

***“The Dada of Haha”:
The Hypermodern Anti-Comedy of Tim and Eric,
Eric André and Million Dollar Extreme***

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SMASHING THE LIVING ROOM:

AN INTRODUCTION

Potted plants, a couch. A desk, a chair. Brown curtains, columns, a tabletop globe. Picture a comedy talk show set outfitted with these staples: homey, right? Comforting? It might, for you, invoke a living room; after all, as Michael Shapiro writes, “the family-like living room of the talk-show set...functions as a theatrical stage to forge intimate connections with the friends and family of the nation.” (Shapiro 32) Think, for a moment, on the worn-in “living rooms” offered by our nation’s most beloved comedy programs: the quirky clutter of *Seinfeld*, the stylized skyline of the *Tonight Show*, the comforting glow of *Saturday Night Live*’s faux-Grand Central spread. We know these spaces perhaps better than we do our own living rooms; the latter mutable, the former dependable. We come upon these shared “living rooms” and we, Pavlov’s audience, know that it’s time to laugh. Comedy becomes a warm, bubbling cordial that brings us, the Shapiro-style nation-as-family, together; in indulging in our shared national sense of humor, we as a culture bond together as we settle into the cozy cosmic couch these comedy programs offer us.

With this in mind, once again picture the comedy talk show set. Now picture a man bursting from the wings to violently, viciously kick it to pieces. He tears down curtains, smashes frames, throws chairs. The show’s house band plays a cheesy intro jingle through his demolition; soon, like a man possessed, he tackles the drummer and nails him with a smattering of punches. In this midst of this furniture-splintering, our host scraps with a cop, gags on a raw fish and cha-chas with a dance partner before suplexing her into the desk. In a manic minute, the place is completely demolished.

Finally, the host slumps amidst the wreckage; stagehands reconstruct the set behind him as he pants heavily. This opener to programming block Adult Swim's *The Eric Andre Show*, besides being a... well, punchy way to introduce the madness of the program, forms an apropos visual metaphor for the invigorating function of anti-comedy. Anti-comedy – also known as meta-comedy – effectively smashes up the traditional living-room approach to comedy. The idea that comedy programs should be a force of unification or mollification is flung aside by anti-comedy, which, with its aggressively alienating features, highlights the mediocrity of comedians who avoid thinking critically about their craft. Anti-comedy knows what we expect as an audience and a comedy-consuming culture – and takes immense delight in shanking it. After all, when you throw back your head in laughter, someone can come at your jugular.

The academic study of anti-comedy is a burgeoning field, with serious analysis of the subgenre slowly accumulating to form distinct boundaries to this seemingly uncontainable art form. Anti-comedy finds an early examination in Richard Corliss' 1981 *Time Magazine* article "Comedy's Post-Funny School", which functions as not just a veritable who's-who of anti-comedy innovators but as an illuminating early touchstone. For all of his in-depth analysis, canny wordsmith Corliss strikes gold with a four-word nutshell pitch: anti-comedy is, in short, "the Dada of haha." (*Time*) The Dada art movement, which sought to toy with the "meaninglessness of the modern world", is a clear forebear to anti-comedy; with its "pok[ing] fun of the "seriousness", formality, and sanctity of traditional art," Dada highlighted the flaws and the arbitrariness of its contemporaries' traditional approaches. (*Miami Dade College*) Why are artists slavishly devoted to the established artistic rulebook, and what about our culture cooked up the

rulebook in the first place? Anti-comedy is umbilically connected to Dada for the distinct subversions it offers, boldly championing the true raucousness of the mangling, the inverting, or the absence of a “joke.” Anti-comedy commonly possesses a combination of a disappointing, irrelevant, incoherent or entirely absent “punchline” and intentionally severe aesthetic failure (poor production quality or woefully awkward acting, for example.) The result is a cringingly convincing cocktail that tricks the uninitiated and tickles those “in the know”.

Anti-comedy has gained staggering traction in today’s media landscape, with myriad comedy programs attempting to tango with this spiky subgenre. This stripe of comedy-making has started to surface even in the very kind of mainstream content they lampoon, from Totino’s pizza rolls commercials to Saturday Night Live sketches (if only those that air around the risk-inoculated 1 AM slot.) This begs the question: *why now?* What is it about the 21st century that has allowed comedy to morph into such a new, strange, exhilarating beast? One recalls that Dada was born of World War I, that it was a kickback against a political climate of devastating industrial carnage wherein the world seemed soaked with an unprecedented nihilism. In a crisply analogous way, anti-comedy was truly born of today’s wild hypermodernity.

Hypermodernity, in short, is “a stage in society where the belief is that our technological advancements are happening so quickly that history is no longer a valid indicator of possible future” – that is, today’s anxiety-generating condition wherein we have no reference point for the chaos around us. Traditions that we commit to as a culture are therefore rendered irrelevant and banal – traditions in comedy naturally included. (*Quora*) In hypermodernity, there is the belief that people have more control

over the human experience than ever before; however, this control comes without direction. Hypermodernity is akin to driving a motorcycle in pitch-blackness: we can get there faster than ever before, but where are we going? Meaningfully meaningless anti-comedy, therefore, is the logical next step in comedy's evolution as we head into wildly uncertain hypermodern times. Three major case studies from the 21st century will allow us to truly understand this timely transformation: the works of comedians Tim Heidecker and Eric Wareheim (of *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!*) Eric André (of *The Eric André Show*) and the troupe Million Dollar Extreme (of *Million Dollar Extreme Presents World Peace*). The three share similar sinews in style; despite their surface-level aesthetic similarities, however, the three utilize the weaponized subgenre to fire shots at completely distinct facets of hypermodern culture.

In the channel-seek mélange of pop-gunk they have cultivated as their house style, duo Tim and Eric weave the deteriorated, low-rent elements of cheap infomercials, mediocre public access television, stilted corporate training videos, late '80s/early '90s net-mad effluvia and other aesthetically amateur forms to make a larger statement not only on today's accelerated diet of media pabulum we are consistently force-fed but on the sheer banality of hypermodern nostalgia. In hypermodernity, "artifacts from the past superabundantly clutter the cultural landscape and are seamlessly reused to generate an even greater superabundance from which individuals are unable to discern original intent or meaning." (Emicapers) In other words, today's culture, as with Tim and Eric's chopped-and-screwed comedy, strips its scrambled stew of influences of any larger statement. Tim and Eric's nihilistic anti-comedy borrows its aesthetic from sources where quality and substance takes a backseat to utilitarianism, the ultimate in hyper-

accelerated sentiments. In hypermodern times, Tim and Eric's programs seem to articulate, our culture will die of a phrase coined by poet Patricia Lockwood – “genericide” – employed here to mean a reduction of our media to a crushingly generic state. The contradiction they offer is their artful tackling of artlessness.

