Anarchy in Comedy: The Work of Eric Andre

Eric Andre opens a season one episode of his late night talk show by describing, solely in sound effects, his reaction to Beyoncé’s “six tits like a dog”. His talk show assistant, Hannibal Buress, inquisitively responds with “You… for real think… that those words that you just said should be on television?”, letting us in on Andre’s gimmick – absolutely none of this should be on television, why is this on television, who agreed to fund this show? But his acknowledgement of it ironically also allows it to be on television – if we are aware of the political incorrectness, the subversion, the satire, and so is Andre, it is comedy, no matter what he says about Beyoncé’s body – everything he says is taken way too far for an audience to even consider that he agrees with the things he says. A single electronic note plays, and Andre addresses the camera very seriously – “I’m dying”. A pause, and then Buress nonchalantly responds “we all are” and immediately falls asleep. This is *The Eric Andre Show*, and despite its often unsettling, often downright horrifying segments, it should not be discredited as simply a parody of a late night comedy show. It is a response to decades of media, of cookie-cutter talk shows, boring comedy, a criticism of sincerity in the modern world, a way of saying destruction is the only sincerity. *The Eric Andre Show* is pure comedic anarchy, and somewhere in the mess it leaves, it makes perfect sense of the world we live in.
The Eric Andre Show exists in a world of Jimmy Fallons and Jimmy Kimmels – even late night comedians like John Oliver, who often has very poignant, politically relevant points of view, use comedy in a way that is clean, sanitary. They make perfect sense to everyone watching, because they are formally traditional, easily digestible, catering to every demographic, everyone whose interests lie in the mainstream, in celebrity, in major politics. Kimmel’s segments involve parents tricking their kids into believing that they ate their Halloween candy – harmless. Fallon’s include asking Donald Trump about board games – harmful, but in a sanitary way. 4K video, tripod cinematography, and entire episodes that are compromised of four shots in total, exude not only a lack of creativity, but a lack of thought in general, as the creators focus only on what has already been proven to work, lacking risk, lacking any aspects that are formally interesting. Andre, on the other hand, very specifically takes these formal elements and manipulates them, making them just far-fetched enough that they are still recognizable as a trope, so the audience can be let in on the joke. A prime example is his segment “What If It Was Purple?” Andre has an assistant display a few recognizable items – a pencil, a politician, a rabbit – and then remove the photo to reveal another that would show what the item would look like if it were purple. When the purple pencil is revealed, the audience goes wild. By the time the purple rabbit is revealed, only moments later, Andre is so overwhelmed that he is vomiting. The only voice of reason is Buress, who cannot fathom why everyone in the studio is reacting to the purple items with such intensity, but his voice is drowned out by the excitement.

In Miriam Bratu Hansen’s essay “Kracauer: Film, Medium of a Disintegrating World”, Hansen notes that Kracauer “hails cinema as the perfect medium for a fallen world” (Hansen, 26). Modernity, and modern art, can only overcome themselves by realizing the full extent of their destructive potential. As noted in the essay, modernity can be defined as the end of the
historical process, the freedom from a strict religious sphere, a world where life for humans no longer has meaning in the classical sense of the word – God is not a given, but a choice, a choice from which many people are moving away, causing a society that is painted with nihilism and meaninglessness. To Kracauer, cinema is the art form that best operates as a response to this disintegrating society, as well as a result of it.

The destructive potential of modern art, particularly cinema, lies not exclusively in writing, in story – it exists more poignantly, rather, in form. For film, the editing, the mise-en-scene, the nuances of the performances and the camera movements are the elements that signify an awareness of a piece of media’s place in society. If Eric Andre borrowed a script from Jimmy Fallon, and performed it as a segment on The Eric Andre Show, it would read as satire, as a criticism of a tired form of comedy that contributes very little to the world – read by Jimmy Fallon, though, it is a forgettable, conveniently humourus set performed the same way as all the sets before it. Andre does not focus solely on political criticism - he uses artistic criticism at the very core of his work.

Keeping in mind that Kracauer wrote in the early- to mid-1900s, he noted that cinema was an art form that was “symptomatic of a culture of leisure and consumption” (Hansen, 26), a culture that has not changed all that much in the time that has passed – we are objectively still focused on leisure. My argument, therefore, is that anarchistic comedy – as anarchistic media often contains at least some semblance of comedy – like that of Eric Andre is a realization of Kracauer’s theory that modernity can only overcome itself by reaching its destructive potential. Eric Andre taking widely-known elements of modernity and hyperbolizing them to a point where they are nearly unrecognizable, while maintaining a committed audience - audiences that engage with and create a discourse about his work – achieves a sort of stepping stone into a cultural
realization that much of media is very specifically catered. Andre subverts a style of media that is so standard that even its parodies are immediately recognizable. Pieces of normalized media that are built to engage an everyday audience function as a sort of religion, a placeholder for where a god once stood in society. By re-appropriating and then immediately destroying these places of comfort, we are left with nothing, only the recognition that these normalities are man-made and intentionally served to consumers.

