"Don't Try This at Home"

Fragmented Collectivity in DIY Rude-Boy Media

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There is a moment when the basketball is flung through the hoop, the stuntman crashes into a wall, and the skater leaps over a flight of stairs when a certain type of viewer is on the edge of their seat. While sometimes new, often the trick, the shot, the stunt has been done before, even repeated ad nauseum. When this moment appears in video form in stunt videos, streetball mixtapes and skate video parts, the split second after it happens, an on-screen crowd erupts, leaping towards the pros on the court, the concrete or whichever setting the group finds themselves. The portion of the crowds behind-the-camera are felt through the raucous cheering and jostled hand-held cinematography; the camera often situated among them. This collectivity forges a space for numerous affective encounters with the viewer inspiring laughter or disdain verging on nausea or, for some, an empowering sense of awe and inclusion. Beyond mimetic dislocation and identification, these media objects extend a space for aspiration and imagination, allowing the audience not only to lose and relocate themselves in the individual subjects on screen but to envision and aspire to situate themselves among them. The viewer, at home, becomes a fragment of a crowd across virtual media and physical space.

Characterized by early digital video aesthetics and amateur DIY filmmaking, the videos in this genre emerge in the 90s and 2000s due to increased access to video technology. They mark a significant representation of young male group behaviour and a certain kind of teenage rebellious subculture, specifically in North America often aligned with punk- and hip-hip- music and material culture. I want to look at three objects as examples of the wider DIY rude-boy genre: the *Jackass* franchise; Spike Jonze's *Yeah Right!* (2003); and the streetball mixtapes of the AND1 crew.

Across these distinct media objects, this conference paper will focus on the following in connection with fragmentation: the style of the videos; the representation and effect of the crowd; and the affective encounter experienced by the viewer. The purpose of this is to begin to understand the role of audio-visual media in a larger ecosystem of intersecting subcultures, material culture and audio-visual forms. In this presentation specifically, I want to explore how these videos impact and include a viewer in fragmented collectivity.

To begin: *Jackass*.