Heir apparent Eric André, in pulling from the pair's toolbox, has an entirely different medium in his crosshairs – that of the lumbering, stale comedy talk show which, in its eagerness to “soothe, mollify and accommodate”, says nothing and is nothing. (*Vulture*) Eric André's talk show invites celebrities on his show to gaslight them with terrible or inept questions; these are accompanied by shocking surprises that elicit genuine reactions from stars prepared to maintain their press-release-y facades (live rats are released to scurry around Stacey Dash's feet, for instance, or a roundhouse kick is delivered to Flavor Flav's face by co-host Hannibal Buress.) Talk shows allow celebrities to posture and giggle and self-promote; the hosts are compulsively obsequious. With the advent of our frighteningly hypermodern political landscape, wherein fake news can whiz around the world at breakneck speed, these talk shows are rendered ineffective and neutered. How could this traditional format possibly handle the twisting turns our culture has taken? “Eric André's show,” in response to this, “is a program powered by its creator's agonizing and acute awareness of both the archaic banality of late-night talk shows and the urgent need to destroy them.” (*Vulture*)

Eric André's liberal orientation finds its flipside in the troupe Million Dollar Extreme (MDE). While political statements aren't quite at the forefront of Eric André's antics, they do indicate a leaning to the left, pranking figures like conservative conspiracy theorist Alex Jones; Million Dollar Extreme, on the other hand, has aligned themselves

decidedly with the Internet-honed nastiness of the “alt-right” movement. MDE – a group comprised of comedians Sam Hyde, Charls Carroll and Nick Rochefort – lambast in their work “social justice warriors”, “special-snowflake” millennials and a variety of minority groups in a way that borders on so bigoted as to be a hoax; in their intensely problematic comedy, they evoke a roving gang of antisocial Internet trolls. “With the collapse of the great normative discourses on morality,” hypermodern theorist Sébastien Charles writes, “we are witnessing unprecedented asocial phenomena that are all marked by an irresponsible individualism [such as] ubiquitous cynicism...” (Lipovetsky 22) The act of wholly committing to a cringe-worthy persona is a hallmark of anti-comedy, with failed lounge entertainer characters Neil Hamburger (Gregg Turkington) and Tony Clifton (Andy Kaufman) offering strong examples; ringleader Sam Hyde’s being subsumed into his spiteful public identity is hard to nail down. Is it real? Is it fake? From his fraudulent Drexel TEDtalk prank to his fans’ dissemination of false news implicating him as a mass shooter, the message is clear: in hypermodern times, sincerity is passé and morality is dispensable.

SIGNPOSTS OFF A CLIFF:

THEORIES OF (ANTI-)COMEDY

To understand anti-comedy, one must first familiarize oneself with the theoretical framework from which anti-comedy departs. Traditional comedy relies on a set of expectations – a contract, if you will, between the audience and the comedian(s) – that is familiar and reassuring. For traditional comedy to function properly, there must be something to recognize for an audience to laugh in recognition; after all, anti-comedy laughs at you while traditional comedy laughs with you, intent on looping you in on the

joke. The first expectation of traditional comedy is that the comedic pieces will “signpost” their status – in other words, remind us thoroughly that they are all intended to be humorous, not to be taken seriously. This signposting is bound up in Elder Olson’s conception of “worthlessness” as explored in Gerald Mast’s *The Comic Mind*. “A worthless action is one that we do not take seriously [or as] a matter of life and death”, he writes; humor arises, therefore, when one treats a “worthless” matter in this way. (Mast 9) The comedian is then tasked with delegitimizing the intensity with which they treat this unserious scenario: “the comic craftsman plants a series of signs that lets us know the action is taking place in a comic world, that it will be ‘fun’...that we are to enjoy and not to worry.” (Mast 9)

There are myriad ways traditional comedians choose to signpost, an activity Mast describes as creating a “comic climate”: everything from stunt casting to goofy titling to the use of traditional clowning archetypes might function as a tone indicator. Alongside these contextual clues in style and substance, some traditional comedians choose to make things more explicit with instruments like laugh tracks and rimshots (that, naturally, can be misappropriated in anti-comedy). Once we as an audience are sold on the idea that we are to loosen up and laugh together, we can identify exactly what flavor of comedy we are in for. According to Mast, there are only eight traditional comedic plots in existence for us to identify: the “new comedy” (the lovers overcome the obstacles facing them); the Aristophanic “old comedy” styles (parody, *reductio ad absurdum*, comedy of clashing elements); the tailing of a comic figure through an environment; plot-free riffing; a protagonist versus an impossible task and, finally, the Oedipal discovery of a

longstanding error. These overarching structures can function as comforting road maps for an audience.

At this point, two Mast-cited concepts come into play: that of Brechtian *verfremdunseffekt* and *katastasis*, the former of which leads to the latter. *Verfremdunseffekt* is what allows an audience to see the proverbial seams of a piece, which then gives them permission to giggle, safe in the knowledge that this is a socially acceptable response to the actions' "worthlessness". Mast proposes that "Brecht's theory of 'Epic Theatre' is essentially a comic theory" in that it supports this idea of thorough "signposting", resulting in an opportune critical remove for the viewer. *Verfremdunseffekt* proposes that the traditional comedian might make the audience emotionally disengage as "the baring of theatrical artifice stimulates reflection by reducing illusion"; for the traditional comic, these artificial indicators – which might include third-wall-breaking asides and the aforementioned rim shot – are essential to making their jokes fly. (Mast 15) Rather than feeling concern at a clown taking a severe tumble, the audience, detached, laughs. This is a sense of *katastasis*: "that we do not believe in comedy's reality, that we consciously recognize the imitation as imitation, produces an intellectual-emotional distance from the work that is the essential comic response. *Katastasis* is, in short, the very "relaxed, unconcerned detachment" required to enjoy traditional gags. (Mast 15)

At this point, anti-comedy completely turns this traditional signposting tendency on its head. With anti-comedy, there are no indicators, no hand-holding and certainly no laugh track, unless employed for darkly ironic effect. Traditional comedy elicits an "oh, I get it"; anti-comedy warrants a "is this for real?" If indicators are employed in anti-

comedy, they are used to subvert expectations: to use anti-comedic Adult Swim short film *Too Many Cooks* as an example, a traditional sitcom-opening theme song is clearly signposted before the audience's expectations are dashed as the track loops and loops, horrifically switching genres for eleven gory minutes. In anti-comedy, the contents are not always reflected in the packaging; unlike traditional comedy's commitment to keelhauling the audience onto the same page, misleading an audience is the name of anti-comedy's game. In its tendency to bait-and-switch, anti-comedy is critical of traditional comedy structures' easiness and refusal to confront.

Furthermore, what Mast theorizes might kill jokes – emotional engagement – is oftentimes the contradictory ingredient that allows anti-comedians to pull off their tricky gags. A case study can be found in Baltimore-based troupe Wham City Comedy's anti-comedic short *Unedited Footage of a Bear*, wherein a cheery advertisement for an antihistamine results in the severe mental breakdown of the commercial's central mother from the product's maddening side effects. The viewer – blindsided by the fact that what they thought was an intrusive YouTube pop-up instead follows a woman's grisly psychotic break – is given no indication that the short is to be laughed at. Rather than promoting a complacent comedic detachment, the short requires the viewer to engage with the horror of the faux-Claritin spokeswoman's mania; any laughter elicited is not at the onscreen events but at the fact that such a bizarre concept for a "comedy" video might exist in the first place. It is the kind of incredulous laughter caused by discovering something you are unprepared for and truly do not know what to do with. This piece of anti-comedy is ultimately successful because it is so egregiously un-"funny" in style and content that it effectively flips back to being funny. Today, humor is steadily beginning

to evolve into a radical new beast wherein the goal, it seems, is no longer to elicit a dependable laugh – any signposts in anti-comedy lead right off a cliff.

