The Culture Industry, New Media, and the Shift from Creation to Curation; or, Enlightenment As a Kick in the Nuts
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What is This?
The Culture Industry, New Media, and the Shift from Creation to Curation; or, Enlightenment As a Kick in the Nuts

Benjamin Alan Wiggins

Abstract
This article analyzes Pranked—a reality-TV show that takes amateur videos from YouTube and formats them into MTV broadcasts—to reconsider the culture industry as social media reconfigures it. For television’s first seven decades, the calculated infliction of severe pain on unsuspecting victims was not deemed suitable for mass consumption. To explain why such broadcasts are possible now, this study analyzes the underappreciated role of entertainment insurers, advancements in social media technologies that allowed the culture industry to circumvent entertainment insurers, and a subcultural turn that valorized sadistic pranking. By offloading risk from the insured and compensated professionals of traditional media to the uninsured and uncompensated amateurs of social media, Pranked inaugurates a fundamentally novel shift in the culture industry: a shift from creation to curation. The article concludes by returning to Horkheimer and Adorno’s original culture industry critique to assess the stakes of the turn from broadcasting distraction to broadcasting suffering.

Keywords
reality TV, new media, social media, critical theory, Internet, video, technology, production, television, sports

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In the inaugural segment of Music Television’s *Pranked* (2009-present), Ryan Hurley lies asleep on a couch in a suburban basement. Through the green-toned hue of a night-vision camera, spectators view his cousin Brendan tying a rope through his boxer shorts. Carefully, Brendan tiptoes toward a load-bearing pole behind the sofa to which he quietly ties the other end of the rope. Ryan adjusts slightly but does not wake. Brendan backs away long enough to make certain his cousin remains sleeping. Then, with vicious intensity, Brendan lifts the couch. The rope that attaches Ryan to the pole strings him up by his underwear. Ryan lets out cries of absolute agony as his tethered boxers compress around his testicles. Brendan continues to tilt the couch upright while his kin writhes, begging for mercy. He only loosens his grip on the sofa to point at his cousin and laugh at the camera. Finally, after repeated calls to stop, the attacker relents and slams the couch and Ryan to the ground. The voice of one of the program’s hosts interrupts the video to commend Brendan’s “pranking etiquette,” referring to his unflinching maintenance of the torturous position despite Ryan’s screams. Following the voice-over, the show replays the clip, but this time with a counter on the screen that tallies each “cry for dear life.” This is *Pranked* and it is the future of the culture industry.

*Pranked* is a reality-TV show, and in the surreal world of reality TV, spectators must be reminded before each episode that these are “real people” and “real pranks.” While this should act as a chilling reminder to viewers, it is intended to heighten the stakes of the grotesqueries that follow. The half-hour-long program showcases a collection of user-generated clips featuring stunts and pranks often of a violent and malicious nature sourced through “digital footprints” from YouTube and YouTube competitors such as Break.com (Chris Lehman 2010, pers. comm.). Hosts Streeter Seidel and Amir Bloomenfeld introduce the clips and comment on slow-motion replays of the videos. Although producers find most of the footage, the show’s introduction constructs its hosts as curators of “the best in online pranking.” Streeter and Amir’s strained banter is the only original content of the show.

*Pranked* is an unprecedented program in the history of television. The sadism it broadcasts to American screens is new. For television’s first seven decades, the calculated infliction of severe psychological and physical pain on unsuspecting victims was not deemed suitable for mass consumption. So why is a show like *Pranked* possible now? To answer that question, I offer a business history of the culture industry, a technological history of digital video, and a cultural history of amateur filmmaking. These histories reveal the changing nature of the culture industry and this article explores the implications of mass media’s shift away from the creation of original content and toward the curation of user-generated content.

Although crafted in the middle third of the twentieth century, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s (2002, 106) critique of the “culture industry”—that is, the Western mass media’s production of a culture of a formulaic sameness that veils the true state of the world—is particularly relevant for the concerns at hand because of the pair’s insight that the culture industry “rejects anything untried as a risk.” They are some of the few critics—to this day, in fact—that recognize the critical role of risk management in the production of entertainment. But while it informs their critique,
Horkheimer and Adorno’s analysis of risk management in the culture industry was rather speculative. In the political-economic analysis of *Pranked* that begins this study, I ground their speculations by delving into the specific ways in which risk is mitigated in the culture industry—primarily, I find, through a very close relationship with the insurance industry. Drawing on trade journals and corporate histories as well as interviews with entertainment and insurance executives, I demonstrate that for a culture industry production to be made, it must be insured, and, therefore, must pose little risk. In this reconsideration of the culture industry through its relationship with the insurance industry, I establish why the broken bones and bruised egos of *Pranked* were not possible before very recently.

