



# 'I'm so glad you're fake!': Simulacra slapstick and the limits of the real

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## abstract

Drawing on Plato and Baudrillard's theories of the simulacrum, this paper will consider both traditional and 'simulacra' forms of slapstick humor, exploring how they help us reimagine the distinction between what is real and what is fake. Traditional humor theories generally view slapstick as funny because the audience understands that the performers are not actually in pain. Forms of simulacra slapstick, such as those seen in the film *Jackass 3D*, complicate this traditional view of slapstick comedy: in *Jackass 3D* the humorous appeal is not derived from a representation of fake pain and suffering, but from a celebration of real pain and suffering. I will argue that *Jackass 3D* does not, however, capture a more authentic, real, form of slapstick comedy, but creates a sense of the real by means of enhanced images produced by cinematic techniques like 3D technology and high-definition film resolution – in other words, a form of slapstick that functions as its own simulacrum, as an image without any relation to reality or a referent. Ultimately, this paper suggests that simulacra slapstick exemplifies 'breaking point' moments where binary systems are short-circuited and social life is shown to be transformable.

This show features stunts performed by professionals and/or total idiots. In either case, MTV suggests that neither you or [sic] any of your dumb little buddies attempt the dangerous crap in this show. (Jackass, 2000)

## Introduction

This paper draws on a range of sources – rhetorical theory, social theory, philosophy, and literature on humor in organizations – to explore the possibility that we have a lot to learn from frivolity. I argue that *simulacra slapstick* – a form

of slapstick comedy that upsets the stable distinction between the real and the fake that Western philosophy (and its subsidiary disciplines) is founded upon – recalls pre-modern Rabelaisian, carnivalesque images that '[n]o dogma, no authoritarianism, no narrow minded seriousness can coexist with' (Bakhtin, 2009: 3). Simulacra slapstick resists confinement within the stable categories of real and fake and ultimately reveals that 'the real is no longer possible' in the era of the hyperreal (Baudrillard, 1994: 19). A sense of the real is something that we still desire: 'We require a visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth of origin, which reassures us about our end' (1994: 10). But this sense is now only possible when we create it ourselves.

I seek to explore how the simulacra slapstick of *Jackass 3D* exemplifies 'breaking point' moments where binary systems are 'disrupted and challenged, where the coherence of categories are put into question' and where the 'social life' of institutions are shown to be inherently 'malleable and transformable' (Butler, 2004: 216). What proves most dangerous – yet also potentially productive – about the simulacra slapstick contained in *Jackass 3D* is not that cuts and scabs and bumps and bruises befall the actors. It is that simulacra slapstick functions as simulation that 'attacks the reality principle itself': 'Simulation is infinitely more dangerous [than the real] because it always leaves open to supposition that, above and beyond its object, *law and order themselves might be nothing but simulation*' (Baudrillard, 1994: 20; emphasis in original).

This approach is significant for organizational studies because it problematizes ongoing discussions of parody and satire, which rely on stable binary between the real and the fake. It has been duly noted by many (Kenney, 2009; Tyler and Cohen, 2007; Westwood and Rhodes, 2007; Rhodes and Westwood, 2008) that these critical forms of humor, beginning as a source of resistance for workers, can also become appropriated by management and commandeered into a sterile wasteland of corporate fun days and Hawaiian shirt Fridays. But what has not been as fully explored is that this boundary between resistance and appropriation is not something so easily taken for granted. Ultimately, this analysis causes us to re-think the politics of humor in more general and consequential terms.

## Slapstick humor

The longest-running scripted American television program, *The Simpsons*, features a recurring segment called 'The Itchy and Scratchy Show', a children's show-within-a-show that depicts the ultra-violent anthropomorphic exploits of

Itchy, a cartoon mouse, and Scratchy, a cartoon cat.<sup>1</sup> The plotline of 'Itchy and Scratchy' is unvarying: Itchy kills Scratchy. Always.<sup>2</sup> But this predictable outcome is remarkable because of the seemingly infinite ways in which Scratchy meets his gratuitously violent ends. An episode called 'Bang the Cat Slowly' begins with an innocent birthday party for Scratchy, but takes a dark turn when Itchy places a lit bomb into an empty box, uses Scratchy's tongue to wrap the box as a present and snaps the present into Scratchy's mouth like a rubber band. The bomb explodes, and Scratchy's head is blown into the air, where it drifts back down only to be impaled on the spiked end of his own party hat. In 'My Dinner With Itchy', Itchy serves Scratchy what appears to be a glass of wine. Scratchy drinks it, screams in pain and looks down to find that his body has been stripped to the skeleton from the neck down. Itchy shows Scratchy the wine label, a skull and crossbones embossed with the word 'ACID', and throws his own glass into Scratchy's face. His fur and flesh now completely burned off, Scratchy's disoriented skeleton runs screaming from the restaurant and into the street, where he is flattened by a passing trolley car. Predictable as the sunrise, Itchy kills Scratchy. Over and over and over and over again.

*The Simpsons*, however, is a situational comedy and, for all its gruesomeness, 'The Itchy and Scratchy Show' is a part of *The Simpsons* for a very pragmatic reason: it's funny. The more savagely poor Scratchy gets taken out, the harder we laugh. And even though it might initially seem sadistic to find great joy in such brutal depictions of violence (regardless of the make-believe, cartoon format of the depictions), those of us amused by such things cannot help ourselves: we laugh anyway. Traditionally, the discipline of humor theory would identify 'The Itchy and Scratchy Show' as an example – albeit it a rather extreme one – of slapstick comedy.