In “In Defense of the Poor Image”, Hito Steyerl notes that an imperfect cinema, is more true, more real, and, in fact, avoids bureaucracy more so than a cinema that is closely monitored and sanitized for an audience used to receiving only crystal-clear, widely understandable images. While Steyerl’s theories are derived from media that has been re-uploaded, re-recorded, streamed and bootlegged – a process that, while diminishing in quality, creates a history for the media that proves engagement and interest – I argue that images that were made intentionally poor hold just as much social value. For a moving image, in the 2010s, to be low resolution, to have missing frames, to be intended for an audience that understands the process of diminishing quality, highlights a sort of nostalgia for a time when images were originally poor, but also reflects an artistic criticism of clean-cut media. Poor images are more fascinating because of their histories, and images that are originally poor intentionally put these histories to use by signalling a cultural fetish for the dirty, the ugly.

Season 1 of The Eric Andre Show looks like it was shot in the 1970s. The camera is one element – it is shot on tape, with bleeding colours and incredibly soft focus. No small details can be determined, and lights fracture in every reflective surface. The cinematography, too, is outdated – episodes are composed of multiple unplanned shots, pans, snap zooms and moments that go in and out of focus. This style is fleeting in a big budget, modern show. The nostalgia is
not contained to the camera quality, though; references to early, low budget talk shows can be found in the set, in the props, in the lights. The backdrop is a burnt orange curtain, in front of which a casually dressed Andre and an even more casually dressed Buress sit, Andre behind a desk, Buress in a velvet chair, until the guests arrive, at which point Buress simply stands, hovering behind them. The live band stands in front of a sparkly teal background, dressed and barbered to look like it is 1974. They contribute in small ways, giving the occasional smile or nod, though they will occasionally demand attention by, for example, silently hugging while Andre interviews his guests. It is through these elements that Andre begins to unfold the destruction of modernity of which Kracauer speaks – his acute awareness of the histories of media and his knowledge of how to distort them in a way that reflects modernity, rather than ignores it, highlight a theory that Kracauer calls a distorting mirror effect. Hansen summarizes Kracauer in saying that “since the world is already distorted, reified, and alienated, the iteration of that distortion, as a kind of double negation, is closer to the truth than any attempt to transcend the state of affairs by traditional aesthetic means” (Hansen, 28). Kracauer speaks of a clown, and that clown reflects the actor by reflecting their unreality, “a caricature of a caricature” (Hansen, 28).

If Fallon, then, is the actor, Andre is the clown. He iterates distortion, a distortion that is wholly clear, somehow, in form, wholly basic. Andre uses what Kracauer notes is the key element of film – not the story, but the syntax, the way the shots are composed and edited. Hansen calls this the “cinematic montage” (Hansen, 30), explaining that the way the shots are formed create the object – it is not the substance, necessarily, but the structure that signifies the role of a piece of media in society. As I noted before, Jimmy Fallon and Eric Andre could
perform the exact same script, but the results would be drastically different due to their cinematic syntax.