My investigation of the insurance industry’s role in the culture industry exposes what precluded a program like *Pranked* for so long, but it does not fully explain why it is suddenly possible for recent broadcast television such as *Pranked* to traffic in sadistic content. To explain this shift in the conditions of possibility, I undertake a history of media technology under the presumption that technical objects engender new conditions of possibility, new ways of relating to the social world. This form of analysis illuminates what may be reasonably practiced and seen in any given moment. In the case of *Pranked*, advances in video, digital, and bus (e.g., Universal Serial Bus [USB] cords) technology, their culmination in mobile consumer video cameras and the expansion of Internet bandwidth allow for the emergence of YouTube. YouTube’s importance in the alteration of the culture industry, generally, and in opening the conditions that make *Pranked*, in particular, possible cannot be overstated. As a repository for amateur videos, YouTube acts as a warehouse for motion pictures the risk-mitigating culture industry could not create. MTV’s program is the first to recognize the reserve of dangerous and sadistic videos on YouTube (and its like sites) and view it as a potential loophole around the insurance industry that constrained its content for so long. By offloading risk from the insured and compensated professionals of traditional media to the uninsured and uncompensated amateurs of social media, *Pranked* inaugurates a fundamentally novel shift in the culture industry: a shift from creation to curation.

This shift, however, requires that there be something to curate in the first place. Risky videos need to precede *Pranked* in order for *Pranked* to poach them from video sharing websites. And I argue that a plethora of such clips came into existence within the last thirty years thanks to American culture’s—more specifically, American skater culture’s—valorization of physical failure, a valorization made possible by realigning masculinity with masochism. In the mid-1980s, skateboarding videos began to use failed trick attempts and their concomitant images of pain to demonstrate the toughness of the sport’s participants. It made images of accepting pain as important images of flawless tricks in the sport’s cultural economy. Then, in the late-1990s, underground skateboarding videos, particularly Brandon “Bam” Margera’s *CKY* series, added sadistic pranks to the subculture’s valorization of masochism. Margera’s videos were quite successful in the pre-YouTube era and its pairing of skater masochism with an already masculine sadism played no small role in inspiring the original corpus of videos *Pranked* drew upon. In addition to the small monetary incentive mass media producers and networks offer to those featured in uploaded videos, skater culture’s alteration of
masculinity over the last three decades provided a strong cultural incentive for both victims and pranksters to offer consent to broadcast their homemade images of sadism and suffering.

So with an understanding of the business history, technological history, and cultural history that allow Pranked to exist, what can we make of it? To answer this final question, I conclude this article with a return to the original work on the culture industry from Horkheimer and Adorno. By analyzing the culture industry in relation to both the Enlightenment and sadism—concerns Horkheimer and Adorno never intended culture industry analysis to be divorced from—I show that the shift Pranked inaugurates is one with potentially massive consequences. Pranked not only shifts the culture industry from the role of producer to the role of curator but also shifts the ideal content of mass culture from mass deception to a display of the true suffering of today.

**Pranking before Pranked**

The novelty of Pranked is obscured by shows that look like it. Pranking has a history on television that stretches from Candid Camera to Punk’d. But Pranked stands apart from its reality-TV predecessors for a number of reasons.

Like Pranked, Candid Camera’s original run (1948–67) offered audiences recordings of interactions filmed in the “real world.” However, what seemed to be spontaneous, unscripted situations were actually carefully engineered social experiments intended, argued show-creator Allen Funt, to display the insanity of blind submission to authority. The program established the reality-TV genre as a viable broadcasting format and demonstrated that pranking and its elements—surveillance, surprise, suffering, schadenfreude—sell. It was even one of the first television shows to employ something like user-generated content as viewers sent in ideas for Funt’s production team to stage (Maas and Toivanen 1969). Despite its on-location filming and its foray into audience participation, producers maintained tight control of the production and ensured that its gags posed little risk to the individuals it surprised.

Following the proliferation of the home-video camera, in 1989, ABC began air America’s Funniest Home Videos (AFHV), another contender in the paternity suit of Pranked. The program featured host Bob Saget introducing home movies sent in by its viewers. While most of the submissions went uncompensated, three videos chosen by the show’s producers competed during the taping for a chance to win ten-thousand dollars. This sum was meager in comparison with the advertising dollars the program generated for its network and production company. But the incentive was enough to court thousands of submissions despite the scratch-ticket-esque odds of winning the big prize. Although AFHV is similar to Pranked in its hosted curation of user-generated content, the shows’ video clips differ. AFHV touted itself as a “family” show and featured less mal-intentioned setups than surprising gaffs. While finding humor in the suffering of others was its goal, because it solicited videos, AFHV had to carefully court only selections featuring accidental injuries or distress and could not air any submissions featuring clip makers intentionally harming unsuspecting victims.
The content of Pranked’s videos also seem to stem from another MTV production founded a decade prior, Jackass. This program, which debut in 1999, features a crew of regulars who degrade and debase themselves through stunts and pranks. The difference between the Jackass crew and the players in the video clips on Pranked is in the social and legal contracts Jackass establishes among its regulars. Jackass is a primarily masochistic show. Most of its cast willingly places themselves at risk of bodily harm. When Johnny Knoxville, the leader of the franchise, gets shot in the genitals with a paintball gun, the man pulling the trigger is not so much a sadist as he is Knoxville’s instrument.