HERE HE COMES TO SAVE THE DAY:

ANTI-COMEDY'S MIGHTY ORIGINS

The birth of the anti-comedic approach is naturally difficult to pinpoint, but one of the earliest citations of its power can be found in Richard Corliss' 1981 *Time* article "Comedy's Post-Funny School". In this breakdown, he cites a pantheon of early anti-comic innovators; Albert Brooks, Steve Martin, Murray Langston, Martin Mull and Lily Tomlin are all highlighted as important contributors to its development. The figure appearing to loom the largest over this history, however, would be that of Andy Kaufman, who many look to as the father of the slippery subgenre. At this point in our exploration, perhaps we should allow opinionated comedian Norm Macdonald a moment of dissent. A quote from Macdonald, who claims to "despise" anyone claiming the title of meta-comic: "Many point to Andy Kaufman as an anti-comic. When they do, they expose themselves to be the idiots they are." (*Movie Mezzanine*) Let us therefore proceed with this exposure.

In reading his article, one can sense Corliss' thrill at watching this concept coalesce as he whimsically cites Nietzsche and "patricidal Greeks". Gone are the days of comics nattering on about "their mothers, their wives, their egos", he pronounces; gone is the agita of Allen, the criticism of Carson, the childhood capers of Cosby or Carlin. Instead, the targets remain in the room. So long as the comedic trinity of audience, comedian and the Holy Spirit of the trusting contract between them, so too will anti-comedians seek to perform sacrilege. Regarding the audience, anti-comics clearly state

that they do not require their love or their applause; regarding the state of comedy, their “fascination with the detritus of the entertainment industry” permit them to borrow heavily from the “netherworld of Reno lounge acts and Rotary Club M.C.s, talk-show ciphers and the I-hate-you-but-deep-down-inside-I’m-a-wonderful-guy Janus face of Don Rickles.” (*Time*) The trusting contract is abused with puckish uses of tools like comedy of duration, wherein an audience’s patience is stretched ragged as a gag becomes interminable, or embodiment of persona, wherein an audience cannot discern oddball character from “real” identity. Implicit in all of this are the sins of American entertainment built on the backs of weirdo dime-store jesters; “all the world’s a cramped stage in a seedy Newark bar,” Corliss writes, “and all the men and women – onstage or off – merely sweaty-palmed buffoons following the dog act.” (*Time*)

Enter stage right: Andy Kaufman, man of the hour. “Before he was even 30,” Melissa Weller writes, “Kaufman had started a movement, laying the groundwork for...anti-comedy.” (*Movie Mezzanine*) According to Allen, interacting with an in-the-zone Kaufman was like “talking to a religious fanatic” for his saucer-eyed commitment to his pear-shaped brand of humor. (*Time*) Below are several excerpts from Kaufman’s colorful comic career:

1. A twitchy, stone-faced Kaufman stands nervously beside a record player as it plays the entirety of the Mighty Mouse cartoon theme song; he breaks out of this awkward silence to dramatically lip-synch the phrase “here I come to save the day”, before dropping back into fidgety muteness. This repeats three times. He takes a sip of water, exhausted from the sheer effort of the performance.

2. In lieu of “performing”, Kaufman unrolls a sleeping bag onstage, settles in and falls dead asleep in front of his audience. He proceeds to take his nap for 10 minutes.
3. Once again – in lieu of “performing”, Kaufman orders chocolate ice cream from a comedy club waitress, sits patiently on stage for it to arrive and casually eats the entire bowl. Finally, he bows, to thunderous applause.
4. In a tuxedo and a plummy British accent, Kaufman reads a sizeable excerpt of *The Great Gatsby*. He follows this by playing a record of him reading even more still of *The Great Gatsby*.
5. Kaufman begins to sing “100 Bottles of Beer on the Wall” and does not cease to sing until he arrives at 8 bottles, at which point he walks off the stage. At this point, audiences clamor for him to return and finish the song.
6. Kaufman promises his Carnegie Hall audience that if they are “good”, he will take them out for milk and cookies. He delivers on his promise, shipping the audience in buses to a spread of milk and cookies on 49th street.

As these high-concept, punchline-free examples illustrate, anti-comedy owes a great deal to this pioneer; in his comprehensive theoretical analysis “Quantum Andy”, H. Peter Steeves asserts that “everything he did was simultaneously comedy and an expansion of what comedy is.” (Steeves 116) In his piece, Steeves compares Andy’s work to both quantum physics and Picasso’s paintings in the way that they operate by their own captivating postmodern logic. Steeves’ first comparison to quantum physics dubs Kaufman’s humor a paradox (“How can eating a meal onstage be funny?”), but one that arises only when we “try to understand this laughter using modernist or traditional terminology.” As with applying this terminology to describe the paradoxical, Einsteinian

“spooky action at a distance” of particles in the quantum world, trying to analyze Kaufman’s postmodern “quantum comedy” through a modernist lens is an instant no-go.

Regarding the second comparison to Picasso’s oeuvre: some would cite Andy as a trickster, someone who intends to hoodwink audiences into expecting one-liners and receiving snacking, snores, or many, many bottles of beer on the wall. However, Andy’s jokes, while possessing an element of deception, do not set out to deceive – they merely wish to offer a flip-flopped comedy universe, ultimately allowing us to laugh at what we take for granted in the genre and in life. Steeves makes the comparison between the comic and the painter in that, despite their unexpected shape, Picasso’s faces don’t “lie” – “They show us one way in which the face can appear – they fill in part of the absent horizon of the face. We learn something about what it is to be a face when we study Picasso’s paintings.” (Steeves 122) In a similar way, we learn something about what it means to be a performer and an audience member from Kaufman’s subversive anti-comedic work.

Kaufman, ever the “destroyer of rhythm”, understood a basic principle about traditional comedy’s structure: it tends to be uncomfortably coercive. (Steeves 117) Our brains seek familiar beats, allowing the traditional comedian to comfortably skate by on the reliable punchline/laugh tattoo it knows will reward them: “you know when the joke is coming, you know when to expect a snappy comeback, a droll observation, a catty put-down...your body has been taken by the rhythm and laughs in all the right places...” (Steeves 118) Steeves likens this brand of laughter to a sick ravaging, in a sense, of the viewer’s sensibilities: “think of the last time you were used and discarded by a sit-com, the last time the canned laugh-track laughter goaded you into a gang-bang chuckle.” The

punch-line setups of traditional comedy can artlessly hammer their way into one's bones in a way that demands nothing of the performer and nothing of the viewer. Conversely, in his anti-comedic omission of punchline altogether, Kaufman evokes an audience response that is varied, textured and honest. When watching recordings of Kaufman's performances, one notes that the response "is not instant laughter [and audience members] are not [all] laughing at the same thing"; Kaufman is no choirmaster and the audience is not beholden, Pavlovian, to any rimshot. The joke is no longer a narrow corridor from A to B but a boundless field of quirks in which audience members can make their own little discoveries.

A note on the phrase "anti-comedy": many comedians and comedy critics have pushed back against using the term, either favoring "meta-comedy" or favoring none at all, due to its negative ring. Tim Heidecker, a supremely important figure in the style's history, has blasted the word as "stupid" frequently, even flatly Tweeting "anti-comedy isn't a thing"; as his work is intended to cause laughter, Heidecker reasons, it is just as much an example of comedy as any other comedian's, normative or no. "Anti-" is bracing, acrid; "meta-" possesses a degree of cool analysis while "anti-" is a donkey kick of a prefix. Could anything be less mirthful? It comes as no surprise to hear performers shrink from the term; however, the phrase "anti-comedy" begs reconsideration for its uncompromising boldness.

