriousness of the event and even repeats the stunt afterwards once the issue was fixed. Sontag states that “As a taste in persons, Camp responds particularly to the markedly attenuated and to the strongly exaggerated” (Sontag, 1964, p.8) this duality can be reflected in the importance of the scenes visual ‘flare’ met with a disregard of all seriousness around the actual danger.

(fig.2-4) *Johnny Knoxvile in ‘Jackass Number Two’*

Critics often note the franchise as flaunting and pushing dangerous activity, yet it is evident in scenes such as this that the more favoured element of the Jackass 'methodology’ involves the exaggerated theatrics and spectacle, with the most dangerous component being simply one part of the display.

'Jackass 3D' (2010) 'The Invisible Man'.

(fig 5.) *Johnny Knoxvile in 'Jackass 3D'*

In 'The Invisible Man' (pictured) Knoxville faces the full force of a raging bull, 'disguised' with his full body painted to match a mounted cartoon background. We see here the overt similarity to Sontag's writing on Camp as "an attempt to do something extraordinary. But in the sense, often, of being special, Glamorous." (Sontag, 1964, p.18). The mere act of jumping into a bullring is, in itself extraordinary, but the staging of the stunt allows it to add the extra element of theatrics and spectacle, that points towards its own absurdity. Naturally, Knoxville fails to be 'invisible' , is rammed and (almost pirouetting in the air) is thrown to the ground. The aim of the scene, and many of the franchise's stunts as a whole, was never to succeed in avoiding the pain, but in embracing the almost definite chance of it. "They're deconstructing the stunt. They're all about the aftermath, the actual pain and humiliation and the negative consequence" (Kohn, 2022, n.p) Knoxville personally admits to this rationality "Some other actors do their own stunts, but the difference is that their stunts are designed to succeed." (Marchese, 2018, n.p.) In this way Jackass's methodology perfectly mirrors Susan Sontag's view of Camp's important ability to "find success in certain passionate failures" (Sontag, 1964, p.32)

'Jackass Forever' (2022) 'The Quiet Game'

Jackass Forever, released two decades after the first movie introduces a new, and more diverse cast, namely Rachel Wolfson, the first official female cast member who makes an appearance in 'The Quiet Game'.

(Fig. 6) Rachel Wolfson (Fig. 7) Johnny Knoxville & Steve-O

The stunt in question is relatively simple, involving the performers to remain quiet while they are put under increasingly painful situations such as licking a taser, enduring a snakebite, and the 'skateboard guillotine' (fig.8). Within this premise they combine the stunt with the aesthetics of a 'mime' performance, painted and dressed in the signature apparel. This brings in a conscious element of performance art to the sketch, which is combined with the Camp mentality of exaggeration and an embracing of the humour found when (predictably) the aim to remain quiet fails spectacularly. The notable connections between Jackass and performative arts is something that will be discussed in further detail in the next chapter, yet already in this context there is a deliberate playfulness around the scene being paired with a more avant-garde theme, yet still sticking to it's 'low-brow' style of humour. This persistence in maintaining sincerity and admiration for its own material is a notable distinction of Camp labelling in Sontag's mind: "When self-parody lacks ebullience but instead reveals (even sporadically) a contempt for one's themes and one's materials … the results are forced and heavy-handed, rarely camp (Sontag, 1964, p.15). While the franchise has moments of poking fun at itself it never shows a disdain for its content holding a high regard in its aim of providing humour through its own unique performative style.

Jackass's connection to Burlesque and performance art

Another tie to Camp sensibility is Jackass's similarity to the world of both Burlesque, and performance art as a whole. Burlesque in its origin was a very radical variety of performance: "Although it is often mistaken as little more than striptease, burlesque was originally associated with a sardonic genre of theatre that played against larger social norms" being known for "reversing roles, shattering polite expectations, brazenly challenging notions of the approved ways women might display their bodies and speak in public" (Trachtenberg, 1991 cited in Brayton 2007, p.65). While Burlesque and Camp are not necessarily one in the same the "parameters which Sontag offers for the camp sensibility similarly reflect the burlesque impulse. Early in her essay, she practically echoes Fielding's definition of burlesque" (Degen 1987, p.88). This correlation suggests that by Jackass aligning with burlesque performances, it reveals another way in which it can be seen to relate to Camp. Brayton makes this connection between the content of the Jackass franchise and burlesque saying:

> "Much like Jackass, the early burlesque shows orchestrated by Lydia Thompson and William Mitchell were 'grounded in the aesthetics of transgression, inversion, and the grotesque' whereby the 'debased, dirty, and unworthy' were promoted from the taverns of the working classes to the stages of bourgeois society, making the actors objects of revulsion and desire . . . the skits of Jackass are underwritten by a discourse of 'irreverence, inversion, the grotesque, and sexual display' (Allen, 1991, cited in Brayton 2007, p.66)

This burlesque sensibility extends beyond the content of the stunts and into the gender representation of its male cast: 'In the upside-down world of burlesque', Robert Allen writes, 'masculinity was but a caricature of itself' (Allen, 1991 cited in Brayton, 2007). Brayton thus feels that "The overlapping masculinities of Jackass may present a similar if equally as complex gender parody". This point is further elaborated between the similarities in how burlesque 'questioned Victorian ideals of femininity during the mid-nineteenth century' and how it could function within Jackass as 'a modern-day parody of heteronormative athletic masculinity' (Brayton, 2007). The summary of this gender-orientated satirical play is described by Brayton as 'an ambiguous gender parody' that 'reaffirms as it disavows competing versions

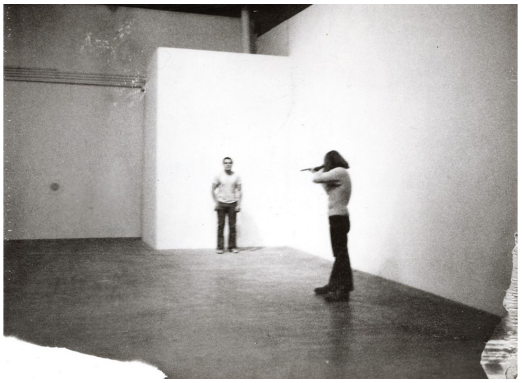
of masculinity and femininity.'(Brayton, 2007). Outlined clearly here we can see this link between burlesque Jackass's own unique parodies of gender, if we consider these performances as one in the same this connection then reinforces this essays argument that the gender display of Jackass is one of a transgressive and satirical kind, and should not be compared in the same sense as other humourless and toxic forms of male expression.

If Jackass can be related to burlesque, can it similarly qualify it as performance art? A form of "art loaded with concussions and the grotesque, head injuries and debauchery." as Veronica Phillips describes it (Phillips, 2022 n.p.). It's a fair point to make considering the series ties to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) where all 4 films have been screened and remain in the permanent collection, Writer Dennis Lim argues "the antics of Jackass may or may not be art, but they stand at the confluence of some significant social phenomena and artistic tradition" (Lim, 2010 cited in Marchese, 2018 n.p). However, in co-creator Johnny Knoxville's view it was never an intentional choice:

> "Yeah, our films were at MoMA, but I hoped we weren't making art. I didn't think that's what we were doing . . . I never wanted to do that. We just wanted to make each other laugh. It's not for me to say whether it's art" (Marchese, 2018, n.p.)

Knoxville clearly allows for others to make their own interpretation of the work as possibly being art, and interestingly in another case where Knoxville talks about early pranks his father played, inspiring his career he describes him as 'always performing like that' (Marchese, 2018) so there is a clear notion of these stunts/pranks even off-camera being a form of performance. On the subject Robert W. Sweeny states that "Knoxville clearly sees himself as something other than a performance artist, though he leaves open the possibility for Jackass as performance art" (Sweeny, 2015, p.140), while Eric Kohn in an interview with Knoxville comes to a similar point, saying "Even if he's disinterested in the complex sociological impulses at the core of his work, he's been forced to contemplate them as a result of his success." (Kohn, 2022 n.p). In reality, the form of art Jackass explores is somewhere in between the two sides of the coin, going between both art and pure comedy it "can be seen to inhabit a cultural space somewhere between the comically

painful “Three Stooges” and the serious performances of Chris Burden . . . who shot himself as part of an art piece” (Shanken, 2007 p.51)