Jackass, emerging on MTV around the 2000s, is a series of films and tv shows that follow an ensemble cast of daring, comedic and brazen young men. Most of the early cast and crew came from the skating world, with figures like Bam Margera and Johnny Knoxville amongst others working previously together at the skating magazine with the filmmaker Spike Jonze, who would go on to produce many of the films in the *Jackass* franchise. *Jackass* has an anthology form comprised of short segments that each play out a singular concept, prank or stunt that part of the cast perform while the others watch, commenting and laughing on the sidelines. The stunts range from extreme feats to practical jokes on the crew to small, idiotic inflictions of pain, as in the famous *Jackass* segment where members self-administer paper cuts in-between their fingers, toes, and lips.
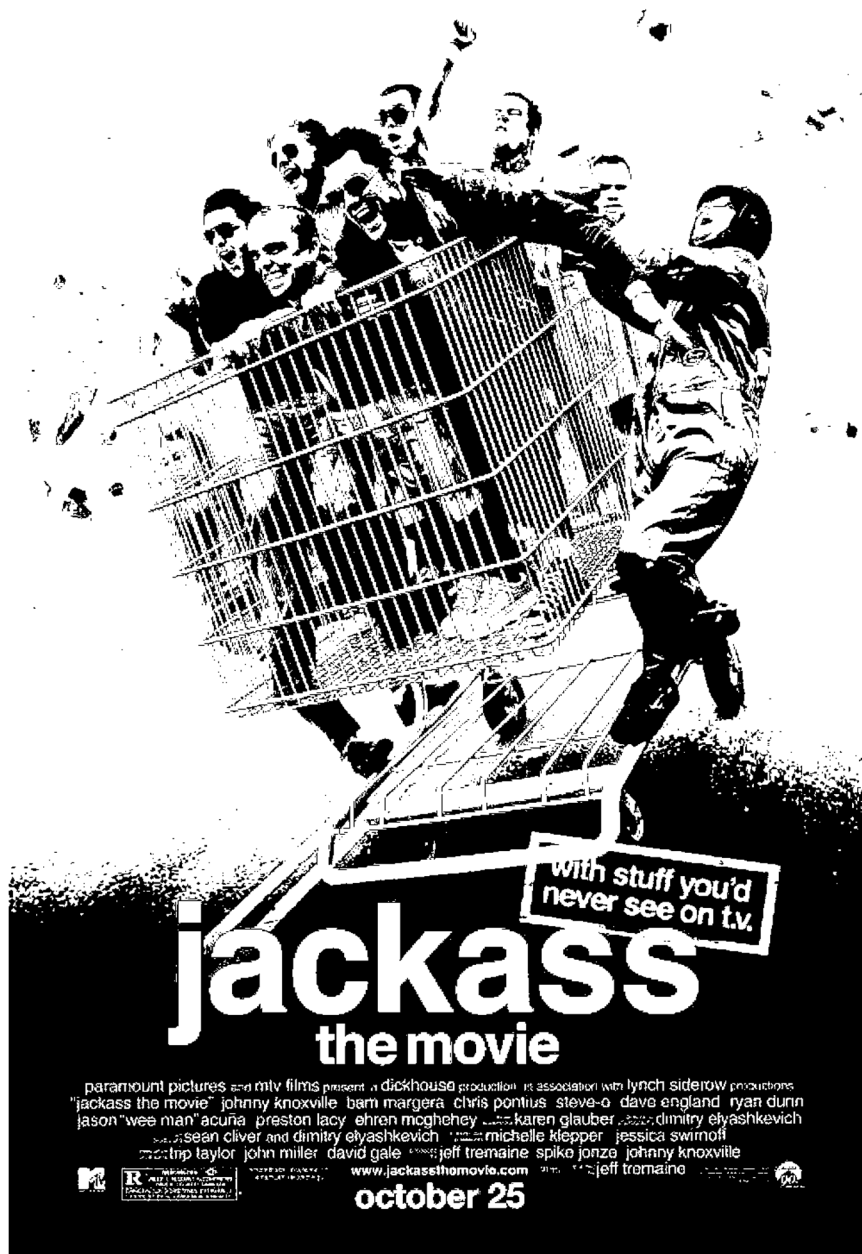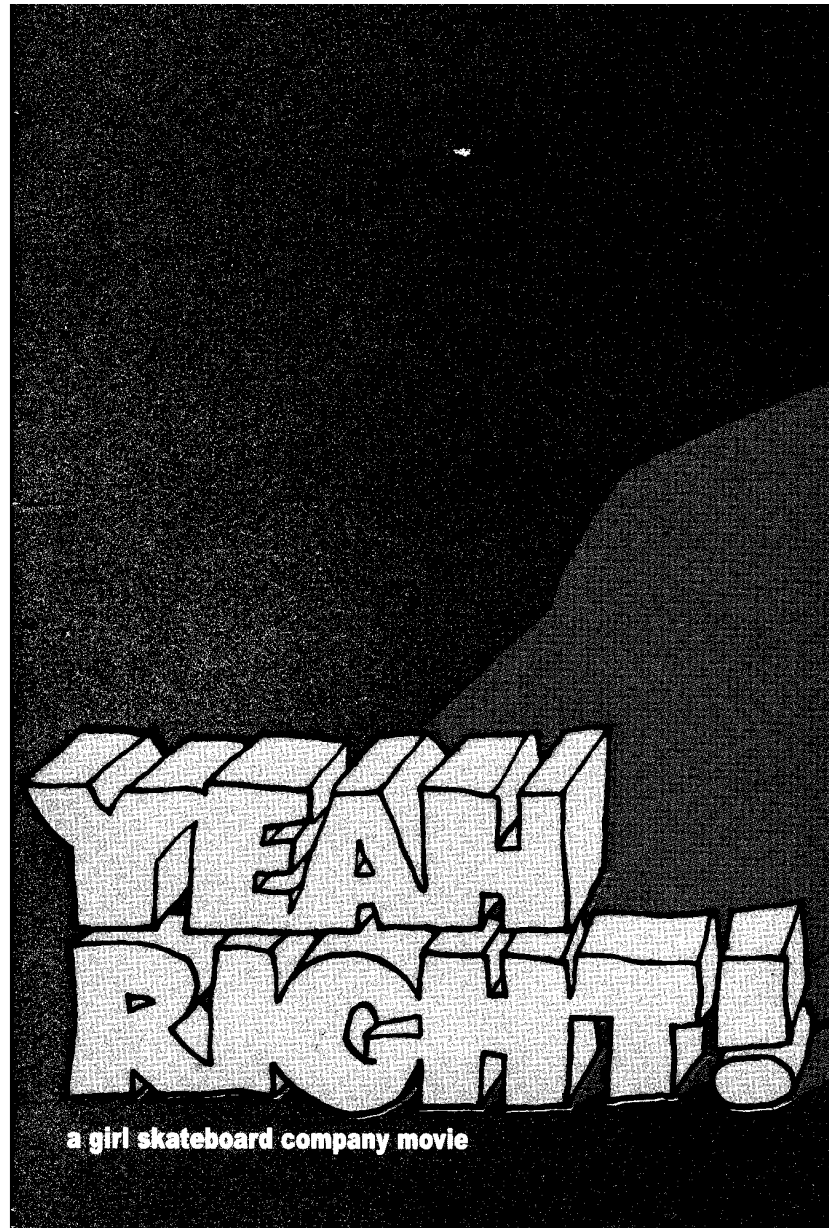