Slapstick is a physical form of comedy in which unruly actions are enacted upon a body in an excessive, ridiculous and sometimes violent manner. Because slapstick typically derives its response from an individual's misfortune, it is considered a form of comedy that dramatizes the *superiority theory* of humor. Morreall (1987: 5) defines the superiority theory succinctly: 'According to the

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1 Technically, 'The Itchy and Scratchy Show' is itself a segment of 'The Krusty the Clown Show', the favorite television program of the three Simpson children, making 'Itchy and Scratchy' a show-within-a-show-within-a-show.

2 The one exception was the episode 'Burning Down the Mouse', of which Lisa Simpson, remarked, 'This is the one where Scratchy finally gets Itchy'. However, the Simpson's television set gets unplugged in the middle of the episode and we, therefore, miss the one time Itchy gets his comeuppance. When the television set gets plugged back in, Krusty the Clown declares that the network will never allow that episode of 'Itchy and Scratchy' to be broadcast again.

Superiority Theory...we laugh from feelings of superiority over other people, or over our own former position'. Simply put, we feel better when someone else has it worse off than we do. The oldest of the primary three humor theories (alongside the relief theory and the incongruity theory), the superiority theory traces its roots back to Plato. Plato questioned the ethical and moral merits of laughter to varying degrees because he believed that certain types of laughter are 'always directed at someone as a kind of scorn', and he feared that the effects of laughter would lead the human soul away from its rational part and toward the part ruled by appetites and desires (cited in Morreall, 1987: 5).

Today, the superiority theory is seen as somewhat outdated in the circles of humor theory because we now accept that 'there is no essential connection between laughter and scorn', and '[t]he Superiority Theory turned out to be a classic case of a theory built on too few instances' (Morreall, 1987: 3). However, its domination of the philosophical tradition for over two thousand years has left an enduring legacy that is not universally accepted as positive. Morreall (1987: 4), for one, laments the negative impact that laughter's longstanding alignment with scorn has had on philosophy: 'The sloppy theorizing that created and sustained the Superiority Theory has troubled the whole history of thought on laughter and humor'. In other words, not only was laughter something traditionally taken as non-serious because of its jovial and whimsical effects but, when it was taken seriously, it often represented something spiteful in human nature to be treated with great caution and skepticism.

### The question of real and fake

The traditional argument for why the Western world has been laughing at slapstick for over two millennia has relied on a stable boundary that separates the real from the fake. Traceable back to Plato's sustained opposition between philosophy's original truth and sophistry's degraded copy of truth, questions of what is real and what is fake have long been a foundational concern to rhetoric and philosophy. In the *Sophist*, Plato defines two different kinds of image-making, 'the art of making likenesses, and [...] the art of making appearances' (1993: 264c). Both the philosopher and the sophist create a resemblance of knowledge, though the former's resemblance is always oriented toward truth, while the latter's is oriented toward persuasion. Therefore, the sophist's 'art is illusory' because the sophist 'deceives us with an illusion' and, as a result, 'our soul is led by his art to think falsely' (1993: 263c). The philosopher's resemblance of knowledge, because it respects the original, is a *true copy* of knowledge, but the sophist's, because it shows no regard for the original, is a *false copy* of knowledge.

Corrigan claims that slapstick comedy's ability to produce the effect of laughter relies on a binary between pain and the absence of pain, reflecting Plato's distinction between true and false copies:

Pain is never funny in itself. Painful circumstances that turn out to have no serious consequences do provoke laughter. In comedy, action has definite consequences, but these consequences have had all of the elements of pain and permanent defeat removed. The pratfall is a fitting symbol of the comic. Even death is never taken seriously or considered as a serious threat in comedy. (1981: 10-11)

So while a pie in the face and a fall down a flight of stairs might all be examples of us laughing at other people's misfortunes, the latter requires us to believe that it is really not happening – because the real effects are potentially life threatening – whereas the effects of a pie in the face are generally nothing more than an embarrassing mess. We're capable of finding pleasure in malice, but we're not *that* malicious. Corrigan further refines comedy's need to maintain the distinction between the real and the fake:

[M]anifestations of the ludicrous must be made painless before they can become comic. The writhings of the cartoon character who has just received a blow on the head, the violent events in some of Molière's plays, or the mayhem committed by slapstick clowns remains funny only as long as it is quite clear that no pain is involved. One reason why the violence of slapstick is so effective in films [...] is that it is virtually impossible to fear for the characters, *since the actors have no physical reality*. (1981: 11; my emphasis)

Because we know, for example, the Itchy isn't really burning Scratchy with acid, we are in some way authorized to laugh at these examples of violence because we accept them as fake.

But both Plato's distinction between the true and false copy<sup>3</sup> and traditional slapstick's reliance on a distinction between pain and the absence of pain become problematized in certain forms of what I call 'simulacra slapstick', examples of which abound in the motion picture *Jackass 3D*.<sup>4</sup> Presumably, both traditional slapstick and simulacra slapstick are copies of an original, real pain. Traditional slapstick maintains an appreciation for the distinction between the real and the

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3 In the interest of both lexical consistency and in an effort to resist falling into the theoretical free play between illusion and reality that this paper explores, I will mainly refer to this distinction using the terminology 'real' and 'fake'.

