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The Sublime “Jackass”: Transgression and Play in the Inner Suburbs

Andrew M. Shanken

A fire hose dangles from a massive crane that sits like a monumental mechanical giraffe in a desolate, parched landscape. A man clings to the hose, which is turned on full blast, causing its force to whip him around like a fly on a string. As the hose snaps back and forth, the camera pulls back and pans the horizon, highlighting the puniness of the man’s body amid endless brown hills. The glimpse reveals recent bulldozer tracks, and the raggedy body (out of which we hear screams) seems to mirror this dramatically denuded land. All the while the crew behind the camera laughs. The devastation of it all is brought home when the viewer realizes the crane and water hose may be a contraption assembled precisely to wash these hills away.

This scene is one segment from the show “Jackass,” an MTV production carried around the world and made into two feature-length films (2002 and 2006), in which a group of young men perform short stunts, some just seconds in duration. Many are simple, involving a skateboard, a stretch of concrete, and random props drawn from the environment. The perverse fascination of “Jackass” comes, in part, from the way it layers social, bodily and geographical transgression with elements of performance art, classic forms of physical humor, and modes of play common to the post-World War II suburbs. That the producers tumble together a volatile mixture of conventional comedic tropes, familiar categories of aesthetic experience, and “generation x” sensibility misses the point. “Jackass” roams this terrain with unconscious delight.

For all of its staging, the essential facts of “Jackass” couldn’t be simpler: adolescent male group experimentation, a video camera, and an audience. And yet, none of it would be

possible without the spaces that foster their play. Even though some of the scenes take place in cities, the show’s creative crucible is the suburb—and in particular, its apotheosis in postwar California. Here, sun, expansive subdivisions, light-industrial and business parks, and ambiguously bounded spaces have produced some of America’s finest athletes and delinquents. But “Jackass” speaks to a more generic geography, as well, one where the suburb uneasily abuts the commercial and industrial, or leaches out to a nonurban frontier. These spaces are “sublime” in multiple ways that contributed to a specific postwar culture of play that, in turn, produced “Jackass.”

A Space for Jackasses

This generic topos, the ill-defined realm between city and country, helps explain the easy way “Jackass” taps into the cultural potential of the suburbs. Depending on context and period, these indeterminate areas have been variously defined as exurban, edge city, and sprawl. As early as 1955, A.C. Spector’s *The Exurbanites* drew attention to villages on the fringes of cities that were being claimed as places of escape by urban elites.¹ But with postwar prosperity and national investment in highways, areas like Long Island’s Garden City slowly filled with subdivisions and commercial developments.

In 1991, the journalist Joel Garreau coined the term “edge city” to describe more recent developments around suburban highway interchanges, where malls, business parks, subdivisions, and in some cases, entire “crystal cities” have sprung up to take advantage of cheap land and changes in telecommunications and regional traffic flow.² Tysons Corner, Virginia, a mere village a couple of decades ago,

is now an immense aggregation of commercial areas and office buildings. But it remains unincorporated, its political structure mirroring its indeterminate morphology.

Many suburban and exurban areas, edge cities, and areas of sprawl share this ambiguity of governance and physical boundary. That they also share an abundance of neglected and remaindered spaces makes them attractive places for adolescent play.

This enormous ring of ordinary environments dwarfs the conventional centralized city. Its scale alone resists easy comprehension, and its spatial indeterminacy intensifies the effect of encountering the un beholdable. Part of this ambiguity is socioeconomic: the same forces that created sprawl—laissez-faire development—apply to its management and oversight. We have a bloating belt of lawlessness in the unmonitored areas outside our cities. Much of “Jackass” takes place in these areas—in parking lots, alleys, and fragments in and between suburbs—exploiting their openness, both practically and aesthetically.

“Jackass” as a Form of Culture

The epic opening shot to the first *Jackass* film plays on this landscape. We see the Jackasses loaded into a Brobdingnagian shopping cart as it hurtles down a stretch of asphalt. Eight men hold on desperately as explosions threaten, until the cart finally crashes into a vegetable stand, sending them into the air.

Here in condensed form are all the elements of the more modestly financed television show: the felicitous use of ordinary props (the shopping cart), speed, the chance of injury, an ambiguous and seemingly empty landscape, and the violent camaraderie of daredevils egging one another on. The aesthetic is one of young male

bodies unleashed in space, breaking social and corporeal boundaries.³ The Jackasses, however, are filled with a light-hearted irony, which rescues the show from the puerile hazing and homophobia (often played out as homo-eroticism) that also characterize it. On the surface, the segments seem to filter fraternity stunts through extreme sports. The Jackasses watch as a skateboarder traverses impossible terrain to an inevitable, painful “wipeout.” Or they stuff one of their fellows into a section of plastic culvert tubing and roll him down a hill; as he spills out, woozy and bruised, they stand by, laughing.