▲ Cover of a *Jackass*

◄ Stills from from *Jackass Number 2*

Yeah Right!, directed by Spike Jonze for his skating company Girl Skateboards, compiles several segments of skaters attempting to land tricks over stairs, rails and other concrete and steel urban architecture. The shots in each segment are repetitive, showing the attempts several times from different angles and including shots indiscriminately of whether the trick lands or fails. In between these, the skaters are filmed collectively in groups, loitering and waiting for the next opportunity to perform or watch one of their peers. These sequences are accompanied by skits, extreme stunts and gimmicks involving the skateboarders. The camera centers the skateboarder, with photographers, other skaters and passersby coming in and out of frame as both the camera person and skater pass quickly through space.
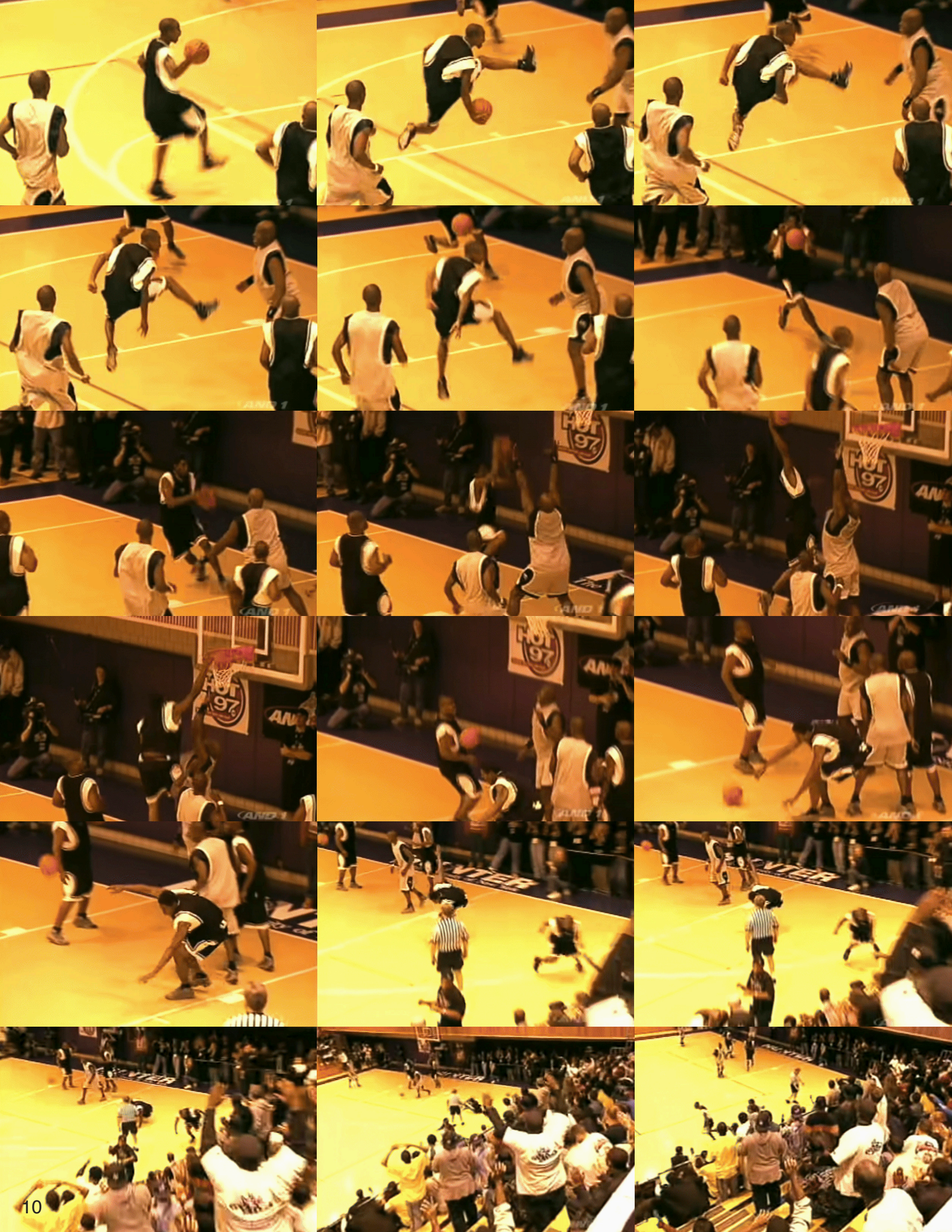
Lastly, streetball mixtapes function as highlight reels for a particular streetball crew. Streetball, a sport tangential to basketball following the same basic structure and objectives, operates with more relaxed rules and an emphasis on performance and style in play. While streetball and basketball spheres overlap, with some members of the NBA emerging from the streetball world, basketball is often positioned as the more formal and institutional version of the sport. In this way, streetball has been subject to similar attitudes to that of skateboarding. Like in basketball, the streetball team sees the emergence of distinct cult personalities with recognizable signature styles of play amongst the ensemble. Detailed in the first episode of the MTV show AND1 Live tour which emerged after the mixtapes' wide success and cultural influence. The mixtapes were widely distributed across the United States in the basketball & streetball community, propelling personalities and marketing for the AND1 brand. The mixtapes centered players and games to create publicity that would aid the commercial side of AND1. The videos, roughly 20 minutes in length, show montages of trick shots and innovative ball that often defy classical basketball rules, making use of humor, improvisation, and extreme athletic technique.