While Pranked may draw its elements of surprise and voyeurism from Candid Camera, its format and cultivation of schadenfreude from AFHV, and its role as purveyor of extreme pain from Jackass, it does not directly descend from anyone of these programs. And there is something that sets it apart from other “pranking” shows such as Sci-Fi/SyFy’s Scare Tactics and MTV’s Punk’d, too, as those shows are tightly controlled by onset risk managers, likely pay some of the highest insurance premiums in the industry, and are exposed to potential expense of having to scrap footage if any part of the setup is botched.¹ Pranked’s existence is not indebted as much to its reality-TV predecessors as much as it is dependent on creating a distance between the culture industry and the production of dangerous content.

Covering Culture

The literature on insurance has seen a proliferation in the last three decades with critical texts from Francois Ewald (1986), Ian Hacking (1990), Tom Baker and Jonathan Simon (2002), and Ian Baucom (2005) locating the role of insurance within what Anthony Giddens (1990), Ulrich Beck (1992, 1995), and, to some degree, Michel Foucault (2003, 2009, 2010) identified as a “risk society.”² In media studies, however, the scholarship on risk is relatively small (cf. Andrejevic 2004; Murray and Ouellette 2009; Ouellette and Hay 2008; Rosenberg 2008), and none have considered yet the role of insurance in media industries.

Significantly though, Horkheimer and Adorno, in their foundational critique of mass media, find risk management to be a thick root of the culture industry. “Ideology,” they write, “hides itself in probability calculation” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 116). They believe this actuarial tendency in mass culture engenders sameness as it treats the unfamiliar as a risk not worth taking. Repeatedly peddling best-seller adaptations, remakes, and sequels and investing heavily in the star system, the culture industry, argue the German critics, fundamentally believes recognizability predicts profitability.

Culture industry analysis requires refining, however, because the insurance industry influences and occasionally supersedes the culture industry as the force shaping the form and content of mass culture. Insurance was present in Horkheimer and Adorno’s culture industry and insurance continues to loom over the culture industry of today. Shows are not made unless shows can be insured. Indeed, reality TV was not viable for
the first five decades of television’s mass use precisely because insurers were frightened by its unpredictability (Serres 2004). There were “reality-based” shows such as game shows, *Candid Camera, AFHV*, and a smattering of other programs, but as Aon/Albert G. Ruben Vice President Lorrie McNaught (2011, pers. comm.) confirms, the proliferation of reality TV was not possible until an accident-free run of ABC’s *Survivor* and NBC’s *Fear Factor* illustrated that the genre was only incrementally rather than exponentially riskier than fictional programs.³

The production of mass media has been insured in a number of different ways over the last century. In the early years of the studio system, most Hollywood companies would assume the risks associated with film production themselves. In the 1920s, however, studios began to purchase policies that covered their production equipment in the way an automobile may be covered (Frankel & Associates Insurance Services). When studios transitioned to talkies, they purchased their first significant policies from Fireman’s Fund. Eventually, some studios cooperated to insure the completion of each other’s films, resulting in something between a corporate mutually beneficial society and a trust. While major film companies’ vertical integration of production, distribution, and exhibition is mentioned in nearly every critique of the studio system, this oligarchic, horizontal integration is routinely ignored. By insuring that the biggest pictures would be completed, these studios took a vested interest in the welfare of their ostensible competitors. This practice continued even after the antitrust legislation of the late-1940s, but new forms of entertainment insurance were able to flourish as the studio system began its decline. By the 1950s, Lloyd’s of London was insuring casts of studio and nonstudio films (Tavares 2005).

In 1960, film insurance became standardized with the creation of the Albert G. Ruben Company. This company modernized cast insurance—coverage that guarantees completion or pays out the cost of aborting the production due to illness, incapacitation, or death of actors—by guaranteeing protection of film producers even if the actor was not truthful about his or her health history. Since this development, the vast majority of entertainment insurance has been brokered through Albert G. Ruben and underwritten by Fireman’s Fund, though Travelers St. Paul, Chubb, EBI, Clarendon, National Hammer, Berkeley Underwriters, Media Professional, and Houston Casualty all currently underwrite the North American–based entertainment industry, too (Tavares 2005). Additionally, entertainment policies have grown to cover film negatives, film processing, props, wardrobe, sets, property, travel, workers’ compensation, adverse weather, automobile accidents, expenses over budget during shooting, onset animals, postproduction equipment, contingencies, and even celebrity body parts.

The completion bond and the errors and omissions policy represent the two most entertainment-specific forms of insurance. A completion bond guarantees that a film will be made on time, on budget, and in line with the screenplay. If the production fails in one of these regards, control of production is turned over to the completion bond company. If the film cannot be salvaged, the completion guarantor repays the film’s investors or the lending bank in full (Allen Financial Insurance Group, 2011). Completion bonds extend the reach of the insurance industry beyond studios as they
make “independent” films dependent on this coverage. Since the 1970s at least, almost no films regardless of the degree of their studio connections get made without a bond. The other policy with the most entertainment specificity is errors and omissions insurance. This form of insurance owes its development more to television than film because of the faster pace of that medium’s dissemination of information, information that could be incorrect. It covers libel, slander, unauthorized use, copyright infringement, and breach of contract. Errors and omissions coverage is particularly important to Pranked.