(fig 8.) *‘Shoot’* Chris Burden (1971) ,
(fig 9.) *‘Riot Control Test’* Jackass Number Two (2006)

Some would argue against this interpretation with a distinction between art as performance, versus the cast of Jackass who, by genre, are viewed as non- actors in a reality setting. However I feel such readings undermine the performative aspect of ‘playing reality’. As Gauntlett writes on Judith Butler, “Butler reminds us that we do not face a choice of whether to give a performance, because identity is a performance already – it’s always a performance” (Gauntlett, 2008, pg 152). In the same way Knoxville can see his father as a ‘performer’ we can recognize the male identities presented within Jackass being performances of their own.

Whether Jackass falls into the category of Burlesque or performance art is debatable, and depends on how we view a creator's *intention*, over the viewer's *interpretation*. However the connection between the two is absolutely crucial in our understanding of how the franchise expresses masculinity. Performance is clearly something considered by its cast, thus showing a distinct knowledge that there is a persona created for the camera. When considering the question of Jackass’s portrayal of masculinity, this distinction proves an evident case for the masculinity displayed being a clear parody of itself. If we see Camp as a way “to impose something on an original” (Degen, 1987, p.91) Then this comedic performance is imposing itself onto the preconceived ideas of masculinity. This imposing of parody onto gender is critical for labelling the work as Camp.

John Waters & Rip Taylor

Although this essay has so far outlined how the general stunts, pranks and performances of the Jackass movies can be labelled as Camp, there is another element which provides an even more conclusive tie to Camp in the guest stars of John Waters and Rip Taylor.

John Waters is a cult filmmaker known widely for his provocative and often controversial films and writing, a "master of the disgusting; his films deal in the shocking, the unclean, the appalling." (Phillips, 2022, n.p) matching the outlined 'awful' denotations of camp Extending further than his own work, Water's opinions on taste, overlaps perfectly with Sontag's own writings, Waters declares:

> "To me, bad taste is what entertainment is all about. If someone vomits watching one of my films, it's like getting a standing ovation. But one must remember that there is such a thing as good bad taste and bad bad taste . . . To understand bad taste one must have very good taste. Good bad taste can be creatively nauseating but must, at the same time, appeal to the especially twisted sense of humour" (Waters, 1995, p.2)

Sontag almost perfectly echoes this same sentiment, she maintains: "Camp asserts that good taste is not simply good taste; that there exists, indeed, a good taste of bad taste" (Sontag, 1964, p.32). It's clear that Waters' thoughts on taste in media align with the ideology of Camp, as well as his own work, and therefore his inclusion in the franchise is an important aspect to study. Waters' connection to Jackass begins with an appearance in *'Jackass Number Two' (2006)*, playing himself as a 'magician'.

(fig.10) *Jason Acuña, Patty Perez and John Waters in 'Jackass Number Two' (2006)*