▲ Cover of the *AND1 MIXTAPE TOUR*

◄ Stills from the *AND1 MIXTAPE VOL. 3*

Beyond their similar distribution and exhibition, all finding a home on MTV at one point or another, these objects share a set of aesthetics: anthology style structures; the use of montage, jump cuts and fast-paced editing; low quality footage and handheld cinematography, often taken from personal video camcorders; and the use of physical humor and athletic performance. These soundtracks often involve a mixture of the diegetic sounds of the action (scraping, crashing, boards on the concrete, sneakers on a court) and cheering from the crowd with a non-diegetic accompanying song, ranging across genres from punk, hip-hop, rap and pop. All these types of media involve a professional of some kind, positioned as an underdog athlete participating in a sport or stunt of with a rebellious connotation and subject to normative ridicule. While they certainly contribute to the cult of personality for several of the members (stuntmen/skateboarders/streetballers), there is an emphasis on the group as a whole.

Using multiple cameras, the cinematography is as keen to show the inner workings, camerawork, and sideline commentary as the stunts themselves. The nature of the filmmaking translates into a rough yet electric aesthetic. This is where the "DIY" part of the genre emerges: not strictly because these videos are made independently but rather because of their rough, hand-held like style where there is an acute awareness of the "reality" and presence of the camera operator in the physical location of the recorded event.

▼ Eric Koston in *Yeah Right!*

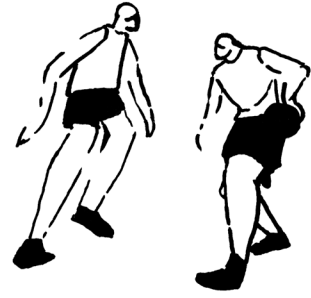▲ Lance Bangs, longtime cinematographer for *Jackass*