Obtaining details about the policies of specific programs is quite a difficult task. Producers from Pranked’s production company, Cheri Sundae, declined to comment on the show’s coverage (Chris Lehman 2010, pers. comm.). MTV’s Executive in Charge of Production for Pranked, Matthew Parillo (2010, pers. comm.), confirmed that the network provides cast insurance for the hosts while Cheri Sundae pays for the errors and omissions policy but would not comment further on any remaining insurance costs. Because Pranked is a clip-based show that curates rather than produces the majority of its content, it is doubtful that it requires anything more than the basic coverage of any common studio television production. Streeter and Amir do not possess irreplaceable celebrity (the most notable credit between two of them is Amir’s unbilled appearance in the third installment of the Harold and Kumar franchise) and their clip commentary is shot in studios or in closed, on-location sets. In the hosted segments at least, the risk is nearly as minimal as any television production could get and the insurance cost is likely minimal, too. Although the cost of the errors and omissions policy is more difficult to estimate, the fact that the show secures rights through a refined legal document before airing any clip means that it is significantly less risky than “ambush” shows such as Punk’d or Scare Tactics. Aon/Albert G. Ruben Vice President Lorrie McNaught (2011, pers. comm.) suggests that the total coverage costs of clip shows that employ previously shot material “are some of the lowest in the industry.”

By culling videos rather than creating them, Pranked is able to display some of, if not, the riskiest behavior ever seen on broadcast television without taking out insurance policies on its content creators. In contrast, insurance has cut deeply into the Jackass franchise’s profits because, as its stars’ fame rose and its stunts became more complex, its cast insurance premium increased dramatically, reaching seven million dollars by the series’ second film (World Entertainment News Network). Curation instead of creation saves the network and the production company from high premiums, and allows insurers to cover what, in the culture industry of old, would have been nearly uninsurable.

The parasitic relationship between the culture industry and the social media industry in Pranked’s format calls into question those who view the proliferation of blogs, wikis, social networks, and smart phones (among other technologies) as a sign that communication has switched directions and is now flowing horizontally rather than vertically. New media scholar Lev Manovich (2009, 321) argues that rather than
celebrate user-generated content and simply equate user-generated content with alternative and progressive, academics should ask,

To what extent is the phenomenon of user-generated content also driven by the consumer electronics industry—the producers of digital cameras, video cameras, music players, laptops, and so on? or to what extent is the phenomenon of user-generated content also driven by social media companies themselves, who after all are in the business of getting as much traffic to their sites as possible so they can make money by selling advertising and their usage data?

To answer Manovich’s question, we must now turn to an analysis of technology. This will not only allow us to gain insight into the way social media is changing traditional media generally but also allow us to better understand the particular conditions that changed to open up the possibility of *Pranked*.

**Becoming Technically Possible**

*Pranked* owes its existence to a very specific confluence of technological innovations. For the culture industry to circumvent the insurance industry, camcorder, bus, and network technology had to develop to the point that videos could be shared online and a company, in this case, YouTube had to implement a unique business model in which this service was “free.” By tracing the technological development of the consumer-grade camcorder, its digitization through the charge-coupled device (CCD), and development of the IEEE 1394 wire, we are able to see the opening of the actuarial loophole on which *Pranked* depends.

Early video cameras, such as the Sony Portapak, required that either the operator or an assistant carry a separate, bulky VCR while shooting. Video cameras were not only less mobile than those with Super 8 film but also more expensive (even after taking into consideration the film processing fees). This prohibitive cost restricted their early market to artists and professionals (D. Boyle 1992). A major shift in mobility and affordability occurred in the wake of JVC’s introduction of the VHS tape in 1976. The VHS tape (and its ill-fated competitor, Betamax) allowed electronics companies to move the cassette out of the recording pack and into the camera. The cutting of this cord birthed the consumer market for camcorders. In 1985, 1 percent of U.S. households owned camcorders. By 1991, that figure rose to 15 percent, and by 1995, a quarter of the country’s homes had one of the devices (Consumer Electronics Association 2011).

The refinement of VHS made the camcorder literally handy, reduced manufacturing costs and price, and increased sales. But soon after this innovation, economization, and proliferation opened up the possibility for home-video production on a large scale, a number of culture industry productions tamed and directed the camcorder’s use. For example, in Japan, the Tokyo Broadcasting System’s *Fun TV with Kato-Chan and Ken-Chan* integrated home videos into network television almost as quickly as the
commercial camcorder came to market in the mid-1980s. The show’s broadcasting of the most schadenfreude-inducing home videos attached value to pain recorded by amateurs. Similarly, Sony directed the use of the camcorder toward innocuous activities as its early marketing campaigns sold camcorders as a device to record travel (Sony Corporation 1996). By the time George Holliday exposed an alternative politics of the camcorder with his home recording of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD’s) beating of Rodney King, the culture and technology industries had already firmly entrenched a “proper” use for the home-video camera. The digitization of the camera would, however, refresh the possibilities of imaging technology.