4 For those unfamiliar, the basic premise for *Jackass 3D* is rather simplistic: a marauding cast of misfits and eccentrics perform various pranks, stunts, and gross-out performances on themselves and each other causing injuries (physical, psychological, intestinal, spiritual, etc.) in order to conjure up laughter in the viewing audience.

fake because it always addresses its audience as being a representation of actual pain, never suggesting that the injuries befalling the actors are real. As such, it functions as Plato's *true copy*, maintaining a regard for the original because the audience never has any doubt that its effects are fake. But unlike traditional slapstick, where we are authorized to laugh only when we know the actors' physical realities are not in jeopardy, in simulacra slapstick we clearly witness painful and damaging effects being inflicted and we laugh anyway. In this way, the humorous appeals of simulacra slapstick announce themselves to the audience not as representations of pain, but as actual pain. These appeals rely on the audience having a real, essential sense of the humanness of the actors. But because the appeals of simulacra slapstick are still dramatized for the purposes of making an audience laugh, they are, in Plato's terminology, still a copy of this 'original' pain. Simulacra slapstick, then, tries to hide the fact that it is, itself, an image, a reproduction, a fake, and thus does not show the same distinction between the real and the fake that traditional slapstick upholds. Thus, in Plato's sense, the humorous appeals of simulacra slapstick function as a *false copy*.

But since both forms depict images of physical violence befalling people, they can – at times – resemble each other as well. This, for Plato, is the risk of representation and the reason why the sophist is such a danger: because both the philosopher's copy of knowledge and the sophist's copy of knowledge resemble each other, it is difficult to distinguish between the two. Contemporary rhetorician John Muckelbauer (2001: 228) suggests that the effects of the sophist's false copy are so troublesome to Plato because the sophist claims to be a teacher of wisdom but he is 'a pretender to this lofty lineage, a counterfeiting thief whose very presence threatens the proper inheritance of wisdom'. The sophist possesses the resemblance of knowledge on all subjects, but this knowledge is not original knowledge and therefore falsely leads us away from the pursuit of original knowledge. And because it is difficult to tell the difference between the philosopher's resemblance of knowledge and the sophist's, we might not even know when we are following the wrong one. Muckelbauer (2001: 233) suggests that the false copy, or simulacrum, places at risk the very idea of there being an original at all:

Resemblance is the very condition for Plato's dialectical movement; that the sophists knowledge and the philosopher's knowledge resemble each other places the dynamic of resemblance and, therefore, dialectical thought, at stake.

In this way, the slapstick of *Jackass 3D* functions as a simulacrum, one that places at risk the very idea that there is, or ever was, a real. Humorous appeals in the film are structured to produce the sense of the real in the audience vis-à-vis images that dramatize injuries to the physical reality of the actors. Because these appeals are presented to the audience as images amplified by various cinematic

enhancements and technological manipulations, however, this realness that the actors experience gets repeatedly called into question. In other words, much of what appears as real in simulacra slapstick – the violence befalling the actors – is actually the effect of Plato's false copy, an image rhetorically produced to create a sense of the real for the audience.

### **Mutual resemblance: The blurring of cartoon slapstick and simulacra slapstick**

In order for *Jackass 3D* to distinguish its humorous appeals from more traditional forms, the film actively works to produce a sense that the effects of simulacra slapstick are real. One important way it does this is by continuously presenting something fake to contrast itself against. In *Simulacra and simulation*, Baudrillard (1994: 12-13) notes that fake spaces like Disneyland function to produce a sense of the real in the surrounding city of Los Angeles:

Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle.

*Jackass 3D* and Disneyland follow inverse paths to creating a sense of the real: Disneyland produces a sense of realness in Los Angeles by calling attention to its own lack of reality, whereas *Jackass 3D* constructs its own sense of reality by calling attention to what is fake around it. For example, in the opening interlude, the film presents an image of a traditional form of slapstick humor to contrast with its simulacra forms. The first image viewers see on screen in the film's interlude is Butthead, of *Beavis and Butthead*. Butthead's purpose appears to be to explain to the audience that the movie they are about to see will be presented using 3D technology: 'You will see the Jackasses as never before' (*Jackass 3D*, 2010). Beavis then joins in to explain, 'in order to experience this new dimension, you must put on the special glasses that you were given in the lobby'. Butthead looks down at his own hand and says, 'Whoa! Beavis, look at my hand! It's in 3D!'. Beavis, the more moronic of the two, begins to say, 'Really? It really doesn't look too different ...' but his response is interrupted by a punch in the face from Butthead that seems so real to Beavis, it convinces him of the authenticity of the 3D technology: 'Whoa! That's amazing! It felt like you really hit me!'. Beavis continues on about the 'amazing technology', as Butthead continues to punch and slap him about the head and face. This interlude concludes with Butthead saying, 'So sit back and enjoy the movie', as he slaps

Beavis one more time for good measure, punctuating his last slap with his infamous tagline, 'Dumbass'.