▾ A spectator obscures the shot in *AND1 MIXTAPE VOL. 3*

▾ Cameraperson capturing skater Brandon Biebel in *Yeah Right!*

This personal touch in the filmmaking accompanied by the juxtaposition of poor-quality footage with high quality performance of the pro stuntman, skater or streetballer introduces what Rombes' terms "DV humanism." This refers to the personability and anthropomorphism of the digital aesthetic in defiance of its commonly associated coldness that it's connoted with in contrast to warmth of the grain of celluloid film. Video and digital aesthetics, reaching popularity and ubiquity in the 1990s, reflects on a democratised access to the video technology that enabled subcultural forms to enter the mainstream. The digital aesthetic has a "warm" quality with "traces of humanness" revealed in the "rough, spontaneous aesthetic." While Rombes locates this in the texture of the image, I believe it can be extended to the weight, movements and limitations of the independent camera operator in the crowd. When Lance Bangs, a cameraman who's worked with *Jackass* for decades with severe nausea, drops his camera and runs off to vomit, the jostled cinematography and cut to the other camera signifies the apex of the stunt. In the *AND1 mixtapes*, the camera is often placed amongst the crowd and even blocked by the heads of other spectators, and shaken as the crowd erupts after a particularly difficult maneuver succeeds. In skateboarding videos, the cameraperson is often a skater themselves, following along as a pro performers for their video part. A follow up shot of a trick will often reveal the cameraman taking previous footage, along with onlookers to the spectacle. These personal touches and interactions with the camera alert the viewer to the presence of the cameraperson amongst a crowd of onlookers as evidence of onscreen collectivity.

► Nicholas Rombes, "DV Humanism."
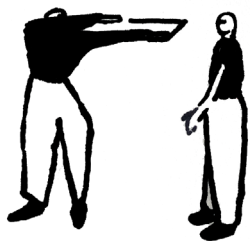
▲ Stills from *Yeah Right!*

This leads us to the second topic of exploration: the crowd.

I want to highlight three spheres of collectivity in these media objects: firstly, the group of performers (pros/experts/idiots); the onlooking crowd present physically at the scene of the action with the cameraman among them; the audience of viewers watching asynchronously in private spaces on TVs and early computers – many of whom in the 2000s belonged to the target audience of young, rebellious masculine teenagers.

The architecture of the onlooking crowd in the physical space of the event is constantly in flux as onlookers join, pass by, erupt into the space of the action and interact with the group of performers. The camera, and by extension the at-home viewer, is one among this crowd. The fast-paced editing, presence of a live crowd and the handheld camera emulating the onlooker's their movements lend these media objects a characteristic of "liveness." Jane Feuer writes on the "liveness" characteristic for television that it is not dependent on the programming or address being actually live or contemporaneous to the viewer but rather that the media acknowledges liveness as a potential reality – that the viewer could be watching the programming synchronously and responding in "real time." Because of this liveness and television's "flow" across discrete segments or fragments of programming, a characteristic similar to the documentary-style direct address and high stakes tricks and responding audience of the videos discussed in this presentation, there is a porousness between the physical space represented in the media object and the private space in which one watches from at home. The porousness of the on-screen and "real" space informs the capacity for the viewer to be a fragment of the on-screen crowd they observe in these videos.

► Jane Feuer, "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology."

Conceptions of the crowd inform the affective implication of the relationships between the viewer, the digital handheld aesthetic, and the visualisation of live gathering. Gustav Le Bon's foundational work "The Crowd: Study of the Popular Mind" is highly critical of the crowd but posits two important ideas: firstly, that collectivity inspires action beyond that of individual will; and secondly, that the push to action or inclusion in the crowd is strongly tied to emotion and affect. Elias Canetti locates a politics of the crowd not within their action or cause but in the rendering of the individual as anonymous. Canetti underlines the crowd as a space of pseudo-equality where categories of difference are stripped in the presences of a shared movement and psychology. This allows the individual to imagine a fantasy of their selfhood beyond the boundaries of their body. From both Canetti and Le Bon, the psyche of the crowd becomes engulfing and all-consuming, significantly shifting one's mindset while inside it. Regarding the on-screen crowd, this conception of anonymity and the opportunity for fantasy becomes an additional dimension of the encounter between mimesis and identification.