Kodak developed the first digital camera in 1975. Although only a still camera, it represented the first practical implementation of the CCD, a technology that is the standard in both still and motion picture cameras yet today. In their initial publication on the device, Bell Labs researchers Willard Boyle and George Smith (1970, 592) suggest that the CCD may act as an imaging device by “having a light image incident on the substrate side of the device creating electron hole pairs.” Kodak’s digital camera prototype realized this suggestion as it “would capture images using a CCD imagizer and digitize the captured scene and store the digital info on a standard cassette” (Sasson 2007). The playback device then “interpolated the 100 captured lines to 400 lines, and generated a standard NTSC video signal, which was then sent to a television set” (Sasson 2007). Sony created the first “electronic eye” using a CCD in 1982 and by the mid-1990s, refinement in the CCD capture of motion pictures and the standardization of the digital video format allowed nearly all major electronics companies to offer digital camcorders. In 1996, less than 0.3 percent of households owned a digital camera but that percentage leaped to 24 percent in 2001 then to 57 percent in 2006 and to 82 percent in 2010 (Consumer Electronics Association 2011).

The ability to transfer motion pictures from a camera to a computer to a network is the final technological advancement to understanding the culture industry evolution Pranked represents. The integration of the personal computer and the consumer camcorder depended on advancements in “bus” technology. Apple’s development of the IEEE 1394 (A.K.A. the FireWire) in the mid-1980s and the development of the USB through a cooperation of technology giants, including Intel, IBM, and Microsoft, in 1994 meant that problem of what to do with digital recordings had already been solved by the time consumer digital recording technology was first made available in 1995. But despite major progress in the transmission, storage, playback, and editing of digital video in the decade since its release and despite the exponential growth of the largest network in human history, home videos were stranded on personal computers as late as 2005.

However, home videos found a home on the Internet when three former PayPal employees launched YouTube in November of 2005. The start-up quickly became the site to upload digital video content on the Internet as it allowed registered users to post their videos for free. The site grew so fast and so exponentially because it was the first video uploading site to absorb the millions of dollars in bandwidth expenses associated with video hosting. Without this unique business model, the technological innovations that make YouTube possible may not have combined in
the way they did. If YouTube does not absorb these bandwidth costs, media becomes less social, or, at least, social media becomes less videographic.

The year of YouTube’s founding was the pivotal year for new media generally. Manovich (2009, 319) argues, “The explosion of user-generated content,” marks it as the year “media [transitioned] to social media.” This transition, however, need not require new lines of inquiry. Instead, scholars must continue to ask what Manovich (2009, 321) terms “basic critical questions,” such as

Is the replacement of mass consumption in the twentieth century by mass production of commercial culture in the twenty-first century a progressive development? or does it constitute a further stage in the development of the culture industry as analyzed by Horkheimer and Adorno?

By investigating the history of television, risk management, and media technology, we find the answer to Manovich’s question rather simple. Social media has certainly had an impact on the culture industry. Although rather than destabilize it, social media opened new possibilities for the culture industry to profit. With the advent of YouTube, all the conditions had aligned for the emergence of Pranked. Now, the culture industry could curate what it could not create.

**Amateur Hour: From the Bones Brigade to Camp Kill Yourself**

For the culture industry to poach dangerous, sadistic videos from YouTube, those videos needed to exist in the first place. In short, the filming of risky stunts and pranks required not only a technological possibility but also a cultural valorization. As the culture industry could not create or court these sorts of clips, their valorization did not occur at the level of mass culture, but rather on a subcultural level, specifically, in the subculture of skateboarding.

Skateboarding, like television, has been profoundly affected by its perceived relationship with risk throughout its history. Although skateboards have existed in some form since the 1920s, the sport remained quite small until the mid-1970s. With that decade’s advances in board technology (e.g., urethane wheels, independent trucks) and opening of new arenas (e.g., drained pools, skateparks), skateboarding grew exponentially. As American skaters toured the world, network television broadcasted competitions, and corporations began sponsoring individual skaters, the sport became an international phenomenon. But as skateboarding’s popularity rose, so too did the moral panic about it. While recent research suggests skateboarding is safer than baseball or football, by the 1980s, skateboarding had won a reputation as the Russian roulette of sports (Consumer Products Safety Commission 1998). Thanks to growing liability risks and skyrocketing insurance premiums, all but a handful of skateparks in the United States closed (Borden 2001). Skateboarding returned to the subcultural level.
As the sport went back underground, skateboarders struggled to share their culture beyond a local scale. Not only did the mainstream press stop covering the sport, but in 1982, its chief independent outlet, *Skateboarder* magazine, also folded. It was around this time that skateboarders turned to VHS. VHS offered skateboarders an inexpensive way to capture their ephemeral tricks as well as the potential to share their stunts beyond their communities. In 1984, skateboarder Stacy Peralta filmed clips of the top remaining skateboarders, connected the footage with a loose narrative, and released the half-hour tape as *The Bones Brigade Video Show*. Notably, the tape intentionally left in a number of botched tricks and its penultimate segment—titled “Broken Bones Brigade”—featured falls, crashes, and other mishaps resulting in embarrassment or injury.