In Craig D. Lindsey’s article “A Toast to the Epic Dada Madness of The Eric Andre Show”, Lindsey notes that “The Eric Andre Show may be the most literal example of a performer deconstructing the talk-show format” (Lindsey, web), referencing not only Andre’s subversion, but also the fact that he begins every episode of his show by dramatically destroying everything in his sight – his desk, his files, his entire set. When he is done, a new set is wheeled out, and the show begins. Lindsey does argue that what Andre is doing is not new, and with that I disagree. The most popular aspect of his show is bringing, by season 4, well-known faces and interviewing them in a setting where they believe they have signed up for a regular talk show. His antics – Lindsey references Andre puking on his desk then slurping it back up – go far enough to convince guests run off set out of fear or disgust. This is where Andre truly separates himself from those who have gone before him, those who are working now. This is destruction. His guests themselves are in such shock, the subjects of his art, that they choose to remove themselves from it altogether. Of Kracauer, Hansens says, “[t]he point is not just to mirror the world that is, literally, going to pieces but to advance that process” (Hansen, 32), and Andre is shattering his form of media from the inside out, causing the very subjects of his show to depart, leaving the audience with nothing but a host, nothing to signify that this was a talk show in the first place. It is because his guests are not in on the gimmick that this is successful – parody is one thing, and Andre does have episodes where the guests are aware of what he does, but The Eric Andre Show is much more hyperbolized than simply a talk show parody. Its entire objective is to deconstruct exactly what it is – it does not aim to exist for very much longer than a few minutes, its comedy built for experimentation, for pushing boundaries, rather than for laughs.
Again, anarchy, whatever its intentions, is often comedic, and even when Eric Andre is not funny, he is funny. Take, for example, Andre’s interview with Steve Schirripa. Schirripa, who is unaware of the premise of the show, is promoting his new marinara sauce. Andre demands that his PA, fully naked, emerges and inserts his testicles into the jar of marinara. Andre angrily holds a gun to the PA’s head while Schirripa laughs. About halfway through the PA’s time on the show, though, Schirripa’s tone changes to concern. The PA leaves and Schirripa criticizes Andre, calling both him and Buress “irritating”. Andre goes with it, approaching Schirripa and holding a microphone to his penis, asking if it has “been lying dormant for years”. Schirripa, who, again, does not understand the satirical nature of the show, stands up and begins threatening to attack Andre. At this point, a power switch occurs, and Andre is at the mercy of Schirripa. As Schirripa pushes Andre around the room, the camera focuses on Buress, silently standing with no intention of intervention. He occasionally smiles. The cinematographer’s and editor’s choice to make Buress’ lack of action a major component of the segment signals to the audience that this is experimentation that has direct consequences. Buress is under no obligation to change the outcome of Andre’s anarchy, and Andre’s thesis is best presented by following through the entirety of the consequences that may occur. Again, The Eric Andre Show causes destruction from the inside out, creating an environment in which the guests themselves unknowingly take action that deconstructs the entire talk show format. It is the freest they have ever been on television, and upon that realization, they begin to experiment with it, whether that means escaping or attacking.

Hansen discusses Kracauer’s affinity for humour, arguing that, like the clown, it is through hyperbole, satire, and caricature that a modern reality can be most clearly viewed. She quotes Kracauer in saying that “a ‘deeper meaning’ of this ‘amusing joke’ is that it ‘reveals the
nothingness of a world that lets itself be set in motion over a nothing and provokes laughter overs its previously detoxified seriousness’” (Hansen, 32). This theory can be applied to Schirripa’s laughter when Andre has the gun to the naked PA’s head – this is incredibly hyperbolic, an absolutely ridiculous, and violent, situation, and Schirripa’s first instinct is to laugh. It is through this laughter that he is able to recognize the severity of the situation and his role in it, and from there decides to take action, destroying the classic talk show narrative, rewriting as he goes.

Kracauer, Hansen notes, likes works that are so loosely narrative that they have neither beginning nor end. Perhaps this can be applied to the way in which Eric Andre’s work is consumed. It is fragmented, released by Adult Swim, Andre’s network, on the internet as well as on television. The segment featuring Jimmy Kimmel has nearly 4.7 million views on YouTube, meaning that Andre’s work is largely consumed in pieces, not episodes. Andre’s viewers jump across seasons, episodes, and scripts, creating their own narrative, their own progression of The Eric Andre Show. It is styled so that a new viewer can click on any segment, and guest, and engage with the piece, rather than watching chronologically from season one, episode one. Every segment is a mess, with guests finding their freedoms in different ways, Andre providing them with different methods of causing reactions. Kracauer supports work that lack “academic logic” (Hansen, 33). It is through this lack of academic logic that academic results can be drawn – Andre’s wild intentions are built for primarily entertainment, but it is a style of entertainment that has not been done before because it aims to deconstruct. This is ideal for Kracauer – deconstruction combined with slapstick is a home run.

In The Desiring Image, Nick Davis explores desire as the root of all things. His book discusses queer cinema, mainly, though this does not necessitate LGBTQ+ films – queer cinema
is “more than a cognate for LGBT filmmaking” (Davis, 24). They are not opposed, of course – their very wording indicates that they are very often in affinity with one another, but Davis argues that they do not absolutely depend on one another. A piece of cinema can be queer without LGBTQ+ themes, and a piece of cinema can have LGBTQ+ themes without being queer. The queerness of the minor cinemas in which Davis delves lies in desire, in the ways a piece is provocative and arousing, though not necessarily sexually so. To apply queerness to media, one must look for pieces that are non-normative, that are based in the destruction for which Kracauer argues. Destruction is based in desire, as we work to overcome a social structure of meaningfulness. If queerness is a force of differentiation, it begins at the intention of destruction and deconstruction, a force that Andre uses in his work. Viewership of his work is based in desire, a kind of tortuous arousal – Schirripa, in fact, calls Andre’s show “tortuous” while operating as a guest on it – a need to watch, an arousal that stems from fascination and realization. Davis argues for a level of queerness in which homosexuality and heterosexuality are no longer even identifiable, where queerness is an absence of definable sexuality, rather than a definition of sexuality. While Andre may have not reached this level, the chaos he causes is fully in a destruction-based, not a lust-based, arousal. He deconstructs not the relationships between people, between characters and performers, but the entire machine that envelopes them, using queerness, non-normativity, to function as his tool of deconstruction. There is no definable sexuality in the machine.