At first, the myriad ways in which “Jackass” uses pain, corporal transgression, and public humiliation recall the vogue in the last generation or so for body modification or mutilation. It might also suggest ties to a more fluid sense of the body—allowing its use as a vehicle for entertainment, even via potentially harmful behavior, to seem more normative. Indeed, forty years after the rise of performance art, and especially the more extreme forms of it, “Jackass” seems quite tame, extending traditions of humor to a new milieu.

On reflection, the show 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 in 1971 as part of an art piece.⁴ Larry, Moe and Curly performed gags that were choreographed and conventionalized, but could still be quite painful. Likewise, the Jackasses violently wax off body hair, kick one another in the testicles, pole vault into palm trees, and throw themselves into ceiling fans and cacti. But “Jackass” is never as serious or disturbing as Burden’s work—nor as conceptually scripted.



The show does, however, draw on the perverse appeal of disgust, pain, risk, humiliation, and other forms of transgression. This list, as much “classical” as “sublime,” has obvious ties to slapstick or Vaudeville, but implies, in its broadest sense, an ancient spectacle. “Jackass” carries on the physical humor of Charlie Chaplin in an aesthetic mode of decadence. But such a Roman summation is too neat. Decadence is a form of exhaustion, or a harbinger of it, an expression of power with nothing better to do. Such self-involvement requires an essentially anti-social stance. “Jackass” uses anti-social posturing to achieve something intrinsically social.

Just as the medieval jester mocked the high seriousness of the king, his floppy cap the foil to the crown, so “Jackass” poses as the self-conscious jester for the court of the suburb. While these affable outcasts on skateboards and other improbable vehicles are there to entertain, their stunts also reveal the disturbing qualities of this environment, and their Puck-like gestures subvert its notions of order. Yet they do so with such harmless good cheer that their terrible honesty holds the court together.

The way the audience watches

“Jackass” reveals another level of sociability. The show seems to grasp unconsciously that a generation or more of television viewers now treat the erstwhile culprit of anti-social behavior (the television itself) as a catalyst for building community. People are no longer alone together when they watch TV: they talk throughout their shows; review the last episode while at work; and visit on-line chat groups devoted to their shared interest. “Jackass” was among a vanguard of shows that present a knowing product to this new generation of viewers, one that grew up in the spaces in which Jackass is performed. The television, the suburb, and the court in which the Jackasses play are parts of the same kingless realm.

The very confusion over what to call the Jackasses goes right to the cultural ambiguity of the show. They are not actors in the conventional sense. Nor are they performers in the sense of buskers or break-dancers. As an alternative, performance artist is too pretentious, athlete or stuntman too generous, and “reality TV” partici-

Above: Opening shot of the first *Jackass* film. Image courtesy of Paramount Pictures and MTV Films.



pant too passive. Instead, the merry band of pranksters has let us into their “living room.”

This is not a staged pseudo-event, polished with oleaginous promotional techniques, starring hand-picked opportunists intent on turning their fifteen minutes of fame into a career. “Jackass” appears to present just a bunch of guys willing to try pretty much anything.⁵ While the show does place “real people” in front of the camera, it does so in a way that feels more like a home movie. This sense of overgrown kids shooting footage of their delinquent fun also seemingly grew out of the trouble the unsupervised areas of the suburbs invite. In short, the Jackasses are a product of their spaces, and the same confusion about what to call them extends to the areas in which they act.

Sublime Play, Sublime Landscape

The show occasionally hits deeper chords of misery. In one segment, two Jackasses pack themselves into what looks like a wheelbarrow on four wheels. A third pushes them down a

hill, as in a bobsled race, until they hit a short, rickety ramp, and they are thrown, legs and arms akimbo, concussively on their rear ends. One Jackass writhes in agony. “Oh, dude! My...tailbone is seriously broken! I’m not even kidding!” His friends laugh hysterically. One quips: “That’s all right, we don’t have tails anymore, what’s the point of having one?”

Schadenfreude like this is central to the show. But so is the setting: a desolate stretch of road where they can test the limits of flesh, bone, and nerve. Moreover, the segments are almost always filmed by mirth-filled cohorts, who in turn are watched by the television audience. The layering of audiences, a technique used more explicitly in “Beavis and Butthead” and “Mystery Science Theater,” creates just enough distance so the viewer, safely ensconced and armed with a channel changer, can experience “comfort tinged with terror,” Edmund Burke’s pithy definition of the sublime.

Minor torture, extreme stunts, and body mutilation are not, in and of themselves, sublime. But in this filmic state—photogenic, streaked with humor, 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. Beauty, as he understood it, is a thing of perfection. Orderly, symmetrical and smooth, it creates the sense of repose exemplified in Classical art. The sublime, by contrast, is terrible, the province of pitiless nature. Avalanches, hurricanes, and mountains that soar beyond imagination are sublime.