Despite those believing the contrary, anti-comedy is hardly "against" comedy – if anything, it is a joyful liberation of comedy from the shackling forces of comedic "success". There is a myth that the marker of "successful" comedy is everyone playing their role: zinger, rimshot, big laugh, rinse and repeat. Conversely, Kaufman and his kin

are allowing “comedy [to be] stripped from the comedian, emancipated from his rhythms and his will, and returned to us” – an act that is truly pro-comedy. (Steeves 118)

Kaufman’s anti-comedy asks us to turn off autopilot and actively discover humor wherever we may find it – in a twitch, a stutter, a false start, a betraying flicker of a smile, or the fact that the bizarre bit exists in the first place. If anti-comedy is anti-anything, it is the idea that the only positive comedic reaction is a unified, and unifying, one. “Ted Cohen has argued that comedy is about confirming our similarities,” Steeves writes; “jokes are about our shared identity. When we laugh together...it is ‘the realization of a desperate hope [...] that we are enough like one another to sense one another, to be able to live together.’” “But,” he insists, “Andy’s comedy is about difference.” (Steeves 118) Anti-comedy like Kaufman’s makes the case for a heterogeneous audience, for the invigorating clash that occurs when those nervously silent, those chuckling in disbelief and those roaring in laughter find their own rhythms. While imperfect, only the bold phrase “anti-comedy” quite evokes that paradoxical energy. This subgenre is not wishy-washy; the term shouldn’t be, either.

HAMBURGERS, HOT DOGS, HYPERMODERNITY:

“TIM AND ERIC AWESOME SHOW, GREAT JOB!”

It is night, and two strangely-coiffed men stand in the parking lot of a B-grade nightclub called Circus Disco. They are agonizing over what to name their new company, officially formed several minutes prior. “We’re boys who do business,” one of the men muses, as if this statement might lead to profound insight. Suddenly, a name appears, splashed in stars across the night sky: *DOBIS*. The two delight at this clumsy truncation of the phrase “doing business”. A glowing trio of fax machine, calculator and

stapler appear in the sky (“Look at all the elements of business!” the second man coos), before the Dobis constellation offers more riches. “Market Research!” “Strategic P.R.!” “Profit and Loss!” they chant. “I’ll have the report to you on Monday!” the first man promises a boss floating in the sky; “I look forward to it!” the boss responds with a wink.

Comedy duo Tim Heidecker and Eric Wareheim – or “Tim and Eric” – undoubtedly possess all the “elements of business,” the business in question being a feverish strain of anti-comedy. There’s a whirlwind patchwork of “elements” floating in their business constellation, many sourcing from the culty mid-’90s compilation series TV Carnage; the tapes, a mishmash of “late-night broadcast detritus, from cheesy infomercials to politically incorrect cartoons to countless public-access performances,” offered the two Temple University film students the screwy toolbox with which to create the “entirely new comedic language” that is their house style. (*Wired*) This style, honed through a decade of producing television series, feature films, short films, podcasts, advertisements and ‘net-based content, first hatched out of the fused skull that is their 2007 series *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!*.

Awesome Show is, in short, an 11-minute wasteland of carefully curated mediocrity, its jackhammering episodes as amoebic in form as free jazz. In attempting to describe *Awesome Show*, *Wired*’s Brian Raftery cites characters who “wear too much makeup, scream or vomit without warning, and rap about socks”; *Bloomberg*’s Max Abelson compares its “augmented ugliness” to the “kamikaze post-apocalyptic videos” of artist Ryan Trecartin. The show’s detractors find it “unbearable, loud, schizophrenic, soulless, ugly, and unfunny”; someone might also deem it un-analyzable, finding nothing of academic merit amidst the puke, drool and pasta sauce. (Medium) To marathon a

season of *Awesome Show* would be to subject oneself to dozens of incoherent sales pitches for useless products, to meet a fleet of alternative-fact-hawking crackpots, to be subjected to the “talents” of the creatively bankrupt, to drown in a full-tilt bureaucratic nightmare.

In short, marathoning a season of *Awesome Show* could be a little like living in America. In our hypermodern times, American culture can itself appear incoherent for its emphasis on the hollow and the artless. Tim and Eric’s work is therefore not inanity for inanity’s sake: its ramming speed matches that at which we process media in our Internet age, its retro aesthetic speaks to our backwards-facing pop pilfering, and its alternate America is as alienating as this one can be. Author Dave Eggers appreciates that it’s “not a glossy comedy where beautiful people trade bon mots”; “it’s interested in ugliness and decrepitude and some of the most ordinary aspects of people and life and America – though seen through a surrealist’s eye,” he praises. (*Wired*)

This brings us back to the men in the parking lot – Tim and Eric, naturally – searching the night sky for answers. Above them are the generic totems of a retro-nostalgic ‘80s corporate banality, scattered amongst the stars. Vague, business-y jargon is intoned like magic words. This scene – excerpted from Tim and Eric’s controversial feature film debut, *Tim and Eric’s Billion Dollar Movie* – is a profound turning point in which our heroes find their destiny; the fact that the destiny leads them to an abandoned, decaying all-American shopping mall infested with wolves perhaps says it all.

In order to understand Tim and Eric’s cultural significance and their connection to those anti-comedians who came before, one must recognize the real star of *Awesome Show* – and it’s neither Tim nor Eric. In many of *Awesome Show*’s bits, the joke does not

stem from content as much as form; the real screwball is the fictional showrunner of their universe whose invisible hand gave the videos his stamp of approval. Just as Kaufman's inept stand-up personae suggest the unseen influence of a terrible booking agent who found their routines to be up to snuff, Tim and Eric sketches possess the connotation that there are weirdoes both in front of and behind the public-access camera. The camera-work is "wobbly in a way that suggests their equipment has broken down, the tapes are disintegrating, and all the adults have fled the station." (*Bloomberg*) Ugly fades, ghastly lighting, fuzzy resolution, chintzy graphics, tracking errors, tacky wipe transitions, jerky camera movements, strange zooms, inept splicing: the mystery of what kind of strange soul might let these slide proves as tickling as the action onscreen.

Due to the 1984 Cable Franchise Policy and Communications Act of 1984, Raftery writes, the '80s were a "wonderful time for terrible crap": "America got insecure talk-show hosts, bug-eyed conspiracy theorists, and deservedly undiscovered musicians — lumpen, inarticulate people who would not have been allowed anywhere near a commercial TV soundstage." (*Wired*) For this reason, Heidecker shares, they've often resorted to appropriately retro technology to give their sketches temporal texture: they'll "dump a piece to VHS, then shake the player, or bang on it, and reimport it." (*Wired*)

In his thorough academic analysis of *Awesome Show*, Jeffrey Sconce cites a recurring routine featuring anti-vaudeville act Casey and His Brother, featured on the faux-public-access revue *Uncle Muscle's Hour*, as a crisp example of this approach's umbilical connection to Kaufman. The setup is simple: Casey (Heidecker as a nervous, sickly little boy in a vest) and his Brother (played by Wareheim in a rotating series of costumes) perform little ditties that absolutely drip with discomfort. Casey's face,

sloppily rouged and slick with some sort of shiny slime, is tortured into a permanent wince. “I want to go on a horse and buggy ride,” he shakily sings as his brother awkwardly gallops around in a horse costume. “Hamburgers and hot dogs too / I want to have a barbecue,” he whines and keens as his brother boogies in a hamburger costume; the bit ends with him projectile stress-puking, choking on a hot dog and accidentally beginning to sing the Horse and Buggy Ride song again. We learn little about the boys’ origins, except for a “Song For Mommy” revealing Casey’s dark relationship with his mother. They are an enigma, furthered by the “WTF verisimilitude” of their bits’ mise-en-scene. (*Wired*)