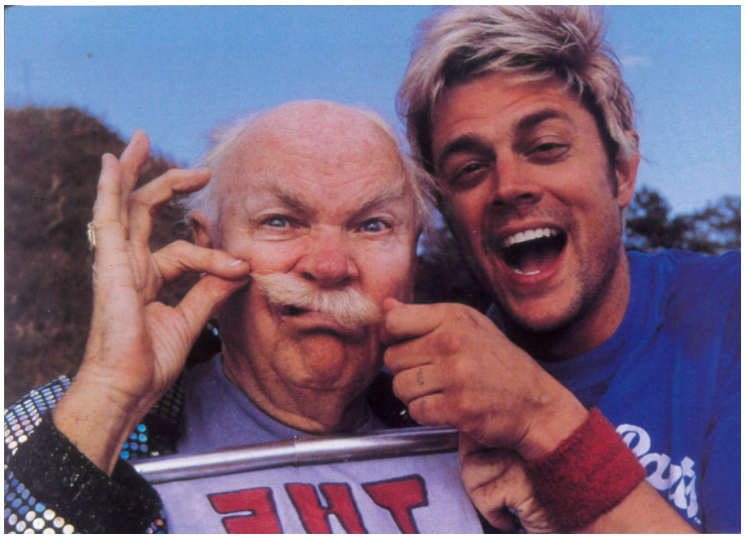
'The Magic Trick' stunt Waters takes part in has its own connections to the above mentioned burlesque sensibility; as pictured above Waters (right) makes Jackass co-star Jason 'Wee Man' Acuña (left) *'disappear'* With the help of 'Goddess Patty' Patty Perez (centre). This involves a playful flick of a wand as she jumps on top of Acuña smothering him completely. Although it uses bodily performance the scene never feels targeted towards either of its stars, and the humour arises rather from the over-the-top absurdity. This absurdity is again created and aided by the staging of the scene, the cartoonish magician outfit and wand, and the red slippers worn by Acuña being a nod to *'The Wizard of Oz'* (Itself often cited as a Camp classic) . It has all the artificial elements, and humour of Camp media, but roams in this terrain with complete sincerity. It considers an appreciation of his work, and his taste, showing how Waters and the cast of Jackass clearly reflect each other's sensibilities, one which undoubtedly would fall under what we have denoted as Camp. As Waters states:

> "Johnny's (Knoxville) bad taste is never vulgar and always witty," Waters said. "He's doing the same kind of stuff I was doing. I always said to Johnny that if he had been around for 'Pink Flamingos,' I would've had him eat shit instead of Divine." (Phillips, 2022, n.p).

The inclusion of Waters is also extremely important for our reading of Jackass's relationship to the 'Pure Camp' definition. It is distinctly not an example of 'camping' that is, not used as an attempt to create a false sense of Camp aesthetics.

Waters is addressed simply as a guest star, and takes part whole-heartedly in the scene without affecting the sketch's approach or demeanour. Water's is markedly underplayed in his importance, and is clearly part of the film as a mark of respect for the Jackass team rather than any other motive.

Rip Taylor is another noteworthy inclusion into the Jackass filmography, and quite an obvious tie into Camp considering his title as the 'King of Camp and confetti'. He features in the first three Jackass films, each time ending the film's finale with his signature blast of confetti and loud exuberant personality. Similarly to Waters he appears simply as himself, not seemingly a token example of trying to shoehorn in some Camp sensibility



(fig.11) *Rip Taylor and Johnny Knoxville on the set of 'Jackass: the movie'*

As discussed above the context of their feature is what allows Jackass to remain 'Pure Camp'. Camping implies that the use of Camp-esque ideas/themes are chosen to *deliberately* frame the subject as being Camp. The use of Taylor doesn't fall into this category as their inclusion is not framed as a way of 'creating Campness' and instead they are sincerely featured as part of the film. Moreover the choice to feature these stars is especially interesting when you consider the main audience of Jackass, that being young, heterosexual men. These two stars Waters and Taylor are not seemingly the type of guest star that would bring mass appeal, or excite the assumed fanbase of the franchise. Sontag asserts that: "Camp taste is a kind of love, love for human nature. It relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward

intensities of ‘character’ (sontag, 1964 p.33). There is a genuine feeling of pure admiration for Waters and Taylor, both of whom are full of the intense ‘character’ Sontag denotes. It’s a clear choice from the Franchise to go against assumptions and proudly champion these Camp figureheads.

4). The Camp counter-argument.