While an argument could be made that this segment merely performs the utilitarian 'how-to-put-on-your-3D glasses' purpose that all 3D films must apparently meet (a seemingly unnecessary sort of cinematic regulation along the lines of the way the airline industry still insists on instructing millions of passengers how to put on a seat belt before each and every takeoff), Beavis and Butthead's inclusion here serves the larger purpose of demonstrating how traditional slapstick comedy differs from the simulacra forms found in *Jackass 3D*. For one, while the juvenile sense of humor found in *Beavis and Butthead* might aesthetically be in concert with what will follow in the main event, their performance of cartoon slapstick places *Jackass 3D* squarely within the tradition of slapstick comedy, while also providing it with a point of divergence from that same tradition. Like *Tom and Jerry* and 'The Itchy and Scratchy Show', Beavis and Butthead's cartoon version of slapstick comedy is a non-human form of the genre. As such, it dramatizes the idea that traditional slapstick comedy's success as a form of comedy precludes the absence of pain. Butthead can beat Beavis all day and night, and, even though we might take some pleasure in watching this (partially because Beavis is a character that quickly gets under the skin), we ultimately know that no harm is ever coming to either of them.

Furthermore, the 'new dimension' Beavis makes reference to in the interlude, the incorporation of the 3D technology itself, enhances the manner in which *Jackass 3D* transgresses the boundary between the real and the fake. The entire purpose of 3D, from a cinematic standpoint, is to take the two-dimensional format of film and represent it in a manner that more closely resembles real life (a fact reflected in the name of today's preeminent 3D company: Real3D). In other words, 3D technology, both rhetorically and, in a way, 'physically', is not there for the actors, not there to honor the reality of the action captured on film in a more detailed fashion. 3D technology exists only for the audience. It attempts to produce a visual copy of the action and bring it closer (literally, visually closer) to the audience. But in this effort to produce a more 'real' copy of the original action, its regard for the original becomes dissolved, because it is always moving away from the original, toward the audience. When Butthead slaps Beavis, his hand reaches out into the audience and swings right in front of our own faces, never touching of course. We are still in the free play of cinematic fantasy, yet this gesture provides an authentic approximation – a spatial closeness that *Tom and Jerry* could never approach – that stimulates the perception of the boundary between the real and the fake, making it appear more illusory than we might often admit. Much like, as Baudrillard (1994: 13) argues, Los Angeles relies on Disneyland and other theme-parks such as 'Enchanted Village, Magic Mountain,

Marine World [...] imaginary stations that feed reality, the energy of the real to a city whose mystery is precisely that of no longer being anything but a network of incessant, unreal circulation', *Jackass 3D* also relies on these imaginary stations. The explicit non-reality of cartoon performances and twenty-first century cinematic technology help maintain a distinction between fake forms of humorous appeals found in traditional slapstick and the sense of the real that *Jackass 3D* wants to construct in its own simulacra slapstick. The technological amplification produced by Beavis and Butthead's cameo at the beginning of *Jackass 3D* sets the stage for the non-cartoon performances that will follow, performances that will contrast non-human cartoon slapstick against human simulacra slapstick, as both extremes are continually enhanced by Real3D.

### **It's real because we say it is**

*Jackass 3D* further produces a sense of the real in its forms of simulacra slapstick by way of the disclaimer. *Tom and Jerry* has been entertaining children for over fifty years with physically violent forms of Saturday morning entertainment without any kind of warning, which is precisely what the sensationalized violence of 'Itchy and Scratchy' satirizes. Even *The three stooges*, the seminal television program starring Larry, Moe, and Curly, a comedy trio born on the American vaudeville stage that went on to become a household name in the United States for four decades, avoided warning the audience about the dangerousness of the slapstick pranks and stunts contained within, even though non-cartoon depictions of eyes being poked and hair being pulled are clearly actions that could be quite dangerous. In all of these examples of traditional slapstick, the assumption appears to be that we know enough to know that what we are seeing on the screen is fake and, therefore, we don't have to be warned otherwise. However, this clear-cut distinction cannot be assumed with simulacra forms of slapstick.

All iterations of *Jackass*, from the earliest television series to the final feature film, have begun (and ended) with a disclaimer about the stunts contained within the film. The epigraph included above is taken from the very first television episode of *Jackass* that aired on MTV in 2000. In it, we see an air of informality, both in the lax grammar of the copy ('neither you or...') and in the casual irreverence of the semantic references to 'total idiots', 'dumb little buddies', and 'dangerous crap' (*Jackass*, 2000). In total, this disclaimer tries to downplay its authority and seeks to fit in as part of the show itself, sharing in the anti-intellectual, anti-authoritarian spirit of the performances that will follow. By the time we get to *Jackass 3D*, however, the disclaimer has evolved along with the show's performance budget, becoming appreciably more grown up (i.e. more

legally binding) in the process: ‘WARNING: The stunts in this movie are performed by professionals, so for your safety and the protection of those around you, do not attempt any of the stunts you are about to see’ (*Jackass 3D*, 2010). Gone are the references to ‘total idiots’, (apparently they’re strictly professionals now), ‘dumb little buddies’, and ‘dangerous crap’, and they’ve apparently run the copy past a high school English teacher as well since the either/or, neither/nor grammatical *faux pas* found in the earlier version has been corrected. Additionally, not only does this disclaimer present a more formal written appearance but it is also read aloud by a young but serious-enough-sounding male, ensuring that even those movie goers trying to send out one final text message before the film starts will at least *hear* the warning, reflecting a clear effort on the production company’s part to cover its legal bases in every manner possible. Because, ultimately, that is what a disclaimer of this sort is intended to do: we told you letting a snake bite your penis was a dangerous idea, so you can’t sue us if you decide to do it anyway.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, though, the disclaimer in *Jackass 3D* performs an additional role in that it declares that the film’s performances of simulacra slapstick put the actor’s safety at risk. Quite literally, it tells us that the simulacra slapstick in the movie you are about to watch is so real that it can hurt you.