performers

live spectators

expanded audience
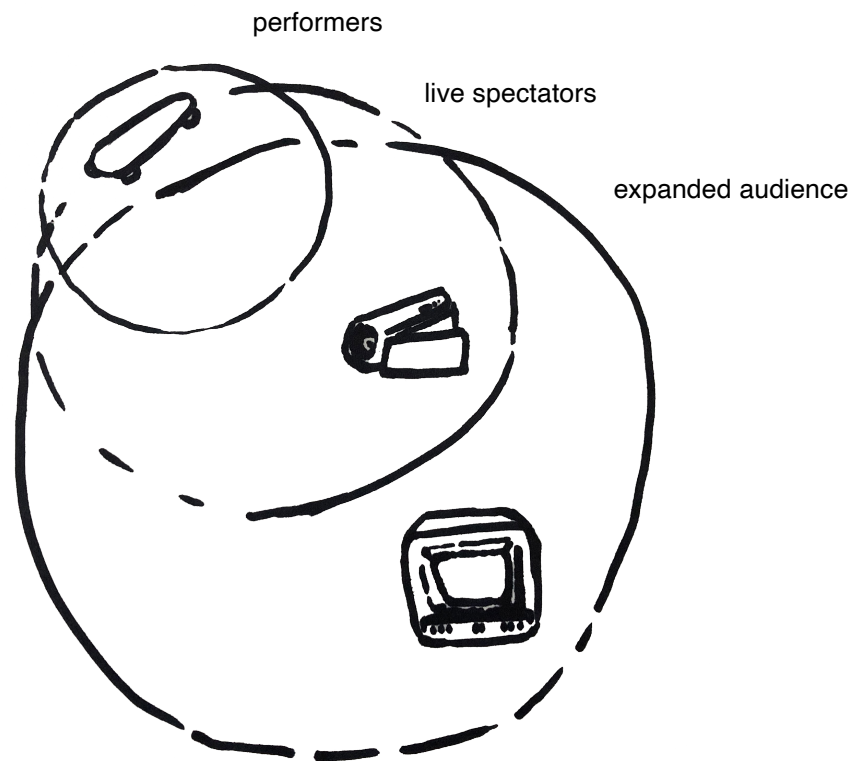
▶ Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power.*
▶ Gustav Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind.*

Richmond poses the question of mimesis and identification with respect to *Jackass*: the viewer does not physically mirror the men performing these idiotic stunts but still engages affectively with them, the mimesis "overwhelming" the viewer. This contextualization of the affective encounter with Jackass can be added to; amongst a queasy or comedic responses, there are also reactions of aspiration. Richmond locates the encounter as a combination of mimesis and identification, "Mimesis is the capacity to lose yourself in an other; identification is the capacity to recover yourself." The aspiration encounter can be located exactly in between the two where the viewer imagines themselves not as one of the crew members but amongst them. They aspire to one day be on the show, projecting themselves into the imagined space as a process of dislocation and relocation between the show and the home.


▲ Stills from "papercuts" in Jackass

► Scott Richmond, "'Dude, That's Just Wrong': Mimesis, Identification, Jackass."