The main argument against this essay suggests that Jackass’s display of masculinity falls under the label of toxic masculinity, and its staging as a parody doesn’t extend far enough to outweigh these traits. As discussed above ‘toxic masculinity’ can pertain to a wide range of behaviour, but the particular way in which Jackass could be seen to present a toxic element is ‘Reflexive Sadomasochism’ a topic Sean Braydon discusses. Sadomasochism comes from the combination of terms ‘sadism’ and ‘masochism’, denoting a pleasure coming from inflicting pain on both oneself and others. Citing Robinson, it describes how white men often ‘display their wounds as evidence of disempowerment, and find pleasure in exploitations of pain’(Robinson, 2000 Cited in Brayton 2007) and describes this effect as ‘assuming a victimised identity’(Brayton 2007). This concept denotes how various rituals surrounding pain are used as a way to push white masculinity into a constructed marginalised space. It pushes a very hegemonic ideal of a ‘certain indifference to the body’ which ‘manifests in a willingness for endurance.’ (Walsh, 2007). It’s a paradoxical combination of both proving one's lack of bodily concern, and yet attracting attention or sympathy from said self-inflicted action, “through ‘reflexive sadomasochism’ the white male subject is able to simultaneously express an aggressive and receptive identity”(Brayton 2007 p.57). While he makes these arguments Brayton also leaves the possibility open for the parodic nature of jackass to counteract this reading:

> “As a form of satire, Jackass represents both an affirmation and a disavowal of ‘heroic’ white masculinity. The ambiguous nature of parody provides us with multiple and conflicting depictions of white masculinity that are curiously underscored by an ironic homoeroticism and a working-class disruptiveness. (Brayton, 2007, p.58)

Fintan Walsh however is critical about the idea of Jackass's satirical view having enough strength to outweigh these arguments, and states very clearly his opinion of Jackass being non-Queer:

> "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". Rather, they excrete and ingest the abject in a mood of irreverence and nonchalance, attempting to deny its disturbance of 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 (Walsh, 2007, p.2)

However I would argue that there is an important distinction within the presentation of the franchise's masculinity that such theories overlook in their reading. While it displays a hyper-exaggerated display of boisterous, pain-ridden and traditionally masculine behaviour, it does so with a careful lack of toxicity, which common critique of the franchise seems to disregard. Knoxville speaks to the mis-understanding of the franchise's intentions saying:

> "It was a special group of guys, We loved each other. Some people who try to do what we did interpret it as macho or angry. They forget that there was a real sweetness to Jackass. We gave each other hell, but we cared about each other. I think people responded to that" (Marchese, 2018, n.p.)

It's clear that viewers who have engaged sincerely with the content were able to find this separation, as Rajendra Roy, the Celeste Bartos Chief Curator of Film states "Fans (many of them women) saw past the ridiculousness and embraced their unfettered and often emasculating brand of male bonding, which transmitted more affection and less toxicity than most bro-fests in popular media" (Roy , 2022, n.p.) Roy later makes a critical point about the franchise's 'need to dispel the self-seriousness of masculinity' and an allowance for the 'release of stress-energy in ways that don't (emotionally) hurt other people'(Roy, 2022). This is where the factor of satire/parody *does* play an importance into its interpretation. As classified above, Jackass's framing as 'Pure Camp' is a distinctly non-serious one. What Brayton has called its 'parodic nature' (which this essay argues as its 'Campness') 'may overwhelm typical white male victimhood'. He continues to state that Jackass 'expresses a legitimate concern of working class discontent and yet it also demonstrates an ambitious irreverence toward all social constructions of identity,

especially that of white heterosexual masculinity'. (Brayton 2007). Walsh, and other critics are wary to give this playfulness as much importance, which I feel is a lack of respect for how the Camp sensibility can have a transformative effect on a piece of media. "We do not condemn the things we view as camp; to condemn them would be to imply that they have a real - and probably a threatening - seriousness that would remove them from the realm of camp".
(Degen, 1987, p.89)

5). The relevance of reframing Jackass.

Readers of this essay may question the relevance of interrogating the Jackass franchise, or of it being labelled 'Camp'. Jackass is, in reality, a form of low-brow pop culture media; why does it matter how it depicts masculinity?

From examining the subject I argue that the study of mainstream media is extremely important in so far as its larger influence on society. Bell Hooks articulates this influence asserting that: "Whether we're talking about race or gender or class, popular culture is where the pedagogy is, it's where the learning is" (Hooks, 1997, p.2). It's known that the consumption of entertainment media is associated with our perceptions of the world around us, therein lies a 'direct link between representations and choices we make in our lives' (Hooks, 1997). As a hugely popular franchise, aimed for a malleable adolescent audience, the influence of its portrayal of masculinity has a huge impact on how gender performance can be explored within the general public opinion's discourse.