At this point, the gentlemen pull a Kaufman-esque shuffle, pairing their fictional numbers with performances from actual “entertainers” from the public access world, whose strange routines are all too real. After watching the work of James Quall (inexpert celebrity imitations) or David Liebe Hart (clumsy ventriloquism and songs about aliens), Casey and His Brother starts to feel bizarrely real; “Much as Kaufman’s performances compelled viewers in the broadcast era to question what was real and what was not,” Sconce writes, “Tim and Eric’s vacillation between performing “fake” ineptitude and showcasing apparently authentic amateurism elicits a similar confusion in the era of...a 100+ channel cable system, replicating a logic of channel-surfing that also so often suspends viewers between the real and the parodic.” (Sconce 76-77)

At this point, criticism that anti-comedy is elitist comes into play, as one of the factors contributing to our laughter is our intense contemporary media literacy; the sheer amount of video content Millennials have experienced is staggering in our YouTube age. Our laughs can easily take on a bully’s ring; *we know what a good video looks like*, we

scoff, *and that is not it*. Casey and his Brother is what a tech-illiterate old fogey might slap together, unable to discern its badness like we can. It's the humor of aesthetic hierarchy, and a laugh at Tim and Eric might very well be at those without ability. Tim and Eric, a positive pair, likely do not intend for their work to scan as such; this dynamic is worth noting all the same.

In repurposing this vintage style, Tim and Eric is also decidedly hypermodern; despite any elitist tones, its use is nostalgic: "we millennials were also raised on VHS and the horrific color-scape of the late '80s and early '90s, and T&E embrace those aesthetics fully. They evoke nostalgia for a seemingly more naive and honest time...It's [as] fun and bright and as affectionate as it is also at times disgusting or terrible." (*Medium*) This neatly bookends with hypermodernity theorist Gilles Lipovetsky's comments on the "vogue for the past" of the "paradoxical present" – "old objects...everything that mimics the past...everything 'vintage', all the products stamped 'authentic' that arouse our nostalgia" he cites as culturally coveted. (Lipovetsky 57-59) *Awesome Show* is a clear illustration of this tendency.

Equally hypermodern is the ramming speed at which the show thunders forward. Lipovetsky writes that, "in the [hypermodern] world of bustling activity, speed – it is said – replaces the bond between human beings, efficiency replaces the quality of life, and feverishness replaces the enjoyment of intense but fleeting pleasures." (Lipovetsky 53) How appropriate that Tim and Eric sketches are ultra-short – some clocking at 15 seconds – and they race by before the viewer can really acknowledge they occurred. Cathy Fisher writes that, "For Awesome Show, there isn't an in-between, neutral state: it's basically just ON, ON, ON." This is ideal for the hyperaccelerated, hyperfractured nature of the

Millennial attention span in our media-glutted age; “a show like Awesome Show that basically says ‘Don’t like this sketch? Well just wait ten seconds and there’ll be something different,’ plays exactly into what we want our media to do,” Fisher assesses. (*Medium*)

With this intentionally amateur aesthetic approach, Awesome Show offers lethally cynical criticism of today’s landscape of media mediocrity. The most immediately prominent type of mediocrity on blast is, of course, that of the entertainment industry and its paucity of ideas; in a landscape of inane reality television, sequels/threequels/reboots and the consecrating of the slapdash and thoughtless, Tim and Eric’s clips might feasibly blend in. Regarding bloodless prank-based hidden camera T.V., Tim and Eric humbly submit Spaggett, a ponytailed man in a red turtleneck, face absolutely coated in spaghetti sauce. His only function is to jump out from behind things and yell his own name in an endeavor to “spook” his targets, at which he never succeeds. One sketch has him lurk in an office building: “these two office members are planning ahead for their weekly office meeting,” a narrator giddily intones; “but what they can’t possibly plan for is a surprise visit from Spaggett...” Spaggett springs from behind a potted plant and yells. The businessmen, not remotely startled, stare blankly. “Spooked ya! You should see your faces,” the eminently un-scary Spaggett insists. With wildly misguided shock-and-awe programming typical of our hypermodern times turning television into a cheesy haunted house, a show built around a pasta-sauce-smeared man yelling at you becomes a credible logical extreme.

Emerging from the cash-grab kid-flick swamp of flops like *Foodfight!* is *The Pillgrims*, Tim and Eric’s comment on grating children’s entertainment. This sketch features director “Glen Tennis” conducting a stilted promotional interview with the star of

his animated Thanksgiving feature; his leading man, “Grum,” is a shrill and shoddily rendered CGI booger who flickers in and out of visibility. Their conversational beats don’t match up, pauses linger, words overlap; we never forget Tennis is just a man talking to himself in an empty room. This sketch might remind one of the choice made by showrunners to animate Shrek and his donkey sidekick into empty seats at the 2002 Academy Awards: the perfect snapshot of hypermodern America’s hollow “state-of-the-art” gimmickry can be seen in the image of attendees, dressed to the nines, flashing fake smiles at an ogre that is not there.

Awesome Show continues its assault on whiz-bang emptiness in its handling of the world of technology, a consistent theme in both the show and in Lipovetsky’s *Hypermodern Times*. “We are drowning in “the culture of the fastest and the ‘ever more’”, Lipovetsky writes; “more profitability, more performance, more flexibility, more innovation...” (Lipovetsky 34) We are at risk of being trapped in the quagmire of “blind modernization, technocratic commodity nihilism, a process spinning round and round in a vacuum without aim or meaning.” In his foreword to *Hypermodern Times*, Sébastien Charles cites philosopher Martin Heidegger as finding technology’s “inner meaning,” once to aid humanity, “being confiscated by a “will to will”, with no other aim than its own development.” Charles bleakly summarizes that technology’s “sole aim is [now] to maintain its dominion over men and things.” (Lipovetsky 18) Our hypermodern world has become a technological nightmare. Heidecker and Heidegger meet in sketch “Eric’s Banking Problems”, wherein Wareheim attempts to use an “easy interface”, “no human interaction” touch-screen banking system to set up an account; the machine’s automated voice asks Eric if he lives in a hole or a boat, Eric indicates that he lives in neither, and

things quickly spiral out of control as the glitchy machine misreads his every answer. Ultimately, it changes his wife's legal name to "Taargüs Taargüs" and sends her a pornographic tape, all while Wareheim protests in vain. In Tim and Eric's universe, technology is a force that is barely useful at best and at worst, actively antagonistic; characters frequently find themselves bent to its menacing will.

The fictional company spawning these products is the seemingly monopolistic CINCO; when not hawking useless products with names like the "T'ird", the "B'owl" or "Ham'b", they produce technologies so misconceived as to be dystopian, such as the "Cinco-Fone", which possesses a single button, cannot receive calls and leaves burns on its user's face. CINCO innovation "Mancierge" is similarly thoughtless: a harried Fred Willard stands by for your call, surrounded by a flurry of Post-Its and stacks of Yellow Pages, to serve the Sisyphean task of being your own human search engine. Lipovetsky warned about hypermodernity's "certain excessiveness...that oversteps all limits", typified by the "Internet galaxy and its deluge of digital streams: millions of sites, billions of pages and characters..." (Lipovetsky 32) *Awesome Show's* conception of the Internet is positively Lipovetskian: its unfathomable speed and multitudes, if made tangible, would create a crushing hellscape. It's only appropriate that one episode has CINCO advertising its own Internet, the "Innernette"; this "fresh new way to check out sites, buy clothing and surf music" offers an installable simulacrum on a CD-Rom requiring no actual Internet access. Possessing access to only 103 simplistic websites, Tim promises us that it "almost feels limitless"; while its lack of connectivity only allows you to have meaningless conversations with pre-programmed avatars, this digital ghost town offers

assured protection from spam, viruses, and the hypermodern fear of an overwhelming virtual world.