Jackass's opening warning stresses the "MTV insists that none of you or your dumb little buddies attempt the dangerous crap in this show." For legal reasons, the network felt obliged to discourage a transference and influence of these actions, though the title only entices audiences more. For audiences, and in a tongue-and-cheek sense expressed by the Jackass crew themselves, this is more of a secret invitation. The sentiment "don't try this at home" within these media objects is a warning - explicit or unspoken – but often interpreted as a challenge. Althusser's analysis of the subject realization in "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus" posits the address "hey, you there" by "the most common everyday police (or other)" as the phenomena that processes individuals into subjects. The challenge, the warning or the implicit aspiration of "don't try this at home", however it is interpreted, forms the viewer as a subject. Their aspiration to be included in the onlooking crowd, a particular subculture or community that the media represents, forms the viewer as a governable subject.
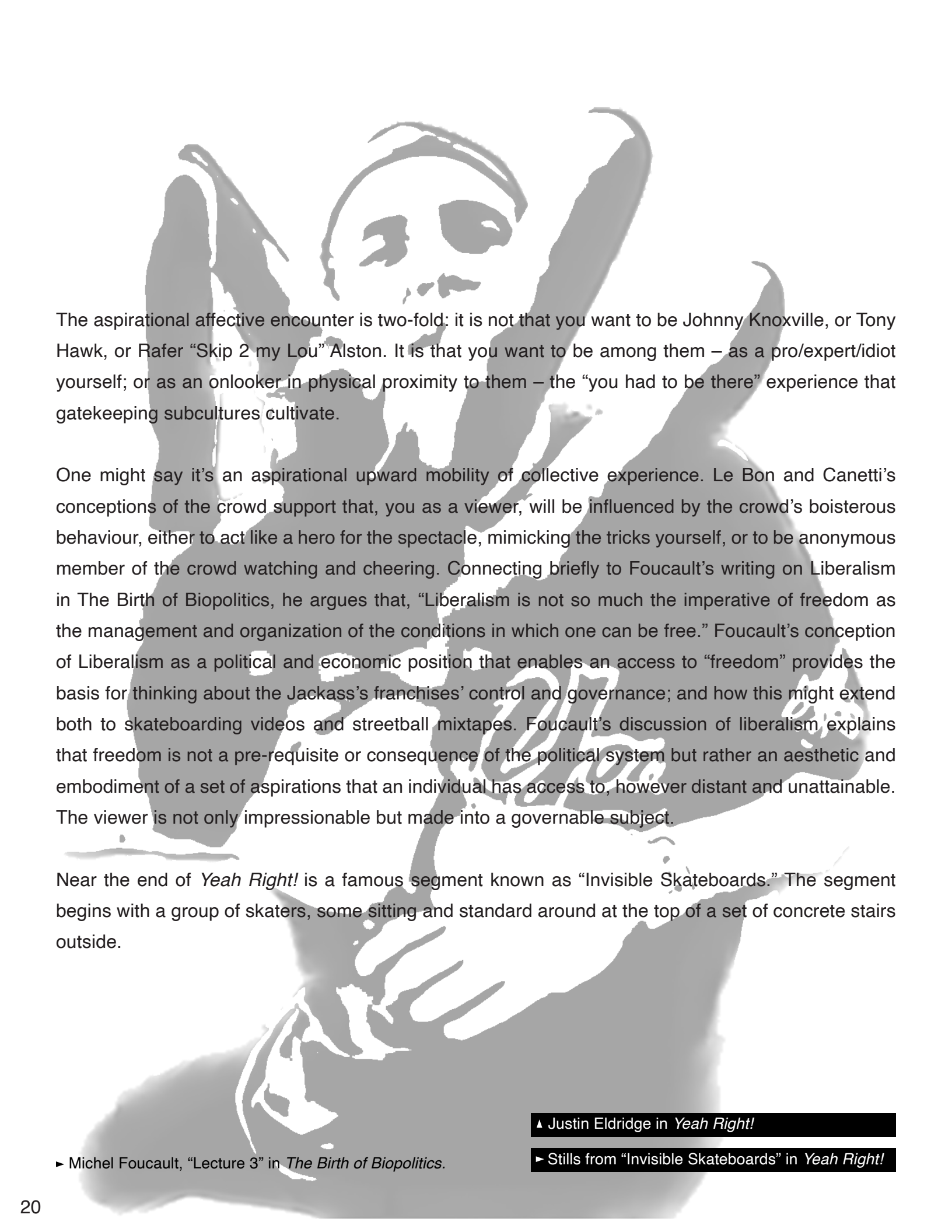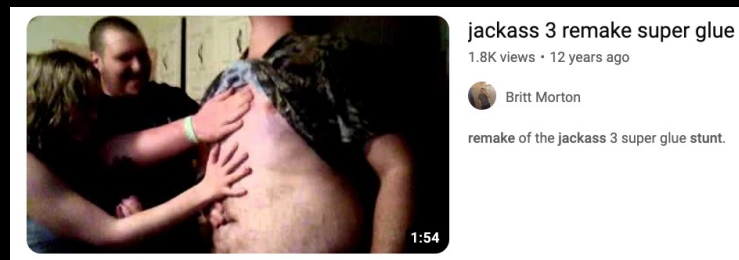

▲ Various YouTube videos remaking *Jackass* skits

Canonizing the forbidden attempt of these stunts by fans, the latest installment *Jackass Forever* (2022) has new additional members who started as loyal and audacious fans who grew up watching and mimicking the show. While "don't try this at home" is never articulated in AND1, its legacy acknowledges the invitation and even reward of mimicry and aspiration as an affective encounter with the show. Brandon Wallace points out the significance of AND1 mixtapes and tour television series as an influence on future NBA stars. Audiences internalize and take those techniques "home" with them.

► Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus"
► Brandon Wallace, "Commodifying Black Expressivity: Race and the Representational Politics of Streetball."