The *Bones Brigade* developed into a series with a strong cult following and helped spark a revival in skateboarding. It also helped encourage a new sort of subjectivity that the sport went on to cultivate. By using physical failure, *Bones Brigade* valorized pain in the economy of skateboarding. It made failure a sign of toughness and helped engender a sort of masculine masochism. After *Bones Brigade*, the attempt of a trick became as much a feature of skateboarding videos as its successful completion. Images of successes come to be replaced by images of failure—bloodied elbows, protruding bones, and embarrassed faces. These subcultural videos reflect what Karen Lee Ashcraft and Lisa Flores argue was a shift in the popular culture during the last two decades of the twentieth century. Like, say *Fight Club*’s narrator who experiences emasculation through the docility of his white-collar work, in this period, male characters frequently use pain to uncover the limits of their bodies and recoup their masculinity by nearing but not reaching death (Ashcraft and Flores 2010). But while popular culture was (as always) redefining masculinity and skateboarding videos were establishing real pain as a cultural commodity, neither level of culture was valorizing the sadistic behavior on which *Pranked* depends. It was, however, in a small pocket of the skateboarding subculture that this sadism developed, too.

By the mid-1990s, skateboarding regained the popularity it had in the mid-1970s thanks to the International Association of Skateboard Companies’ effective lobbying to reform skatepark liability statutes. With the 1992 case of *Knight v. Jewett* and the 1998 passing of A.B. 1296 in skateboarding’s epicenter of California, both of which severely limited the liability of local governments, insurers insured skateparks once more and the sport began to flourish again (Amell 2004). While skateboarders and their industries tried to convince governments of the low risk of the activity, they, along with media companies, sold the sport to the public as an “extreme” (in other words, extremely risky) sport. Playing off the apparent danger of the tricks, the sport became the cornerstone of ESPN’s Extreme Games (now called the X Games) and experienced an unprecedented popularity.

But in a sport so enmeshed with a countercultural identity, the exposure in the national press did not squash the existence of DIY-media and skater-owned-media distribution channels. While the quasi-amateur videos the continuance of this DIY ethic produced began to adopt a somewhat formulaic structure—near-ground angles,
multiple trick attempts, montages with only music for sound—one low/no budget video stood out, Brandon “Bam” Margera’s CKY. Rather than simply capture tricks and their failed attempts, skater/director Margera injected his filming of stunts with the filming of vicious pranks. Short for “Camp Kill Yourself,” Margera’s video begins with a man calmly stating his name and age for the camera. Out of the left side of the screen, a metal gas can huddles toward and hits this talking head; the first of much physical harm sold as simple pranks. Pranking continues throughout the film as a cast member exposes himself to passing drivers on a country road, another throws a dummy off a bridge onto an unsuspecting motorist’s truck, and yet another hurls a soft drink into the face of a drive-through window worker. Margera’s own pranks most frequently find him alternating between his regular, able-bodied self and personas with disabilities. For example, at a carnival, he displays cogency, then feigns Tourette’s tics, and later adeptly tosses a baseball then pretends to have a muscular disorder; clearly setting out to capture the shame, embarrassment, and confusion of the public around him.

CKY was a truly independent production of Margera’s. After its filming, it found a small and short-lived skateboard wheel manufacturer to sponsor its distribution on VHS and it sold out of numerous editions. Then, shortly after its release, Dickhouse producer Jeff Tremaine saw the video and persuaded many members of the CKY troupe to join the cast of his already-in-development show, Jackass.

Like the broadcast-television programs discussed above, CKY looks strikingly similar to Pranked. But CKY had to become Jackass to reach a wide audience because the actuarial loophole YouTube opened was not yet created. So while Jackass offers audiences a portrait of the masculine masochism started in the Bones Brigade and takes it to its extreme—that is, tricks in which there is no outcome possible but severe physical and psychological pain—it could not broadcast the unbridled sadism CKY displayed. Once members of the CKY crew became employees for MTV, their similarity with future Web 2.0 clip makers ceased. They became compensated professionals who were now subject to the demands of insurers, producers, networks, the Federal Communications Commission, and culture industry conglomerates.

Nevertheless, as the popularity of the Jackass grew, so too did the back catalog of CKY, which small, independent distributors constantly reissued. And pranks that originated in the video series such as “fire in the hole” inspired hundreds if not thousands of copycats, which, in one case, resulted in one fast-food worker’s disfigurement (Associated Press 2010). So while it would take nine years for such content to find a broadcast home, the subcultural valorization of sadistic prank videos had already begun before the turn of the millennium.

Pranked and the End of Enlightenment

The loophole social media opens fundamentally changes what may be seen and heard on traditional media. To Jackass’s masculine masochism, Pranked adds
images of the sadistic subject position previously reserved only for underground content such as CKY. Pranked displays not merely aggression or violence but rather sadism in its purest sense.