The image of the disclaimer serves to explicitly address the physical reality of the human actors and to make the audience aware of how these forms of slapstick differ from traditional forms. But the disclaimer, like the 3D technology of the film itself, shows no regard for the original events. It shows no regard for the physical reality of the actors (they obviously don’t heed its advice), but is instead turned toward the audience. It dramatizes the film itself as a false copy, or simulacrum, as always turning away from the original, always structured toward the audience. *Jackass 3D* uses the disclaimer to further set up how its humorous appeals in the form of simulacra slapstick continually reproduce a sense of the real by maintaining the perception that traditional slapstick is as fake as Disneyland.

### The force of the image

Two specific skits from *Jackass 3D* dramatize how the film problematizes the distinction between the real and the fake: ‘Beehive tetherball’ and ‘Gorilla in a

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5 As the production value of the film increases, so does the film’s budget, and so does the film’s overall exposure and risk, all of which invites the legal team to step in and remind us all that not everything in life is a joke. The moral here is even Jackasses have to grow up sometimes, and in Hollywood, no matter how fantastically whimsical the story you are selling may be, money is always very, very real.

hotel suite'. Additionally, because both of these bits feature humor created by bringing together the human and the animal, looking at them together helps further complicate the human-animal relationship that has been viewed as foundational in traditional theories of humor. From this traditional perspective, laughter lends a sort of authenticity to the human experience of humor, sequestering it from the experiences of other animals. This makes laughter more 'real' to the human being than to the animal because in the animal kingdom, so the traditional view goes, laughter is impossible. Therefore, any reference to an animal laughing must be fake and naturally divided from the authentic experience of human laughter. While the skits included do not overtly engage in the debate about animal laughter, they do rely on a certain distinction between human and animal in order to perform their forms of simulacra slapstick, while simultaneously problematizing this distinction.

### 1) *Beehive tetherball*

The first skit, 'Beehive tetherball', is a quintessential example of simulacra slapstick performed within the *Jackass* oeuvre. The skit produces carnivalesque laughter by celebrating the pain of two *Jackass* actors and, in doing so, revisits Plato's early apprehensions about how malicious forms of humor interrupt the subject's rational pursuit of the good life. In the skit, actors Steve O and Dave England are (minimally) dressed as bears: furry bear ears, wristbands, sneakers, and underwear briefs. The bears play a game of tetherball using a beehive as the ball. The skit's protracted setup, featuring testimony from a professional beekeeper and a predatory animal expert, produces the sense that the actors are in very real danger. The beekeeper, commenting on the roughly 50,000 bees in the hive that will be used in the skit, all but guarantees the punchline will be delivered:

*Camera operator:* What do you think the chances are of these guys getting stung today?

*Bee Keeper:* They're gonna get stung. Yeah, there's no doubt in my mind, when you hit a ball full of bees, you're going to get stung. (*Jackass 3D*, 2010)

After establishing sting certainty, the predatory animal expert quantifies the range of danger as it pertains to bee stings, a testimony that serves to further ratchet up the drama surrounding the skit's pain and safety levels:

*Steve O:* How many bee stings do you think we can take?

*Predatory animal expert:* I think it takes about a hundred to kill a man.

*Dave England:* What?

*Steve O:* There's 50,000 bees in there...

*England:* Did you just make that up? Please?

The skit unfolds much as one would expect. Steve O and England, before they even take their places around the tether ball, are clearly getting stung, as bees swarm around the dangling tether ball and frantic voices from off-frame ('This is gonna be gnarly now, man!'; 'I'm already getting hit!'; 'Come on! Do it! Do it! Do it! Do it!') highlight the moment's precariousness. Loomis Fall, playing the role of referee (and getting stung himself), introduces the skit while screaming in pain: 'Got a butt-ton of bees! My two sexy players! This is beehive tetherball! Game on!'. Steve O and England hit the ball back and forth about a half dozen times, all the while screaming, swearing, and swatting bees from their face and legs, before England finally submits and runs from the frame, screaming, 'I can't do it anymore!'. As England flees in pain, the promise of simulacra slapstick in the skit becomes successfully realized: everyone involved is repeatedly stung. Rather than being sidestepped here, pain is celebrated, and, as a result, laughter is produced in the audience.

Even though laughing at the misery of Steve O and England's bee stings is clearly an example of the superiority theory of humor, this skit's effects are not reducible to flipping this pain/absence of pain binary by capturing the base, animalistic and painful experience of simulacra slapstick on film in a humorous way. Instead, the formal cinematic techniques used in the production of the skit both create and perform a simulation that produces effects exceeding the naturalness of the skit's bee sting premise and raise questions about distinctions between real and the fake. Throughout the skit, certain cinematographic decisions call subtle attention to safety considerations that are not made explicit in the film's dialogue. For example, while Loomis Fall introduces the skit (with bees already stinging Steve O, England, and Fall himself), standing in the background – yet still clearly in frame – is the predatory animal expert, who is holding a long spear with a sharp metal point at one end. One assumes that this man and his spear are nearby in the event things take a turn for the worse. Similarly, after England flees the game, a camera follows him as he sprints through an open field, arms flailing, in an effort to get as far away from the bees as possible. When the camera operator finally catches up to him, he is hysterical and begins to sob ('Oh, fuck!...Oh, dude...It fucking hurts!...Oh god...Oh fuck!') as bees continue to swarm him ('Please put me somewhere where there's no bees!'). As England pleads for help, parked behind him, yet very much in frame, is an ambulance, present, like the predatory animal expert, to provide assistance to the actors should things take a turn for the worse. Of course there are pragmatic purposes for having these safety measures in place when you are filming a skit like

'Beehive tetherball', but the filmmakers' decision to include these specific safety measures in the film's final cut speaks to how the slapstick staged in *Jackass 3D* produces elevated, hyperreal effects. By using these safety measures as a compositional backdrop to the absurdly irreverent action of the skit the ambulance and predatory animal expert are effectively transformed from their real, pragmatic purposes in the scene into images, or props, that produce effects exceeding their original purposes.

