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A Moral Meltdown at Super Bowl Halftime

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Tuesday, February 3, 2004

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Super Bowl XXXVIII was a real cliffhanger, and the New England Patriots' 32-29 win over the Carolina Panthers will rank as one of the most exciting Super Bowl games in decades. A last minute field goal by the Patriot's Adam Vinatieri bagged the Super Bowl for New England for the second time in three years.

Nevertheless, the Super Bowl has always represented more than sports. For at least twenty years, the commercial advertisements have been a major object of fascination and the annual halftime show has often been a mix of entertainment and embarrassment. This year, the show leaned massively into embarrassment.

From the start, the MTV-produced halftime show combined an awkward mix of raw energy and blatant eroticism. The most erotically charged portion of the show featured entertainers Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake dancing to Timberlake's hit song, "Rock Your Body," which includes the lyric, "Gonna have you naked by the end of this song." Timberlake and Jackson delivered on that promise, as Timberlake ripped away the right side of Jackson's bustier—a move that revealed a pornographic display of Jackson's anatomy.

The use of Jackson and Timberlake as the stars of the halftime show, along with artists P. Diddy and Kid Rock, was geared toward keeping young viewers glued to the set. Rapper P. Diddy appeared with cheerleaders as they sang, "Oh Diddy, you're so fine, you're so fine, you blow my mind," and similar messages. Even as CBS broadcasted the Super Bowl game, its Viacom partner MTV produced the halftime entertainment.

Immediately after the incident involving Janet Jackson's exposure, Timberlake insisted that the move was an accident. "I am sorry if anyone was offended by the wardrobe malfunction during the halftime performance of the Super Bowl. It was not intentional and is regrettable." But, as The New York Times reported, "there were signs that this was not an accident." That was an understatement.

The evidence for a planned pornographic exposure is linked, of course, to the lyrics of the song Jackson and Timberlake were performing. Can it possibly be an accident that Justin Timberlake promised Jackson to "have you naked by the end of this song," and then clumsily removed Jackson's top?

Further evidence was to be found on the MTV web site—even before the event had taken place. In a news story entitled, "Janet Jackson's Super Bowl Show Promises 'Shocking Moments'," Jackson's choreographer Gil Duldulao said: "The dancing is great. She is more stylized, she is more feminine, she is more a woman as she dances this time around. There are some shocking moments in there too. It is a lot of pressure, there's so many creative people and creative artists, you want to make sure everything is different, and I think she is going to do that." She did it indeed. Are we supposed to believe that even as Jackson's choreographer promised "some shocking moments" that Jackson was completely taken by surprise when Timberlake lunged at her top?

Most Americans aren't buying that argument. The exposure of Jackson's bare flesh was as staged as the rest of the show's erotic material. The show was pornographic and sexual from the beginning, and was calculated to offend viewers with moral scruples—or with young children. The MTV-produced halftime show may mean the end of all Super Bowl viewing for many American families—and perhaps it should.

Both MTV and CBS apologized for the incident. MTV released a statement that claimed: "The tearing of Janet Jackson's costume was unrehearsed, unplanned, completely unintentional and was inconsistent with the assurances we had about the content of the performance." MTV added that the network "regrets this incident occurred, and we apologize to anyone who was offended by it." CBS spokesman Leslie Anne Wade told Associated Press that, "CBS deeply regrets the incident." Joe Browne, executive vice-president for the National Football League, said that the NFL was "extremely disappointed by elements of the MTV-produced halftime show." Browne characterized the incident of Jackson's exposure as "totally inconsistent with assurances our office was given about the content of the show." Browne added, "It's unlikely that MTV will produce another Super Bowl halftime." Unlikely?

The general public is unlikely to buy these apologies—much less the lame excuses made by Timberlake and company. A "wardrobe malfunction?" Does Justin Timberlake really think Americans are this stupid? Meanwhile, CBS and the NFL have absolutely no credibility as they try to deny complicity and responsibility for the incident. They took MTV as their partner, and they knew what they were getting.

The football league and the broadcasting company knew exactly what they were getting into when they turned the halftime show over to MTV. Any doubts would be automatically dispelled when the network arranged for controversial artists like Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake, joined by a host of less-known entertainers, to be the centerpiece of their program.

As the MTV headline announced, "The Super Bowl means just as much to the entertainment world as it does to those who follow sports." The network bragged, "As the big game approaches, one of the top questions along with 'Who's going to win?' is 'What will Janet Jackson be doing at the halftime show?'"

The Super Bowl halftime show was calculated to attract a libidinous audience even as the network would knowingly offend the moral sensitivities of many viewers. In the end, it may well be that the spectacle is all that matters. CBS, MTV, and the NFL must be counting on this controversy to be worth the hassle of outraged viewers. After all, are they going to stay away from next year's game?

Putting gyrating Janet Jackson, clad in a leather gladiator outfit on a stage is provocative enough. Adding Justin Timberlake—singing sexual explicit lyrics—was a recipe for an R-rated performance at best. Wade, the CBS spokeswoman, said that network officials had attended rehearsals of the show all week, "and there was no indication any such thing would happen." Wade added, "The moment did not conform to CBS' broadcast standards and we would like to apologize to anyone who was offended." Of course, reducing this incident to "the moment" of Janet Jackson's exposure implies that the rest of the show did conform to CBS' broadcast standards.

For several years, the NFL has been descending into sensationalism and sex as it tries to bolster its Super Bowl audience. This year's Super Bowl also featured the "Lingerie Bowl," described by CNN as "a seven-on-seven football game between models in skimpy PJs." The "Lingerie Bowl" was available on a pay-per-view basis during the halftime show.

The commercial advertisements were also provocative—and almost calculated to be offensive. In an historic first, the telecast featured three pharmaceutical companies airing ads promoting their drugs for erectile dysfunction. As an Associated Press news report noted, "There was plenty of aiming for a certain area of male anatomy and not just by the makers of drugs for erectile dysfunction." This year, even two beer commercials were aimed at the male erogenous zone. The ads mixed images of sexuality with crudity. One commercial featured a horse flatulating on a woman's face, another showed a monkey lunging for a man's crotch.

According to Fox News, CBS charged an average of 2.3-million dollars this year for each 30-second spot. Amazingly, more than a quarter of Americans say they watched the Super Bowl only to see the commercials. That's an estimated 25-million people.

The Wall Street Journal reported that 140-million dollars was spent by 62 companies ... “and that doesn’t even include spots during halftime, the pre-game show or the all-important Lingerie Bowl.” At 2.3-million dollars for 30 seconds, these advertisers aim to get their message across in a hurry—and their message was not subtle.

On Monday, Federal Communications Commission chairman Michael Powell expressed his indignation at the Super Bowl debacle. “I am outraged at what I saw during the halftime show of the Super Bowl. Like millions of Americans, my family and I gathered around the television for a celebration. Instead, that celebration was tainted by a classless, crass, and deplorable stunt. Our nation’s children, parents, and citizens deserve better.” Chairman Powell promised a “thorough and swift” investigation of the Super Bowl broadcast.

Of course, Powell’s commission is part of the problem. The FCC has progressively loosened decency standards and has shown little willingness to rule almost any speech or behavior out of bounds. Perhaps the Super Bowl halftime show could be just the wakeup call the FCC has needed. What are the rest of us waiting for?

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