Judith Butler talks about this relationship between the display of gender identities and their knock-on influences: "To the extent that gender norms are reproduced, they are invoked and cited by bodily practices that also have the capacity to alter norms in the course of their citation" (Butler 2004). As Gauntlett points out, although Butler 'did not make direct reference to the mass media, it seems obvious that if there is to be a major proliferation of images in the public eye, then the media must play a central role.' (Gauntlett, 2008). It is undoubtedly an important distinction to mark Jackass as an example of Camp media: by re-framing it in the eyes of a viewer

it allows for the separation and contrast of Jackass with its problematic counterparts, and pushes a more subversive take on masculinity into the mainstream.

With this framing in mind, re-contextualizing the franchise allows for the series to gain a larger audience who would have initially dismissed it. Already in recent years there has been a resurgence of popularity for the series (part of what led to a 4th mainline sequel 11 years later) and with this newfound appreciation has come a more diverse audience. “Its accessibility has attracted hoards of queer and trans fans, who see themselves in the ridiculousness of the guys and appreciate the lack of rigid gendering of the content” (Thomson, 2022 n.p.) . This audience who may largely feel excluded from typical heterosexual & male-dominated circles can find a niche where they feel comfortable to enjoy the boisterous behaviour in a non-toxic framework. During an interview with Thomson respondent ‘JB’ states “Something about it feels safe. Through the chaos and sheer masochism, there’s just so much love and openness that shines through,” (Thomson, 2022, n.p.). Another interviewee ‘Izzy’ reflects this sentiment:

> “I love that they can make fun of and totally deconstruct their masculinity with each other and embrace their love for each other without fear of seeming gay. Kind of makes it seem like their lack of care toward that narrative means there’s less homophobia, at least being expressed externally. . . .“I think it feels ‘safe’ in that way to watch because everything is all in good fun without putting women and queer people down which you often saw in media, especially back then.” (Thomson, 2022, n.p)

It’s clear even in this small sample that there is a palpable influence from the more positive, inviting, empathetic performances of masculinity within the franchise.

Finally, there is an importance in expanding the meaning of Camp, and exploring a diverse arrange of media to help distinguish its labelling. Andrew Bolton, curator of the Met’s Costume Institute expressed his opinions on the state of Camp in 2019, where the Sontag-based theme ‘Camp: Notes on Fashion’ was chosen. Bolton believed Camp had ‘gained such currency it has become invisible’ with part of his goal of the theme being to ‘make it visible again’ (Grady, 2019). Author Pamela Wojcik speaks similarly to the lack of male depictions of Camp in mainstream media ‘masculine camp seems to be much rarer at events than feminine and queer camp . . .

it's unusual to see anyone intentionally creating masculine camp'(Grady, 2019 n.p). These sentiments speak to the recent over-simplifying of 'Campness' as a commodifiable, distinct, one-note aesthetic. In challenging the preconceived ideas of what Camp is with a more unexpected subject such as Jackass, it can form a connection back to its original conception as a more nuanced and enigmatic concept, free to contain a larger variety of media than what is typically expressed in mainstream readings of the label.

Conclusion

Jackass is both complicated and contradictingly simple. On its surface it revels in low-brow, childish, hyper-masculine humour and sensibilities. However, in the sincerity at which it plays into its uniquely eccentric, exaggeratedly glamourous stunts, and the sincere inclusion of queer artists it flips its own preconceptions, and reveals a much more transgressive and interesting piece of media. Not only is its presentation of masculinity surprisingly non-toxic, it also exceeds a novelty factor and falls proudly into the realm of 'Pure Camp'. While it can easy with the many simplified understandings of what Camp is, to have overlooked Jackass, but take a closer look and really take it in, as Sontag says "The connoisseur of Camp sniffs the stink and prides himself on his strong nerves"(Sontag, 1964, p.28) if that doesn't sound like Jackass I don't know what does.