Horkheimer and Adorno argue that it is important to understand sadism as a very special kind of violence. What truly sets Sade’s libertines apart from previous dastardly characters is their investment in a means-ends calculus. Sade’s writings read more like strategies than novels as his libertines take pleasure as much in their planning as in their action. Indeed, planning *is* action in Sade’s world. Whereas the torturous actions of the libertines are relayed over a dozen or so pages, the *plans* to bring harm to the victims often last for hundreds. For Horkheimer and Adorno (2002, 69), “Sade demonstrated . . . the affinity between knowledge and planning which has set its stamp of inescapable functionality on a bourgeois existence rationalized even in its breathing spaces.” In other words, every object, every animal, and every human being became the libertines’ instrument.

The clip, “Log Jam,” from the show’s first season, perfectly demonstrates such calculation and instrumentalization and the suffering that they engender. In this segment, a blindfolded young man in a bucolic backyard throws a log into a bin from a distance of about ten feet. He then challenges his friend to complete the same task. While the second blindfolded boy picks up the log, finds his grip, and aims, the stationary camcorder captures the first subject replacing the bin with another log and slipping a long board between the blind thrower’s legs. Through the first thrower’s quick movements and precise planning, the log and board become a fulcrum and lever leaving a teeter-totter in wait for his friend’s toss. Instead of the log landing in the bin, it lands squarely on the elevated end of the plank and sends the opposite side thrusting into the thrower’s testicles. Mechanical planning makes up 90 percent of the video; suffering and ridicule make up the rest.

Even though the homemade clips lack producers, most obey a set of generic conventions. The majority of Pranked’s home-video makers preface their pranks with detailed lead-ins that demonstrate the asymmetry of knowledge between the prankster and the prankee. Premeditation heightens the immediate pleasure for the prankster and the parasocial pleasure for the viewer. The sadistic power is in the disparity of knowledge of the future. The prankster and the audience know of the punch that looms around the corner, the dead bird that waits in the box of cereal, or the masked man ready to pounce from the closet. The prankee, however, lacks such knowledge. Trust is punished and suspicion becomes a virtue.

The sadistic pleasures of Pranked ring in tune with Horkheimer and Adorno’s (2002, 111) aphorism, “the culture industry is pornographic and prudish.” Sex both does and does not sell this show. Girls in bikinis set its traditionally erotic limits. But any reader of Sade knows that sex, especially heteronormative desire and vaginal intercourse, is hardly the foundation of sadism. Most of Sade’s libertines are reviled by the thought of such conventional pleasure. In its place is play with mouths, anuses, fear, mutilation, manipulation, flatulence, urine, and stool. We see each form of sadistic play regularly in the show’s four seasons.
In “Bug Wake Up,” band members shove a massive cicada into the mouth of a passed-out roadie, and in “Orange Crush,” a man slams the sides of an orange juice carton as his wife drinks from it causing her to choke and gag. In “Face Plant,” a man concocts a scheme that results in a blindfolded young woman doing a sit-up into his bare anus. “Tri-ass-alon” uses a different scheme but garners the same result. In “Scare Tactics,” a young masked man wielding a knife jumps out at his aunt, chases her to her backyard deck, and only relents and reveals his identity when she attempts to jump from the deck’s ledge. Pranksters also invade homes of friends and relatives in “Mask-a-raid,” “Monster Garage,” and “Don’t Mess with Mama” and in each instance, Pranked’s editors slow down and zoom in on the victims so the audience may see the genuine fear in their faces. In “Weiner Dog,” a man uses a laser pointer to bait his dog into biting his friend’s genitals, and in “Unibrow,” a husband rips off his sleeping wife’s eyebrow with wax; blood and pain lie in place of hair at the clip’s conclusion. In “Bad Moon Rising” and “Crack of Dawn,” pranksters rest their bare anuses on their sleeping victims’ faces and awake them with flatulence. In “PO’d,” a young man covers a toilette seats with plastic wrap to trick his roommate into peeing on himself, and in “Man Overboard,” pranksters push a man urinating off a boat into a pool of his own piss. Finally, like the shit-feast in Salo, pranking reaches its pinnacle in “Soldier of Misfortune.” In this prank—deemed the best of the show’s second season—a group of U.S. soldiers stationed in Iraq plot against one of their own. When a soldier named Yarborough announces he is off to use the bathroom, his fellow soldiers quickly coordinate a mission to tip over his portable toilet. In a matter of seconds, they identify the toilet he chose, listen to make certain he has begun defecating, and position their camera. Then, two soldiers running at full speed, perfectly in tandem knock over the feces-filled port-a-john. Yarborough emerges from the plastic vat of excrement with his pants down. A stew of hot urine and fecal matter covers his uniform and exposed skin. As he finds his footing, the cameraman shouts, “Welcome to Iraq.”