Gothic novels emerged out of a sensibility for the sublime at the turn of the eighteenth century, and horror films continue the tradition today. They titillate with the terrible. Anything we cannot bear to watch, but watch in spite of ourselves, is sublime. “Jackass” plays into this aesthetic. Much of its appeal derives from anticipation; thus, the camera watches the actor prepare for the stunt, flitting uneasily between the Jackass *du jour* and his devilish friends. This is not quite the tension of a horror film. In place of the high polish and artifice of, say, *Friday the 13th*, there is a rougher verism. Nevertheless, the substitution of audience for “actor” is seamless, and without effort, we suspend disbelief and insert ourselves into the piece.

The show repeatedly sets up extreme encounters between body and nature or built environment. A similar improvisational aesthetic drove the early freestyle skateboard-

Above and opposite: Filtering fraternity stunts through extreme sports—antisocial posturing to achieve something intrinsically social. Images courtesy of Paramount Pictures and MTV Films.



ers in Southern California, who transposed the thrill of surfing to the basins of empty swimming pools—a mid-1970s cultural efflorescence beautifully described in the documentary *Dogtown and Z-Boys* (2002). Like the surfers and skateboarders who gave some initial impetus to this sort of play, the Jackasses often choose expansive, empty spaces in which to perform their tricks. Self-consciously they also draw attention to the relationship between the fragility of their bodies and the danger of these spaces. While few scenes approach the sublimity of a colossal wave crashing as surfers narrowly miss the pilings of the abandoned Pacific Ocean Park Pier (a Z-Boys favorite surfing spot near Venice Beach), the territory of “Jackass” evokes terror in other ways, as with the figure of a Jackass attached to a fire hose thrashing about in a bulldozed wasteland.

“What they do on that show, over and over,” wrote Ocean Howell, an urban historian and retired professional skateboarder, “is fling themselves onto the escarpment, run out in front of the avalanche, get buried in it, then poke their heads out of the top, smiling and maybe bleeding a little, too.”⁶ Their avalanche is not the ocean or the glacial edge, but the untamed concrete edge where nature

and the built environment collide.

“Jackass” exploits this complicated “stage,” one that gives texture to the American suburb, using the unsettling quality of home video. Freud called this effect *Unheimliche*: literally, “unhomely,” but it has been translated, with some loss of meaning, as “uncanny,” or “eerie.”⁷ Even as video recorders become ubiquitous, the shaky hand-held camera image still sets up an expectation of nostalgic or wholesome home videos. “Jackass” ruptures this illusion through its content, but not without first inviting us into the comfort of the “home.”

Its stunts are also often performed in the sorts of interstitial places that polite society avoids—but that its kids cannot get enough of. These are places where order is threatened, where adolescents go to reject the world view of their parents. In addition to broad, empty suburban streets, this territory includes gritty areas where the sprawl of unplanned development has left swathes of disordered fabric to be neglected like the city before it.

Such left-behind spaces form not only a convenient site for stunts, but a critical landscape in which the stunts gather poignancy for being rooted in place: the transgression hits right where physical and social boundar-

ies are weakest. Where are your kids? They are “lost” between the mall and the subdivision with a culvert and skateboard. It is a place where cars are scarce, where police do not patrol, where parental eyes and ears are missing. And the kids are having fun, the sort of fun parents don’t want to know about.

In particular, this world of “Jackass” reveals the suburban street as being as potentially interstitial and dangerous as any other space. With households including only working adults, and garage-forward housing ensuring the privacy of the domestic realm, many such streets were never intended as places to play. But like cities, where streets became de facto play spaces, intentions hardly matter. Several postwar generations have taken to these spaces, using the materials at hand: random pieces of wood, rocks, cinderblocks, bicycles, skateboards, and mind-altering substances. “Jackass” grew out of the cultural geography of the postwar suburb. It speaks of unmonitored spaces; the cheap, handheld video camera; the liberalizing cultural revolution of the 1960s; and feminism in the 1970s, which sent women back to school and work, and their children into an unsupervised world of play.



The Inner Suburb

The success of “Jackass” hinges on its ability to render the lustful joy with which several generations have imposed their own ludic structure on these in-between spaces. In this sense, the show calls out the need to develop new names for suburban places, names that extend beyond the limitations of “exurb” and “edge city.” The first of these terms implies a condition of transportation and employment and a desire to surpass the suburb on an axis of work and domesticity. The second gets at an unsettling sense of dissolution, a devolution into incoherence. But as the city has lost its gravitational pull, the suburb’s once neat orbit is increasingly one that traverses cold, forbidding, ungridded deep-space.