- Bibliography -

Brayton, S. (2007) *MTV's Jackass: Transgression, Abjection and the Economy of White Masculinity.* Journal of Gender Studies, Volume 16, - Issue 1, P. 57-72 Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09589230601116190

Butler, J. (2004) *Undoing Gender.* Oxfordshire: Routledge.

Cliver, S. (2002) *Jackass the movie: The official companion book.* New York : Pocket Books : MTV Books

Connell, R.W. and Messerschmidt, J. (2005) *Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept.* Gender and Society, Vol. 19, No. 6' pp. 829-859. New York: Sage Publications, Inc.

Degen, J. A . (1987) *Camp and Burlesque : A Study in Contrasts.* 'Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism' Vol. I, No. 2 Available at: https://journals.ku.edu/jdtc/article/view/1655

Donaldson, M. (1993) *What Is Hegemonic Masculinity?.* Theory and Society Vol. 22, No. 5, Special Issue: Masculinities p. 643-657. New York: Springer.

Earp, J. (2021) *'Jackass' Has Always Been Deeply, Deeply Queer.* Junkee, Available at: https://junkee.com/jackass-forever-queer/303129. [Last accessed 18/01/2023]

Gauntlett, D. (2008) *Media, Gender and Identity.* 2nd ed. Oxfordshire: Routledge.

Grady, C. (2019) *Camp, the theme of this year's Met Gala, is almost impossible to define. Here's our best effort.* Vox, Available at: https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/5/3/18514408/what-is-camp-explained-met-gala-susan-sontag. [accessed 18/01/2023]

Grady, C. (2019) *"At this year's Met Gala, the theme was camp. To everyone involved, that meant pink."* 'Vox' Available at: https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/5/8/18535428/met-gala-what-is-camp-pink [accessed 18/01/2023]

Hooks, B. (1997) "*Cultural criticism and transformation"* Transcript, Media Education Foundation. Available at: https://www.mediaed.org/transcripts/Bell-Hooks-Transcript.pdf [accessed 29/01/2023]

IMDB (2006) *Jackass Number Two (2006) - Trivia*. IMDB Trivia, Available at: https://m.imdb.com/title/tt0493430/trivia/?ref_=tt_trv_trv [accessed 26/01/2023]

Kohn, E. (2022) *'Jackass Forever': Johnny Knoxville on the $10 Million Stunt They Couldn't Pull Off and Survival of His Slapstick Art.* Indiewire, Available at: *https://www.indiewire.com/2022/02/johnny-knoxville-interview-jackass-forever-1234696305/.* [accessed 18/01/2023]

Lindgren, S. (2009) *In the Laboratory of Masculinity: Renegotiating Gender Subjectivities in MTV's Jackass.* Critical Studies in Media Communication , 26(5), p. 393-410.

Marchese, D. (2018) *In Conversation: Johnny Knoxville.* Vulture, Available at: *https://www.vulture.com/2018/05/johnny-knoxville-in-conversation.html#comments* [accessed 19/01/2023]

McEntee, B. Cronin, C. (2019) *It's Time to Acknowledge 'Straight Camp': The Hetero Flamboyance We Love but Do Not Name.* Observer, Available at: *https://observer.com/2019/04/defining-straight-camp-susan-sontag-met-gala-theme/?fbclid=IwAR3hjrAA5QNYWV8yemX5mPsN3VwuT_7jrgeg8slDR_AWUIARbxR5aOLq-yw.* [accessed 18/01/2023]

Meyer, M (1994) *"Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp" '*The Politics and Poetics of Camp edited by Moe Meyer', London and New York: Routledge.

Meyer, M (2010) *An Archaeology of Posing: essays on camp, drag, and sexuality.* Madison: Macater Press.