Despite the support of new media technologies and its lack of actuarial impediments, the possibility remained that Pranked would encounter severe resistance from the victims of pranks. Although the web’s diffuseness and relative anonymity has diminished the ability of all but the most privileged to resist the use of their name and image without consent, traditional media outlets such as MTV continue to require the consent of parties they broadcast. Pranked, therefore, must obtain rights from the parties who filmed and were filmed in each video they air. To encourage the signing of these waivers, Pranked offers monetary compensation to the parties involved (less than five-hundred dollars according to a Pranked clip maker who corresponded with me under the condition he remain anonymous). Not only does this modest sum compensate the victims but they are also compensated with fame. And just as new media’s economy of page views has eroded the distinction between fame and infamy for the sadistic prankster, Jackass and its spin-offs have shifted the position of the sufferer from an undesirable, passive victim to a position of a tough, masculine masochist. Pranked’s very existence proves as much.
Conclusion

Philosopher Robert Hullot-Kentor (2010) contends that the contemporary meaning of the “culture industry” bears little resemblance to the meaning Horkheimer and Adorno originally imbued it with. Its contemporary usage, he suggests, is devoid of the close relationship the term has with the Enlightenment. While the proliferation of reason during the Enlightenment offered humanity a chance to overcome superstition and foster a happier existence for all, humanity did not use this potential. Instead, argue Horkheimer and Adorno, a means-ends calculus gained footing and, over the course of the eighteenth century, calculation infiltrated most corners of the world and, eventually, even began penetrating the relationships humans have with one another. In the late-Enlightenment novels of Sade, the German philosophers see a perfect representation of a world in which calculating, instrumental reason reigned over all. And, in the years between Sade’s writings and their own, Adorno and Horkheimer find enlightenment fulfilling its sadistic potential rather than its potential for societal happiness.

The culture industry, they argue, both uses this instrumental rationality and veils its use of means-ends calculus, a move that gives their culture industry chapter its alternative title: “Enlightenment As Mass Deception.” By distracting the public’s gaze away from the calculated genocides of the war, diverting attention from the birth of an atomic age that will not die until all die, and peddling the power of positive thinking, the culture industry veiled the sadistic fate that befell enlightenment.

Now that social media has allowed the old culture industry to circumvent the insurance industry, the broadcasting of sadistic behavior has become profitable. Perhaps Pranked exemplifies the final victory of sadistic reason over the use of reason for shared happiness. Despite the fictions that pervade reality shows, its amateur element sets it apart from the standard overproduced, risk-managed reality-TV fare. And other programs are rapidly beginning to traffic in the same content. Tosh.O, Web Soup, Most Daring, Ridiculousness, and other shows all feature segments dedicated to sadistic pranks. How will audiences respond to this new content in the old culture industry?

Horkheimer and Adorno would be the first to argue that the odds are poor that the shift in the culture industry from broadcasting distraction to broadcasting suffering will change the course of enlightenment reason. However, in their display of sadism, Pranked and its brethren offer viewers a chance to see the sadistic fate of enlightenment. If viewers recognize the culture industry has outsourced production (and its risks) to them, then they may come to understand that they can produce an alternative future for enlightenment. By trying to profit from the true horror of the present rather than distract from it, the culture industry may come to find that its circumvention of the insurance industry was a gross miscalculation.

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Notes

1. *Punk’d* and *Scare Tactics* are risky shows. The former has had to edit out large portions of celebrity reactions (e.g., Zach Braff physically assaulting a twelve-year-old) and whole segments when celebrities (e.g., Alex Rodriguez) refused to sign waivers and the latter was sued before its first episode even aired (see *Kara Blanc v. Tri Crown Lawsuit*).

2. Although Foucault (2003, 2009, 2010) never uses the term *risk society*, in his lectures at the College de France in the 1970s he shows that society from the late nineteenth century onward is a society primarily concerned with managing populations, calculating governance, securing life, and racializing risk.

3. It is notable that the culture industry distanced itself from the initial risks associated with these programs as it invested in them only after they proved viable in smaller European markets with Sweden-based Sveriges Television (STV) airing the *Survivor*-predecessor *Expedition Robinson* in 1997 and Netherlands-based Veronica airing the *Fear Factor*-predecessor *Now or Neverland*. In addition, St. Paul Travelers’ Jon Paulson and Aon/Albert G. Ruben’s Lorrie McNaught among others have noted the significant role onset risk managers play in the insurability of these shows (MacDonald 2010; Serres 2004).

4. For instance, Spike Lee lost control of his *Malcolm X* to the film’s completion bond guarantor.

5. The culture industry and social media industry are not mutually exclusive but have not merged completely. America Online’s purchase of Time Warner in 2000 merged what was perhaps the Internet’s first major social network company with one of the largest culture industry conglomerates in the world. Conglomerates that built their business in the traditional media of print, radio, television, and film, now devote many resources to and derive much profit from their own web-based social networks. At the same time, the United States’ proposition of the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and the Preventing Real Online Threats to Economic Creativity and Theft of Intellectual Property Act (PIPA) in 2011 demonstrated just how sharp a divide remains between the interests of each of these media industries. As this article shows, the traditional culture industry is beginning to profit off of the social media industry, but as long as the culture industry bases the majority of its profits in its own productions and the social media industry bases the majority its profits in the productions of its users, the two cannot be said to have converged.

References


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