The aspirational affective encounter is two-fold: it is not that you want to be Johnny Knoxville, or Tony Hawk, or Rafer "Skip 2 my Lou" Alston. It is that you want to be among them – as a pro/expert/idiot yourself; or as an onlooker in physical proximity to them – the "you had to be there" experience that gatekeeping subcultures cultivate.

One might say it's an aspirational upward mobility of collective experience. Le Bon and Canetti's conceptions of the crowd support that, you as a viewer, will be influenced by the crowd's boisterous behaviour, either to act like a hero for the spectacle, mimicking the tricks yourself, or to be anonymous member of the crowd watching and cheering. Connecting briefly to Foucault's writing on Liberalism in The Birth of Biopolitics, he argues that, "Liberalism is not so much the imperative of freedom as the management and organization of the conditions in which one can be free." Foucault's conception of Liberalism as a political and economic position that enables an access to "freedom" provides the basis for thinking about the Jackass's franchises' control and governance; and how this might extend both to skateboarding videos and streetball mixtapes. Foucault's discussion of liberalism explains that freedom is not a pre-requisite or consequence of the political system but rather an aesthetic and embodiment of a set of aspirations that an individual has access to, however distant and unattainable. The viewer is not only impressionable but made into a governable subject.

Near the end of *Yeah Right!* is a famous segment known as "Invisible Skateboards." The segment begins with a group of skaters, some sitting and standard around at the top of a set of concrete stairs outside.

► Michel Foucault, "Lecture 3" in *The Birth of Biopolitics*.

Michael Lorr, writing about skateboarding subcultures, draws on conceptions of "technology of the self" and "technology of the collective" to describing skating as an affective and self-actualising practice. Lorr writes that for skaters, "the technology of this identity-construction process is the skateboard itself." However, in this segment, video overcomes the skateboard as the apparatus for identity formation, collectivity, and governance. This video form constructs a reality where a person can be a skater performing athletic feats without a skateboard. Without these boards, the skaters are, in effect, flying. Without the board, pro/expert/idiot here is stripped to their bare minimum. The space in which they perform is exemplary of access and freedom: a non-descript set of concrete stairs. Amidst the impossible fantasy of levitation that the visuals present, the film constructs a reality in which the viewer sees the absent board and onlooking group of skaters as a space for their own freedom, access, and inclusion. The absent space left by the boards becomes the fantasy space in which the viewer imagines themselves, thereby replacing the skateboard as a technology of the self and the collective with the video as a technology of governance and fragmented collectivity.

► Michael J. Lorr, "Skateboarding as a Technology of the Collective."

The fantasy space created by these video forms in which the viewer imagines themselves at the site of the spectacle as audience and performer is constructed by the live and rough aesthetics of these media objects. This informs the capacity for this DIY rude-boy genre of late 1990s and early 2000s "rude-boy" to facilitate the existence and growth of subcultures through the creation a fragmented crowd.

In the Q&A portion of the panel, there were three questions regarding this presentation summarized with their responses below.

Firstly, there was a question regarding the aestheticization of miniDV in comparison with Super8 and other small gauge film.

There is an ebb and flow between the nostalgia kick of video and film in modern spaces, something I personally relish in. While this calls for further consideration, I am interested in recent trends of the use of Super8 within larger commercial projects as a stand-in for the nostalgic, intimate portrait or video diary. This often replicates the single subject in its remade form which with a fuzzy memory-like quality. To generalize a contrast, the pixellated, jittering video discussed in this presentation show-cases a wide, group dynamic. No single individual can be depicted in close proximity and the form thrives in its nostalgic depiction of the memory of a cultural moment or practice rather than a person or relationship.

Secondly, there was a question about race and DIY rude-boy subculture.

In a longer version of this paper, the discussion of whiteness with regards to Jackass and skate-boarding videos touches on the scholarship of Emily Yochim on White Masculinity and MTV and Brandon Wallace's discussion of Black Expressivity in Streetball. Both are texts that inform the way that identity, collectivity and video form coalesce in a rich study of the intersections of race, space and gender.

Thirdly, there was a question about humour and collectivity in regards to these video forms.

This presentation links to my broader interest in the aesthetics and impact on collectivity in film and video, especially in the translation of forms of humour, memory and affect. While humour is infamous-ly difficult to pin down, I believe the group dynamic and its cinematic form has a vital role to play in the video's humour and the audience's aspiration to be a part of the joke in a physical capitiy through mimicry.

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