McIntosh, J. (2016) *What Is Toxic Masculinity? '*Pop Culture Detective', Youtube, Available at: https://youtu.be/Gha3kEECqUk [accessed 18/01/2023]

Morton, T. (2010) *Queer Ecology*. Modern Language Association Vol. 125, No. 2, p. 273-282. JSTOR [online] Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/25704424 [accessed 12/01/2023]

Pearson, E. (2019) *Extremism and toxic masculinity: the man question re-posed.* International Affairs, Vol 95, Issue 6, P. 1251–1270. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz177 [accessed 25/01/2023]

Phillips, V (2022) *Waters, Knoxville, and the Beauty of Queer Filth.* FilmDaze Available at: https://filmdaze.net/waters-knoxville-and-the-beauty-of-queer-filth/. [accessed 18/01/2023]

Roy, R. (2022) *Jackass Forever: One Last(?) Kick in the Nuts.* MoMA, Available at: https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/823 [accessed 28/01/2023]

Sahni, I. (2013) *More than Horseplay: "Jackass", Performativity, and the MoMA.* Studies in Popular Culture , Vol. 35, No. 2 , pp. 69-94. Popular Culture Association in the South, JSTOR [online] Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/23416336 [accessed 26/01/2023]

Sculos, B.W (2017) *Who's Afraid of 'Toxic Masculinity'?.* Class, Race and Corporate Power, Vol 5, Issue 3, U.S Labor and Social Justice'. Available at: http://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatepower/vol5/iss3/6

Smith, E.W. (2019) *Ahead Of The Met Gala, Remember: You Can't Have Camp Without Queer.* Refinery29, Available at: https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2019/05/231016/camp-fashion-gay-culture-drag-lgbtq-history. [accessed 17/01/2023]

Sontag, S. (1964) *Notes on Camp.* London: Penguin Classics

Sweeny, R.W (2015) *This Performance Art is for the Birds:" Jackass, 'Extreme' Sports, and the De(con)struction of Gender.* Studies in Art Education A Journal of Issues and Research, 49(2), p.136-146, Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/00393541.2008.11518731 [accessed 29/01/2023]

Shanken, A. (2007) *The Sublime "Jackass": Transgression and Play in the Inner Suburbs.* Places Journal, 19(3). Available at: https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8j1338k4

Thomson, J. *(2022) How queer folks embraced the positive masculinity of Jackass.* Xtra Magazine, Available at: *https://xtramagazine.com/culture/jackass-queer-positive-masculinity-218348* . [Last accessed 18/01/2023]

Walsh, F. (2007) *The erotics and politics of masochistic self-abjection in Jackass.* Gender Forum, issue 18, Birkbeck University.

Waters, J. (1995) *"Shock Value: A Tasteful Book about Bad Taste "* New York: Avalon Group

- Images -

(Fig. 1) Uncredited (2002) *'Jackass: the movie'* Available at: https://www.radiotimes.com/movie-guide/b-pm1wdc/jackass-the-movie/

[Last accessed 15/01/2023]

(Fig. 2-4) d0105950 (2013) '*Jackass 2 big red rocket'* Screenshot accessed from Youtube, Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qRjb9cr7tIU
[Last accessed 17/01/2023]

(fig.5) Paramount Pictures (2010) 'Untitled' Available at: https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2010/10/the-stars-of-jackass-3d-talk-about-god-cancer-and-homosexuality
[Last accessed 15/01/2023]

(Fig 6.) Paramount Pictures Nederland (2022) '*Jackass Forever | New Year New Crew featurette'* Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6aPEAO8quaQ
[Last accessed 26/01/2023]

(Fig 8.) Paramount Pictures (2022) *'untitled'* Available at: https://www.cinemablend.com/movies/jackass-forever-hit-me-hard-in-the-feels-let-me-explain-why
[Last accessed 26/01/2023]

(Fig 8.) Burden, Chris (1971) 'Shoot' Available at: https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/chris-burden-shoot
[Last accessed 21/01/2023]

(Fig 9.) Uncredited (2006) *'Riot Control Test'* Available at: https://m.imdb.com/title/tt0493430/mediaviewer/rm2606667776/
[Last accessed 20/01/2023]

(Fig 10.) Uncredited (2006) *'The Magic Trick'* Available at: https://m.imdb.com/title/tt0493430/mediaviewer/rm2472450048/ [Last accessed 18/01/2023]

(fig.11) Ben Kaller (2002) *untitled.* Jackass the movie: The official companion book (Scan). New York: MTV Books & Pocket Books.