Davis argues that the desiring image is not inherently politicized. The machine cannot be political – it is an object, completely objective. Images are politicized through intentions of the creator, the intentions of the audience. But Andre, though his content is often politicized, takes advantage of the un-politicized machine by inviting politically charged guests, like Stacy Dash,
onto his show, and breaking them down, separating them, from their politics. In Rolling Stone article “Eric Andre Must Destroy the Talk Show”, Matthew Love explains that “part of the team’s process involves breaking down interviewees so that they will ditch any lingering interest in protecting their carefully constructed images” (Love, web). He quotes Andre in saying that the show is “half social experiment, half psychological torture”, summarizing Andre’s intentions – it is not about being politically subversive, even when he is. It is about breaking down an entire culture of expectation, of comfort, stripping his guests of their Hollywood-curated identities and revealing a system that is not curated whatsoever. By intentionally stripping his guests and his machine of its politicization, he breaks free from social expectation and highlights the necessity to destroy modernity.

Andre’s anarchism is based in a lack of politicization and morality because it is these elements of society that function as indicators of modernity. Essentially, Andre sets himself up with a political structure, an expectation to play into the politics of his guests and his viewers. Without the expectation of politicization, his show would mean nothing. Talk show hosts like Jimmy Fallon are successful because of the audience’s familiarity with their content, their desire to engage with their guests and their guests’ politics. While the structure of a classical talk show is also necessary for an audience’s engagement, it is the politicization of the images that draw the most significant responses. This is important for Andre to begin with. He takes a machine that lacks politics, politicizes it, and then destroys the politicization. Starting simply with an un-politicized world make his work meaningless, because his deconstruction relies on social cues and understandings as well as form. Inviting Stacy Dash on his show immediately makes it political – there is intention in that invitation. So he subverts her formally, through his performance, by releasing rats into the studio and showing her photo shopped nude images of
Barack Obama. She does not know what to do with herself, and is eventually piggy-backed away by Hannibal Buress. For someone who makes the choice to go onto national news and express her politics for the public, this is a ridiculous situation to be put in. But it is necessary that she is politicized so Andre can criticize not her politics – even though he clearly does not agree with them - but politics in the machine in general. He cannot be an anarchist without politicization, so he relies on the structure of the media with which he works so he can then break it down. He can only destroy when there is something to be destroyed.

Eric Andre is a nihilist, and everything he does is just for the sake of doing it. It is dangerous to hail him as a sort of political leader in what he does, because his intentions are to separate himself and his work from politics and morality altogether. He just likes to know what would happen if he did the thing he’s thought of. His work has created a sort of underground rebellion in media, because he is drawing attention to the anarchy necessary to deconstruct the classical Hollywood narrative structure, but to give him full power as the leader of a movement would be naïve. He’s certainly nuanced, and he does give himself a lot of power in the world in which he works due to his nihilism – the consequences to his performances do not fully matter – but he still does operate in a major network’s realm. He has a lot of freedom, yes, and he is doing something similar to that which happens inside his show – he is working from the inside out, giving himself the same space he gives his guests. He is inside the machine, at the same time as he uses the machine, but he also has to cater to the machine, or his platform will be removed.

*The Eric Andre Show* is comedic anarchy. He uses the cinematic codes of which Kracauer speaks to deconstruct a format that has captured the essence of modernity. It is the sanitization of politics and interests, a format so researched and overdone that it has become rigid, bored. Andre is Kracauer’s “caricature of a caricature”, revealing this boredom to
audiences. Andre takes it upon himself to criticize the machine in which talk shows and other media are pumped out regularly, holding a mirror up to itself to break down its regulation, its normalcy. This is where the queerness comes in – Andre must force a non-normativity on the talk show structure in order to give audiences the space to analyze that which they may have ignored without his prompting. His placement on a major network may cause some constraints – he often runs into legal issues when pushing the boundaries of public television too far – but it also allows him to reach a wider audience, provide viewers with the ability to consume his work so they can move forward in their consumption of media with the knowledge of deconstruction, their eye just a little bit more critical. Small strides, of course, because there is still an entire system of regulated media in place, but by holding even a small mirror up to society, by capturing and revealing the distortion, he begins to break down and overcome modernity.
Bibliography