In Baudrillard's (1994: 3) terms, these images dramatize how the simulacrum threatens the distinction between the real and the fake because it doesn't imply a presence, or a regard for an original, but an absence, which calls into question the principle of reality itself:

To dissimulate is to pretend to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have. One implies a presence, the other an absence. But it is more complicated than that because simulating is not pretending: 'Whoever fakes an illness can simply stay in bed and make everyone believe he is ill. Whoever simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms' (Littré). Therefore, pretending, or dissimulating, leaves the principle of reality intact: the difference is always clear, it is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between the 'true' and the 'false,' the 'real' and the 'imaginary.' Is the simulator sick or not, given that he produces 'true' symptoms?

While the simulation produced by *Jackass 3D* is not technically a kind of sickness (although a case could probably be made), its simulacra slapstick does appear to want to give the appearance that 'true' symptoms are being produced in the actors. In traditional slapstick, we clearly see a form of dissimulation, or of pretending to have what one does not have – pain – in a way that leaves the distinction between real and fake intact. Traditional slapstick implies presence. However, the simulacra slapstick in *Jackass 3D* implies an absence that threatens the distinction between the real and the fake. For while the slapstick antics captured in the film appear to produce real symptoms of pain in the actors (and thus, from a certain perspective, would appear to be of a more real or authentic form of slapstick than traditional varieties), these symptoms are enhanced and heightened in ways that have no regard for the principle of reality itself. Therefore, as images rhetorically produced and structured toward the audience to produce laughter, the simulacra slapstick of *Jackass 3D* becomes neither 'real', 'unreal', nor 'fake', but a sort of virtual reality, a created sense of the real without being actual.

What might have once appeared to have been real becomes transformed into the fake which is then used, as it is throughout *Jackass 3D*, to create a heightened sense of the real for the audience. This paradoxical process is perhaps best dramatized in an exchange at the outset of 'Beehive Tetherball' between England

and an off-camera crewmember. Shortly after England comes to terms with the unfortunate mathematical equation of 50,000 bees + 100 bee stings = death, he asks, with obvious concern for his personal safety, 'So what are we doing here?' to which the crewmember responds, rather cheekily, 'We're making a hit movie'.

## 2) *Gorilla in a hotel suite*

While 'Beehive tetherball' transforms real safety measures into on-camera images that artificially create a heightened sense of danger for the cinematic audience, the 'Gorilla in a hotel suite' skit functions somewhat inversely, creating a sense of real danger vis-à-vis an image of fake danger. The 'Gorilla' skit is a variation on simulacra slapstick in a sense, because unlike 'Beehive tetherball', for example, physical pain is not intended to befall any of the actors. Instead, the punchline for 'Gorilla in a hotel suite' is the emotional trauma that actor Bam Margera's parents, April and Phil, experience when they check into their hotel suite and encounter a full-grown gorilla. The animal is fake, nothing more than actor Chris Pontius in an extremely realistic gorilla suit. April and Phil, of course, don't know this. This scenario is further enhanced by the fact that April and Phil have been recipients of countless pranks at the hands of their son over the years, both in the *Jackass* franchise and in a spin-off television production starring their son called *Viva la Bam*, so there is a strong precedent that the element of chaos makes occasional, unexpected appearances in these people's lives. This particular skit, however, tries to exploit that precedent by making it appear that this is not a prank per se, but a prank gone wrong. The 'Gorilla in a hotel suite' does not perform a real prank, but a copy of a (fake) prank. What this skit dramatizes is the impossibility of staging an illusion in the era of simulation, when images are exchanged only with each other. As Baudrillard (1994: 19) writes: 'The impossibility of rediscovering an absolute level of the real is of the same order as the impossibility of staging illusion. Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible'. In other words, faking a prank shows us that a real prank is itself just a performance produced in the image of all the pranks that came before it. Staging a real prank and an illusion of a prank are both impossible in the era of the hyperreal, as Baudrillard (1994: 20) argues in his depiction of a fake holdup:

Organize a fake holdup. Verify that your weapons are harmless, and take the most trustworthy hostage, so that no human life will be in danger (or one lapses into the criminal). Demand a ransom, and make it so that the operation creates as much commotion as possible – in short, remain close to the 'truth,' in order to test the reaction of the apparatus to a perfect simulacrum. You won't be able to do it: the network of artificial signs will become inextricable mixed up with real elements [...] in short, you will immediately find yourself once again, without wishing it, in the real, one of whose functions is precisely to devour any attempt at simulation, to reduce everything to the real – that is, to the established order itself.

What this suggests, therefore, is that a real holdup is really just a re-enactment of the genre of the holdup, showing us that 'if it is practically impossible to isolate the process of simulation, through the force of inertia of the real that surrounds us, the opposite is also true [...] *it is now impossible to isolate the process of the real, or to prove the real*' (1994: 21; emphasis in original), a point the 'Gorilla in a hotel suite' exemplifies.