Dolores Hayden has noted the rush since the 1980s to invent new terms for the ring of development around the “sitcom suburbs” of the postwar era: “outer city, shock suburb, outtown, edge city, boomsuburb, and exopolis.”⁸ I propose “inner suburb” to get at the combination of forsaken ground, dislocation, and the lawless mentality these spaces evoke. “Inner suburb” acknowledges the latchkey underbelly, but also describes a new geographic imaginary, one based on chaos, fragments, detritus, neglect—the polar opposite of most associations about suburbs.

“Inner suburb” clearly does not designate a literal geography. Rather, it attempts to link historically with other neglected geographies—like the inner city, which is similarly nongeographical. And it grapples with this geography aesthetically, something that art and architectural historians tend to neglect—Robert Breughmann and Hayden excepted. It is an agoraphile’s aesthetic of movement, play and danger.

The inner suburb is not any one, definable phenomenon, and not all suburbs behave like the ones in which “Jackass” takes place. The term calls on a cultural geography of abandonment and savage play, intended, in Johan Huizinga’s sense, to convey an activity in which social boundaries are tested and set.⁹ Huizinga argued for an understanding of play as an amoral social function through which people negotiate ever-changing limits of behavior and culture. The inner suburb is such a place for postwar America—a place where social order breaks down, where rules can be tested. We have all heard of places where police will not go, or where they simply cannot impose order because of the vastness and marginality of the spaces. Such areas allow new rules to be tested, new boundaries to be drawn, new social contracts to be drafted. The seemingly fallow ground of the inner suburbs has

been bearing new cultural products for some time. “Jackass” was among the first to package that product to the consumers (also, perhaps, the producers) of those spaces.

Part of the power of the inner suburb derives from its scale, or more properly, its scalelessness—which brings back Edmund Burke’s notion of the sublime. These environments approach the sublime by suggesting capitalism’s infinitude, its unchecked reach, both environmentally and socially.

As an aesthetic category, the sublime first emerged during the eighteenth century, a time when industrial capitalism was beginning to transform Europe’s medieval patterns of settlement. Burke looked to nature as the source of the sublime, but Europe’s burgeoning cities and industrial landscapes fit his definition just as well. Nature does not own the sublime; culture too can create sublime effects. And soon architects like Claude-Nicolas Ledoux would reach for what the architectural historian Anthony Vidler has called the “public sublime,” in buildings and urban spaces.¹⁰ But what Ledoux had done willfully, sprawl has achieved haphazardly, creating a popular sublime of highways, unfathomably large malls and subdivisions, and the equally inapprehensible fragments in between.



One response to the popular sublime of the inner suburb has been to ignore it. One can still connect the dots from subdivision to mall to highway, creating a conceptual order through attention to the speedometer and traffic light—if not through the television and reruns of suburban dramas such as “The Brady Bunch.”

Or, one can create codes of conduct in keeping with the sublime. The subaltern of the suburbs—the teenager—takes this tack, making an aesthetic performance of these spaces. “Jackass” revels in this performance, making mass entertainment of the personal performance cultivated by and for the sublime environments in which it grew up.

Spaces of and for Adolescence

In the end, then, “Jackass” is a parable about adolescence. The spaces of American sprawl offer a place exactly suited to the moment between the parentally ordered world of childhood and the self-control of a mature super ego.

These spaces, too, are in their “adolescence”—to use a term too often thrown around as a metaphor for anything in that awkward stage between birth and maturity. If the city can be understood as aged, an emblem of what some economists call the mature economy (and some of

the older suburbs likewise have succumbed to a level of urbanization and economic maturity), then the energetic development of subdivisions and commercial strips that lie on the fringes of both provide the bumptious, boisterous, awkward, and unpredictable spatial analogue to the teenager.

What will these spaces be when they grow up? That depends on how Americans choose to shape them. In an age that has tidily dispensed with modernist faith in built space as an agent of social reform, “Jackass” reminds us how powerful the built environment is in shaping society.

Notes

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1. A.C. Spector, *The Exurbanites* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1955).
2. Joel Garreau, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).
3. “Jackass” did not invent this form of play. I played with shopping carts in the parking lots of suburban Phoenix in the early 1980s.
4. In one episode, one of the Jackasses does submit

himself at close range to a barrage of “bullets” from a paint gun. While these guns are generally harmless, part of a mock war game, their output is extremely painful when fired directly at someone, as this segment demonstrated.

5. Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961).
6. Ocean Howell, from an e-mail to the author (Feb. 13, 2007).
7. Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny” [“Das Unheimliche”] (1919), from *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, v. XVII, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1955), pp. 217–56.
8. Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820–2000* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), p. 16.
9. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1949).
10. Anthony Vidler, *Claude-Nicolas Ledoux: Architecture and Social Reform at the End of the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990).

Above and opposite: Self-conscious jesters in the court of suburbia—Puck-like gestures that subvert notions of order. Images courtesy of Paramount Pictures and MTV Films.