Technology finds a twin force in hyper-consumerism in Lipovetsky's dystopia, which *Awesome Show* clearly reflects; this "machinery of excess", this "mania for consumption", this "liking for novelty", this "promotion of everything futile and frivolous" cited by Charles and Lipovetsky rears its ugly head in every one of *Awesome Show*'s abstruse faux-infomercials. (Lipovetsky 10, 32) Below are some choice advertising tactics found on *Awesome Show*'s wasteland of raised voices and lowered prices:

1. A mattress commercial promising sound sleep features a napping Will Forte whose dream involves him cannibalizing a man while screaming; finally, his head wetly explodes in a geyser of blood.
2. A "clown breeder" played by Will Ferrell hawks "fresh child clowns", which he keeps in cages; every word of his sales pitch is screamed.
3. In an advertisement "intended for Jim Boonie only", Tim and Eric abusively target a single man for not accepting a piece of land. ("Jim, come get your damn land!")

As one might guess, Lipovetsky's invocation of "mania" is particularly apt. While Tim and Eric's anti-comedy might appear inane at first blush for its eardrum-busting volume, what could better articulate the vehemence with which we are force-fed pop-up pabulum? Only their frenetic energy might accurately portray the aggressive slapping of sponsored content all over our hypermodern universe.

Finally, in *Awesome Show*, people don't just yell things; they yell incorrect things. In our hypermodern times, Charles warns, "nothing enables us to discriminate between information and disinformation"; this prescient warning of our impending post-fact age finds a clear analogue in *Awesome Show*. (Lipovetsky 16) "When I was a child there was thought to be nine planets...but there are now ninety planets", space expert Heidecker mumbles; "all the food is poison," a cheerleading squad insists as a man lists dangerous meals to avoid (which, as it turns out, is all of them). CINCO offers not a fax machine, but a "facts" machine: "No fact is false with the CINCO Facts Machine," we are promised, as the machine spits out vague and dubious statements. What's more, *Awesome Show*'s fan favorite is undoubtedly Dr. Steve Brule, a mumbling bumbler played by John C. Reilly whose brand of clumsy misinformation proved so popular as to spawn his own spinoff program. Ultimately, the anti-comedic world of Tim and Eric is as tangled, shrill and misleading as our own, locking in their status as America's foremost hypermodern anti-comics.

YOU CAN'T SPELL AMERICAN DREAM WITHOUT HIM:

ERIC ANDRE'S ANTI-COMEDIC TORTURE CHAMBER

Over the course of the last decade, Tim and Eric have inspired a wealth of comedians to follow in their subversive footsteps. One of their fellow Adult Swim comedians, Eric André, has isolated their tendency for manipulation, but to different critical ends: rather than lampooning commercial banality, he targets talk shows' dishonest rictus grins. The energies with which they dissect culture are different – if Tim and Eric is a snot milkshake, Eric André is a shot of battery acid – but they borrow from the same anti-comedic surgery kit.

In our new hypermodern climate – wherein we have no reference point from the past to dictate towards what future we are headed – traditions become reflexively stale and meaningless. This “disintegration of the world of tradition is experienced...as a form of tension,” Charles writes; perhaps no anti-comedic outing illustrates this as crisply as the faux-talk show *The Eric Andre Show*, a program that has been described as “a torture chamber dressed up to look like an Eighties public-access oddity.” (*Rolling Stone*) To understand the punk verve of *The Eric Andre Show*, one must first examine its televisual and political context. In hypermodern times, Charles writes that media “are supposed to inform us, but in fact they disinform us, in the interest either of sensation or of vulgar politics. Instead of raising the level of public debate, they transform politics into a spectacle. Rather than being promoters of a high-quality culture, they swamp us with insipid variety shows...” (Lipovetsky 25) Christopher Lasch’s *The Culture of Narcissism* forms a neat bookend with *Hypermodern Times* in its criticism of culture’s emerging tendencies: “We live in a world of pseudo-events and quasi-information, in which the air is saturated with statements that are neither true nor false but merely credible.” (Lasch 75) (As the book was written in 1979, Lasch writes more in terms of Watergate-era “inoperative” facts than “alternative” ones.) Ultimately, in this age of controversies like “Pizzagate,” “nothing enables us to discriminate between information and disinformation: the craziest theories are welcomed with open arms...” (Lipovetsky 16)

Faced with our unprecedented, frightening political climate, how might the “soothing, mollifying, accommodating” qualities of late-night television handle its every violent swerve? As Jimmy Fallon’s softball interaction with then-candidate Donald

Trump revealed, the gentle, bloodless format is fundamentally ill-equipped. Hazlitt's Zachary Lipez encapsulates the moment thusly: "Fallon, in a suckdog caricature of himself and his pathological need to be ingratiating, strived mightily to be America's sweetheart of all lives mattering. It was collaborationist pageantry". (*Hazlitt*) What soporific variety show might come close to accommodating Trump's nationalist sentiments, which won the day with American voters "precisely because [they] refuse all accommodation"? (*Vulture*) *Vulture's* Frank Guan makes the convincing case that one must fight extremes with extremes, which is where *The Eric Andre Show* comes in – or rather, tears in with a baseball bat, screaming and covered in blood. As Trumpian times "exceed any potential invective or caricature", only Eric André's approach might accurately match their unpredictable lunacy.

Eric André's talk show, as with all talk shows, has a band. He has a wingman, an opening monologue, man-on-the-street segments; its bread and butter are naturally the celebrity guests and musicians to his program. Dissect the show, and the parts are certainly all there; after all, you need to build a table before you splinter it. However, his band plays chalkboard-scratch notes discordantly and his unenthusiastic wingman Hannibal Buress "blends into this circus of madness like lemon juice with milk" (*Indiewire*). Opening monologues have featured immolated mics and urolagnia, all accompanied by the sour ring of an anti-comedic laugh track. Interviewees are understandably traumatized by this unpredictable opera and the Tasmanian Devil at its center: "when destroying the set during one of his calamitous overtures, he snarls at his guest 'Thanks for being on the show!' while basically foaming at the mouth." (*Indiewire*)

Unlike Tim and Eric's stealthy parodies, there is no universe in which one might be hoodwinked into thinking they are experiencing a real talk show.