In the skit, hidden cameras capture the action in both the hallway outside the hotel suite and from various angles inside. As soon as April and Phil enter the suite, two cast members in the hallway lock April and Phil inside. The gorilla appears, dragging a potted plant into the frame and making aggressive sounds and gestures that, obviously, terrify April and Phil, who flee to a corner of the suite, where they watch through a doorway as the gorilla destroys the room. April screams uncontrollably while Phil tries unsuccessfully to leave through the locked front door. At this moment, the skit appears to blow its own cover, as a cameraman runs from a closet screaming, 'Get out! Get out of here!'. What is being performed here is a pretend failure. The joke, however, is that this chaos, this apparently failed prank, is all part of the act, all part of the process of creating a fake copy of a real prank. The front door of the suite is finally opened, and the cast and crew take positions at one end of the hotel hallway while the trainer, played by musician and actor Bonnie 'Prince' Billy, appears to hold the gorilla at bay at the other. From this position of relative safety, an overwrought April and her son have the following exchange, with the cast and crew all feigning the same level of fear and trepidation April is projecting:

*April:* Oh my god, I never saw a gorilla before.

*Bam:* He's tame.

*April:* He's not tame, he just wrecked the whole room!

*Bam:* Well, no, there's a fucking trainer there.

*April:* Big deal! Did this go wrong or something?

*Bam:* Kinda.

The power of the image to produce a sense of the real is exemplified April's terrified response, as she still believes she is in the presence of real gorilla: 'What was supposed to happen? [...] What was it supposed to be just fun or something?'.<sup>6</sup> Poor Phil's response, however, might prove more indicative of

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6 A funny coincidence apropos to this bit is that all the *Jackass* cast members always refer to April by her nickname: Ape.

skit's performative force, as we come to find out that he was so scared by what he thought was a rampaging gorilla in his hotel suite that he sought refuge from the attack in the bathroom. As the camera crew heads back into the suite to check on him, Phil, from off-camera, utters a dejected, 'I shit myself'. Ultimately, the fake prank reveals its full artifice when the gorilla breaks character and begins to speak: 'I need this thing off, I can't breathe. I need this off'. April, upon overhearing the gorilla speak, gets wise to what is afoot: 'Is that a person? That's a fucking person!'. A crewmember steps in and removes the mask, revealing the sweaty, smirking Pontius inside. The gig is up, and a sense of the real has been restored. April, after taking a fresh inventory of the scenario, embraces the now headless gorilla and declares, with a palpable relief that underscores the impossibility of staging an illusion: 'I'm so glad you're fake!'. The illusion has been revealed, dramatizing Baudrillard's (1994: 21) point that real pranks function in the same manner:

This is how all the holdups, airplane hijackings, etc. are now in some sense simulation holdups in that they are already inscribed in the decoding and orchestration rituals of the media, anticipated in their presentation and their possible consequences. In short, where they function as a group of signs dedicated exclusively to their recurrence as signs, and no longer at all to their 'real' end. But this does not make them harmless. On the contrary, it is as hyperreal events, no longer with a specific content or end, but indefinitely refracted by each other [...] it is in this sense that they cannot be controlled by an order that can only exert itself on the real and rational.

The fact that the gorilla was fake did not render it harmless, as April's blood pressure level and Phil's intestinal discord clearly attest. Instead, the preexisting genre of the prank precedes this attempt to fake a prank, showing that no 'real' prank could ever succeed without this same preexisting 'recurrence of signs' (1994: 21). It is the simulacrum that precedes the original and gives the original its own sense of authenticity.

### **The paradox of parody and appropriation**

Performances of simulacra slapstick function as a sort of hyperreal parody – a parody without origin – of the ultra-violent slapstick comedy of found in contemporary cartoons like *Itchy and Scratchy*, which is, itself, a parody of earlier cartoon violence found in *Tom and Jerry* and *Looney Tunes*, cartoons that were themselves aping on the human-centric style of slapstick with roots as far back as Shakespeare. This iterative trace, or 'parodic repetition', 'reveals "the original" to be nothing other than a parody of the *idea* of the natural and the original' (Butler, 1999: 41; emphasis in original). What we see here is the free play of parody itself in a slapstick cycle that, on the surface, might seem to evolve in a linear order

from traditional forms to more self-reflexive forms that seek to critique and alter social orders (Tyler and Cohen, 2007; Kenny, 2009; Ellis, 2008; Rhodes, 2001). However, simulacra slapstick is not the 'next phase' of some logically unfolding tradition, but rather performs a kind of break in the chain, an interruption that is as much a return to 'premodern carnivalesque forms' of comedy as it is an evolution of something new (Rhodes, 2001: 376-7). Subversive acts that are immediately legible or anticipated makes their effects more easily appropriated (Tyler and Cohen, 2007). Because of their random spontaneity, however, simulacra slapstick performances are not immediately legible or easily anticipated. As such, they contain a deconstructive force that throws into question essential notions of real and fake and can help us explore other 'noisy provocations [that] act to disturb from within' (Rhodes, Rhodes and Rhodes, 2005: 77).

Similarly, *Jackass 3D* is paradoxically both a form of humor that resists appropriation and one that finds itself commercially appropriated (from a fiscal perspective, at least; definitely not in terms of social acceptance). With a budget almost twice that of *Jackass: Number two* and four times that of *Jackass: The movie* and distributed by the major Hollywood studio Paramount Pictures, a strong case could be made that *Jackass 3D* has already been appropriated and commodified. This is no longer a bunch of skate punks shooting home videos of themselves shitting on the highway and selling the tapes to MTV. This is a bunch of skate punks with the capital to stage a prank – filmed in 3D – where a man locked in a shit-filled port-o-potty and attached by bungee chords to two crane booms is launched 100 feet into the air and made to bounce and slosh over and over and over again amidst a gravity-defying sea of three dimensional shit as the crew and cast look up in horror from below, some moved to vomit. The point here is that tracing the evolution of *Jackass* skits reveals production differences of degree and not of kind.

It is within *Jackass's* ambivalent stance toward enjoying the spoils of success that seeds of resistance can be found. While there are no explicit representations of management and organizations to be found in the plotless structure of *Jackass*, one could certainly read the evolution of the franchise from a relatively marginalized status within American skateboarding culture to becoming a major motion picture phenomenon as embodying a sort of post-Second World War 'little guy becoming the big guy...importance of hard work' ethos (Parker, 2002: 140). On some level, the story of *Jackass* is a story of hard work and the conservative notion of pulling yourself up with your own bootstraps and making something out of yourself. But where *Jackass* deviates from this narrative is that, for all the franchise's increasing commercial and financial success, there is a palpable feeling that, quite frankly, no one involved really gives a damn about any

of it. Case in point: the self-jeopardizing pranks and stunts that put *Jackass* on the map actually increase in their scope and risk factor as the franchise matures and becomes more successful. In *Jackass 3D*, for example, Johnny Knoxville narrowly escapes death when a horse-sized rocket he is bareback riding blows a piston during its launch, creating enough force to blast a fist sized piece of metal through the shell of the rocket that barely misses Knoxville. Such a prank would have been well beyond the scope of anything earlier manifestations of *Jackass* could have attempted, suggesting there is an inverse correlation happening here between what we think of when we imagine commercial success and what is reflected in *Jackass*. Because even as budgets and salaries increase along with the films' successes, the cast seems to move further and further from the luxury comforts of easy street; they're not sending in the stunt doubles in *Jackass 3D*, even if they can now afford to do so. The laughter created through the performance of simulacra slapstick exceeds any effort to fully contain, thus showing us the radical limits of appropriation and offering new ways to rethink how organizations structure and order the forces at work within them.

## Conclusion

The lingering theoretical notion of Plato's true copy and the false copy are dramatized in the relationship of traditional slapstick and simulacra slapstick in terms of how both forms present images of real and fake pain. Traditional slapstick maintains an appreciation for Plato's distinction between the original and the copy because it always announces itself to the audience as a representation of actual pain, never suggesting that the injuries befalling the actors are real. In fact, the humorous appeals in traditional slapstick rely on this distinction to function in the first place. We are authorized to laugh at Scratchy's injuries because he is a cartoon cat. Thus, the distinction between what is real and what is fake is sustained. Simulacra slapstick, on the other hand, complicates and undermines this traditional theoretical distinction. The humorous appeals captured in the simulacra slapstick of *Jackass 3D* want to announce themselves to the audience not as representations of pain, but as actual human pain. However, because *Jackass 3D* is a film its humorous appeals are no more a documentation or confirmation of some essential humanness than the appeals presented in traditional forms of slapstick. Both forms *create* a sense of the real for the audience. *Jackass 3D*, by employing various cinematic techniques to enhance the production of a heightened sense of the real, functions, in Plato's sense, as a false copy, one devoid of concern for the original because it does not try to maintain the same distinction between the real and the fake that traditional slapstick relies on. Even though traditional slapstick and simulacra slapstick are copies that, in a sense, both resemble each other, what simulacra slapstick, as a false copy or a

simulacrum with no concern for the original, shows us is the boundary between the real and the fake was never as distinct as it seems.

I suggest that the simulacra slapstick performed in *Jackass 3D* reveals an endlessly iterative and ambivalent historical performance of parody that both exposes the impermanence of boundaries between an original 'real' and the 'fake' that parodies it and problematizes traditional notions of what it means to be appropriated. As such, the film challenges us to consider a future where we confront the paradox and ambivalence that is already contained within all attempts to create and sustain organizations and social institutions of any kind. Simulacra slapstick exposes the perpetual crisis that lies behind the maintenance of 'potentially oppressive social relationships' and opens up 'the possibility to interrogate alternatives' (Rhodes, 2001: 375). It dramatizes what Critchley (2008: 83-4) describes as a 'laughable inauthenticity', a humorous acknowledgement that 'recalls us to the modesty and limitedness of the human condition' where the ego is allowed 'to find itself ridiculous'<sup>7</sup>.

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7 On a closing note, the final on-screen image in *Jackass 3D* is a callback to the film's opening disclaimer. Read in the same youthful, yet serious tone as the opening montage, this disclaimer also looks backwards in the past tense, as it tries to buttress any nostalgic impulse that this closing montage and the film itself may have inspired in the movie going audience:

REMINDER: The stunts in this movie were performed by professionals, so for your safety and the protection of those around you, do not attempt any of the stunts you have just seen. (*Jackass 3D*, 2010)

In other words, it still takes a professional Jackass to be a real Jackass, so don't try to fake it. You might get hurt.

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