André, an "Andy Kaufman for the Four Loko generation," possesses the caffeinated alcohol's multifariousness: one minute, André's up, bouncing around like a Tex Avery cartoon, and the next minute, he's down, subjecting guests to pitiful weeping. *Rolling Stone's* Matthew Love compares him to a "feral mental patient...awakened from a bad pharmaceutical binge and shoved onto the set of a talk show." (*Rolling Stone*) (*SPIN*) This vacillation is another much-needed criticism of the talk show genre; how much more disingenuous positivity and Crest-commercial grins can audiences take before they begin to turn on America's hosts, especially in light of today's political climate about which one simply can't feel ambiguously? One remembers that the necessary blandness of talk-show hosts is a mirror to our culture's infatuation with social performance, but is this healthy viewing in today's extreme age? In *The Culture of Narcissism*, Lasch introduces sociologist Erving Goffman's writings in reference to the "contemporary malaise": "As human beings we are presumably creatures of variable impulse with moods and energies that change from one moment to the next. As characters put on for an audience, however, we must not be subject to ups and downs...A certain bureaucratization of the spirit is expected so that we can be relied on to give a perfectly homogenous performance at every appointed time." (Lasch 90) This keep-calm-carry-on placidity is hardly helping anyone in this day and age, and Eric André's "11-minute punk aria" sets out to prove it to you. (*Rolling Stone*)

There is a three-step means by which it does so: the first step of the process is to select uninitiated celebrity guest for whom Eric André's name means nothing. The

second step is to shock, gaslight and mildly torture these guests into allowing their press-release facades to slip. (In *Rolling Stone*, co-creator Kitao Sakurai compares this approach to “Vietcong interrogation tactics.”) Finally, the editing team hacks up and remixes the footage to simulate disjointed and non-sequitur reactions. (Director Andrew Barchilon shares that they “almost always use the first moment of an interview” and then instantly “skip to the end, when [the guests are] exhausted and confused. That's where the gold is.”) *A.V. Club*’s Brandon Nowalk likens *The Eric Andre Show*’s iconoclastic editing style to a shredder, wherein the interviews “come out the other side a collage of shredded bits”; ultimately, the effect is that “the show is ripping itself apart.” (*A.V. Club*) No polished project pitch a celebrity has honed beforehand has a fighting chance; squeals abound as André’s stagehands release geysers of cockroaches from his coffee mug to startle actress Tichina Arnold and allow rats to scurry around conservative pundit Stacey Dash’s ankles.

These interviews are not just content for sadists who want to watch celebrities cower; they derive their meta-comedic merit in large part from our familiarity with the cultivated images of the stars they skewer. Jack McBrayer’s trademark chipper persona flies out the window as he grimaces while André eats a plate of mold; Jack Black can barely keep his laid-back wackiness intact as André electrocutes him with a “lie detecting” shock bracelet. Howie Mandel and Jennette McCurdy, usually polished in press interviews, fight to keep composure as André insults family members and positions his sweaty face inches from theirs; fitness guru Jillian Michaels claims she feels drugged when she and André are word-for-word imitated by doppelgängers with dwarfism a few feet away.

Celebrities aren't the only ones at risk; pedestrians get the star treatment as well as André takes his performance art to the streets, leaving a snail trail of nacho cheese, ranch dressing and blood in his wake. Some bits were omitted by censors, such as one in which André stumbles drunkenly around a McDonalds dressed as mascot Ronald; some bits shockingly managed to pass censors, such as one in which André carts around an abducted woman attempting to claw herself out of his suitcase. Some bits possess razor-sharp social criticism, such as one in which André, who is of Haitian descent, tears through Colonial Williamsburg dressed as a runaway slave; conversely, some bits are completely empty of deeper meaning but indicate a great deal about human instinct, such as the routines André performs in the New York subway system. Much of these moments require trashing the train car: in a centaur costume, he drops two cakes; in a beekeeper suit, he drops an ominously buzzing crate; as a rejected applicant for a General Mills career, he splashes milk and Froot Loops into his plastic cone collar and all over the floor, proclaiming "my body is now your communion – please eat from me, drink from me!" Like a rabid collie spooking sheep into their pens, straphangers run from André to cower on the other side of the car; some choose fight over flight and engage, however, making the viewers fear for André's safety. This is Kaufmanesque anti-comedy with all safety nets removed. Suffice it to say that we find ourselves galaxies from *Seinfeld*.

While critics dismiss André's comedy as garish and gross-out – sound familiar? – he has enjoyed comparisons to Brecht, Rabelais and Artaud for his use of alienation, body genres and constructive sadism. These intelligent anti-comedic tactics result in a show that functions like none other on television, thoughtful in its engineering of thoughtlessness. Guan aptly points out that the chief demographics of talk show fans and

Trump supporters overlap significantly (conservative, old and white), which grafts heavy sociopolitical meaning onto André's anarchic destruction of its tropes. In its endeavor to excavate the *real* within social performers, *The Eric Andre Show* fires back at an America now ruled by "real" news, a "reality"-television-star president and those who tout themselves as "real" Americans.

"JUST ANOTHER MAN TRYING TO TEACH ME SOMETHING":

MILLION DOLLAR EXTREME'S ANTI-(SOCIAL) COMEDY

At this point, one might be forgiven for assuming anti-comedians tend to trend liberal in their political orientation. The Republican party is – as beloved political comedian Jon Stewart puts it – "the party of nostalgia"; how could this fondness for "traditional values" jibe with anti-comedy's inherent tradition-demolishing? (*Goodreads*) Eric André's visit to the Republican National Convention placed proverbial bees in every "Make America Great Again" bonnet; Tim Heidecker's anti-Trumpist piano ballads were praised in a recent *New Yorker* thinkpiece. Heidecker's hits include "I Am a Cuck" – a favored truncation of the term "cuckold" repurposed by conservative Internet trolls – and "Richard Spencer", a ditty about the recent attack on neo-Nazi Richard Spencer at a rally. ("If you see Richard Spencer, won't you give him a big black eye?" Heidecker sings; "come at him swinging, ain't no one gonna cry.") (*The New Yorker*)

At the precise moment Richard Spencer was punched in the face, the white nationalist was showing off his "Pepe the Frog" pin on his lapel. Pepe, a cartoon frog character, is a meme from the wilds of the alt-right Internet; spreading rapidly through thorny home bases like message-boards 4Chan and Reddit, the mascot was soon

classified as an anti-Semitic hate symbol by Hillary Clinton's campaign and the Anti-Defamation League. From the very same malevolent message-board morass that birthed Pepe comes the "alt-right" comedy troupe Million Dollar Extreme, whose now-cancelled Adult Swim show *Million Dollar Extreme Presents: World Peace* offers anti-comedy's most controversial, contradictory case study. For every graceful sketch that borders on an odd sort of beauty, Million Dollar Extreme, or MDE, creates a repellent sketch espousing noxious prejudice; they alternate between the poetic and the inexcusably vile. This whiplash has led some to theorize their alt-right stances are simply Kaufmanesque fronts, exaggerated characters they are playing to stealthily mock the Republican party. "MDE videos...sometimes espouse some pretty heinous views in the service of a joke," *A.V. Club*'s Christian Williams warns, "and the group doesn't tend to 'wink' when it's ironically adopting the personas of scummy Internet denizens." (*A.V. Club*) Ironically? The extensive, offensive Twitter- and Reddit-based activity of MDE's members – Sam Hyde, Nick Rochefort and Charls Carroll – indicates that this theory is wishful thinking; if their white nationalism is a goofy gag, no anti-comedians have ever been more committed than these.

While it is hard to make sense of the mores and motivations of MDE, Sébastien Charles' writings on hypermodernity offer a helpful framework, specifically in relation to convictions and irony. The sect of alt-right trolls from which MDE springs are bound to the Internet – it is their medium; it is their battleground. The battle, however, is unclear, and these 'net commandoes vacillate with every new memetic fake-news affront: as Charles notes, we've abandoned "belief in an absolute truth of history...a casual attitude has replaced hardline beliefs." (Lipovetsky 14) With these denizens of the Internet's

dark corners, “ethical concerns are no longer experienced, as they were in the past, as following a logic of sacrificial duty, and they need to be seen as taking the form of a painless, optional morality...” (Lipovetsky 21) In short, alt-right trolls hold fast to, and act on, their problematic beliefs “for the lulz”, or for the fun of it all. They play life like a video game, with no concern for the real life damage their “jokes” might have, and they find conviction impossibly uncool.

Tara Isabella Burton breaks down the hypermodern phenomenon of the “shitposter” – one who contributes worthless, meaningless posts on messageboards – in her *Real Life* essay “Apocalypse Whatever”. Shitposters have cultivated a power in today’s discourse they’ve dubbed “meme magic” – their ironic inside jokes (see: Pizzagate) become accepted as fact by media outlets, causing real-world damage. Burton cites Kierkegaard’s conception of the ironist as a “proto-troll,” who lives “in this totally hypothetical and subjunctive way...say[ing] things just to be the sort of person who says them...maintain[ing] his power by taking no position...” (*Real Life*) To write sexist and racist statements and to disseminate misinformation is their conception of power and freedom; just as Kierkegaard’s ironist was born in an ambiguous time, so too is the shitposter a product of hypermodern uncertainties.

“I’m just joking”, shitposters may protest, seeing themselves as masculine, “Alamo-style resister[s] (to)...feminized niceties as politeness and compassion”; however, doing things for the lulz with no regard for minority groups is noxiously privileged: “Only someone who has always had enough privilege to never have to reckon with the consequences of one’s words could participate in such a movement and keep up with the profound disengagement it demands.” (*Real Life*) Burton describes their actions

as “throwing rocks through the Overton window — regardless of what else gets smashed in the process.” While these messageboard users tout the joys of ironically spreading “funny” misinformation and slander as “intoxicatingly masculine...sexy and heroic”, their war is basement-bound, far from brave battlefield-bloodletting; despite the fact that they will never see the effects of their antics in corporeal form, Burton concludes, the brutal results are no less real.

In Emily Nussbaum’s *New Yorker* essay “How Jokes Won the Election”, she cites how “online, jokes were powerful accelerants for lies—a tweet was the size of a one-liner, a “dank meme” carried farther than any op-ed, and the distinction between a Nazi and someone pretending to be a Nazi for “lulz” had become a blur.” (*New Yorker*) Notorious troll Chuck Johnson even went so far as to crow: “we memed a President into existence.” *Hazlitt*’s Lipez finds it only too appropriate that this type of person should favor “anti-humor” as their vehicle of choice, a style somewhat dependent on an inside group “in the know” scorning outsiders: he finds it “so wildly elitist a concept that [he was] surprised it took people known for their contempt for huge swathes of the marginalized population this long to embrace it.” (*Hazlitt*) And lo, *Million Dollar Extreme Presents: World Peace* was born. “Celebrate Diversity Every Friday at 12:15A ET,” the troupe’s promotional materials beseeched, tongue planted firmly in cheek; “World Peace will unlock your closeted bigoted imagination, toss your inherent racism into the burning trash, and cleanse your intolerant spirit with pure unapologetic American funny_com.” (*Buzzfeed*)

Part of what makes MDE so confounding is the fact that much of their output can be affecting, even moving; they offer lush musical elegies to men failed by depression,

vice and the perceived decline of masculinity. In one sketch, an ineffective teacher possesses no *Dead Poets Society* gravitas but instead lusts after his male student-athletes who make him feel like a “silly dinosaur man”; at the end of the sketch, he hangs himself, the noose flying him away like Peter Pan. Another sketch features a ‘50s father and self-proclaimed “bad dad, good gambler” monologuing as he returns to his Rockwellian home. *World Peace* has him thrown by invisible forces through a plate glass window to let him bleed out on the pane, a metaphor for a soured age. In the black-and-white ‘30s-era pastiche “The Man Who Would Never Be, What They Made Him To Be”, an arrogant Carroll is sentenced to a decade in jail, the entirety of which he spends in deep denial even as he doubles his sentence and is shanked. The final shots feature Carroll lying in bed bearing the suicidal legend “To Go To Bed Forever” as musical artist John Maus stands over him and sings about killing police officers.

Maus is quoted as saying that his song “Cop Killer” is the “perfect way of putting over the idea that any worthwhile political or artistic agenda should be seeking an undoing of the situation as it stands...whether the status quo is a political state or a musical language, the idea should be to kill or overthrow that.” (The Guardian) This explanation might double as MDE’s statement of purpose. These sketches, like all anti-comedy, are more thought-provoking than gut-busting; one is more likely to weep at their dead-eyed cynicism than laugh. However, the quiet beauty of these moments is at direct loggerheads with the bullying, unacceptable blackface and wink-nudge anti-Semitism espoused by the troupe, the “gnarly feminists-kick-sand-in-our-face Charles Atlas ad view of manhood” possessed by Hyde and his ilk. (*Hazlitt*) The boys assassinate Mark

Zuckerberg and threaten to shoot politicians; at one point, one trips a woman to shatter her through a plate-glass coffee table.

If Eric Andre's comedy is Andy Kaufman sans safety net, ringleader Sam Hyde's is Kaufman stripping others of theirs. He has crashed TEDx symposiums to babble about teaching impoverished African refugees Javascript; he has performed "stand-up comedy" consisting of homophobic pseudoscience; he has posed as Jennifer Aniston to mock Rutgers students for being "special snowflakes". His fans disseminate false news implicating him in a variety of mass shootings – a novel form of fan love letter, to be sure. "It's a trap just to read Sam Hyde literally", *Buzzfeed*'s Joseph Bernstein writes; "he's built a career out of making fun of people who take his speech too seriously. But that has not stopped Hyde's alt-right admirers from trying to divine his true politics...whether or not [he] is genuine is basically unknowable, as Hyde never publicly breaks character." (Buzzfeed) When an anti-comedian is performing Nazi salutes and consorting with white nationalists in the name of a "joke", is the joke even funny anymore?

Ultimately, Adult Swim canceled *World Peace* in the midst of a deluge of criticism both from media outlets and from Adult Swim artists like comedian Brett Gelman and Tim Heidecker himself. MDE's fanbase, a vocal bunch, were not pleased, spamming every Adult Swim social media account with the phrase "MDE NEVER DIES." *World Peace*'s hidden references to James Holmes and David Duke were compared by some to the punk movement's use of shock tactics to encourage critical thinking: "I think that what they are doing can be very easily compared to the outlandishness of punk rock bands like Crass or the Sex Pistols," a reader wrote the

Atlantic, “[who] used swastikas and other fascist imagery in a rather successful albeit sort of ignorant way of spooking audiences and acting as flies in the ointment of popular culture.” Others found the idea of canceling the show paternalistic and prescriptive: one letter to the editor reads “is it your belief, at the *Atlantic*, that people are so fragile and their minds so easily intruded upon that a TV show could do actual harm? To what exactly? *THE* narrative? The only way of thinking? The right way of thinking?” (*The Atlantic*) Some found no excuses to be made for their hateful rhetoric: “You asked if readers would defend the airing of this show,” a reader spits. “I say crush it.”

Ultimately, the nesting doll of anti-comedy is clear. Tim and Eric presents us with an understanding that hypermodernity, with its technological dead-ends and consumerist fervor, is hell; within this statement, Eric André contributes, with a Sartre flourish, that hell is other hypermodern people; finally, Million Dollar Extreme, in typifying hypermodern irony in a way that reveals anti-comedy’s corruptible elements, welcome us to the hell the other two predict. Where comedy might head next is anybody’s guess – perhaps we might return, fearful, to comedy’s comforting Vaudevillian womb – but no genre quite comes close to encapsulating our hypermodern times.

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