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**Critic-as-Artist:  
Paraesthetic Theory and *The Eric Andre Show***

The late-night talk show has become one of the most prolific, self-sustaining, and arguably exploitative genres to be shaped by American television's history. In its commitment to pleasing sponsors, idealizing celebrities, and maintaining a sense of the status quo, the talk show format has remained rigid and unchallenged for decades.

Since its debut on the Adult Swim network in 2012, *The Eric Andre Show* has disrupted the inoffensive monotony and disingenuous positivity of the late-night talk show culture by its employment of surreal anti-aesthetic and meta-comedic strategies, essentially laying the foundation for a conceptual slaughter of the talk show format. At first glance, *The Eric Andre Show* emulates a low-budget public access-style show before dissenting into complete madness, with host Eric Andre wildly demolishing his entire set at the beginning of each episode while being casually ignored by his laconic foil, co-host Hannibal Burrese—it's as if their critical awareness of the archaic banality of the talk show genre is overcome by the sudden urge to completely destroy it from within.

*The Eric Andre Show* considers and subverts the artifice and tropes of late-night talk shows and becomes a study into David Carroll's theory of paraesthetics. By deconstructing the forms of the late-night talk show genre, *The Eric Andre Show* exposes the perceived 'reality' viewers have accepted since the genre's inception—but at what cost?

There is no better starting point for thought than laughter; speaking more precisely, spasms of the diaphragm generally offer better changes for thought than spasms of the soul.<sup>1</sup>

—Walter Benjamin

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht* (New York, London; Verso, 1998): 101.

Each episode of Adult Swim’s surreal anti-talk show, *The Eric Andre Show*, begins the same way: a single shot of an unmanned set consisting of a desk and chair, an armchair to the left, and in the background a decoration hangs over curtains. A voice announces, “Ladies and gentlemen, it’s the Eric Andre Show!” while a band cues up with an upbeat, jazzy introduction. Host Eric Andre sprints onto the set, screaming and flailing into frame as he leaps off the armchair and through the back curtain. The band continues to play as Andre charges to the other side of the set and hurls a bass drum out of the way, tackling the drummer, breaking another part of the set situated behind them. The destruction that continues varies by each episode, usually involving various weapons (chainsaws, simulated gunfire, bats, axes), physical stunts (being set on fire, attacked by dogs, flung around the set by hidden wires), or by use of bizarre props (raw chicken carcasses being substituted for boxing gloves). After long minutes of destroying everything around him, a visibly exhausted Andre collapses into his chair, the only surviving piece of the set. Still panting, an entirely new and identical set is wheeled in and assembled around him. Co-host Hannibal Burrell shuffles in from behind the curtain, seemingly as unaware of the prior carnage as he is disinterested in being part of the show at all. Eric Andre is always confronted with the futility of his efforts.

I’m not sure this is comedy. It presents itself as a talk show. ... We seem to be viewing some sort of inescapable closed universe containing nothing but an endless slightly nightmarish talk show. It feels like a bad dream, half remembered. It feels like there’s some unspeakable horror lurking just off-camera that the people on-stage can see, but, we can’t, and they can only stay safe by pretending to ignore it.<sup>2</sup>

— IMDB user: diesixdie

At first take, *The Eric Andre Show* is juvenile, disturbing, and straight up jarring before it could be considered funny. It is a protest against the forced geniality and feigned enthusiasm of

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<sup>2</sup> User: diesixdie, comment, May 21, 2012, on “Reviews and Ratings for The Eric Andre Show,” *IMDB*, accessed November 23, 2017, [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2244495/reviews?ref=tt\\_ury](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2244495/reviews?ref=tt_ury).

mainstream television talk shows. Andre awkwardly struggles through monologues and indulges middling celebrities in an attempt to please an elusive but audibly unimpressed studio audience. His detached co-host, Buress, remains unsympathetic to his plight—Andre is indeed less of a talk show host than he is being kept prisoner in what looks like an ‘80s public access show. By maniacally destroying his entire set at the beginning of each episode and witnessing the process that occurs to replace it immediately after, Andre is providing various implications about the nature of the talk show genre. It symbolizes the undying legacy of the late-night talk show format: its establishment is as old as television itself.

After WWII, as television sets were first being brought in to American homes, the public was still haunted by the hardships and recession of the ‘30s and ‘40s. They were instilled with the reasons to abstain from active consumerism, which ran contrary to the massive economic boom following the end of the war, resulting in a population with money to spend and the need for incentives to spend it. In *The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class, and Ethnicity in Early Network Television Programs*, George Lipsitz states:

Commercial network television played an important role in this emerging economy, functioning as a significant object of consumer purchases as well as an important marketing medium. Sales of sets jumped from three million during the entire decade of the 1940s to over five million a *year* during the 1950s. But television’s most important economic function came from its role as an instrument of legitimation for transformations in values initiated by the new economic imperatives of postwar America. For Americans to accept the new world of 1950s’ consumerism, they had to make a break with the past. ... In addition, FCC decisions to allocate stations on the narrow VHF band, to grant the networks ownership and operation rights over stations in prime markets, and to place a freeze on the licensing of new stations during the important years between 1948 and 1952 all combined to guarantee that advertising-oriented programming based on the model of radio would triumph over theater TV, educational TV, or any other form. Government decisions, not market forces, established the dominance of commercial television.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> George Lipsitz, “The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class, and Ethnicity in Early Network Television Programs,” *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Nov. 1986): 359-60.

Fearing the economic downturn while simultaneously inheriting the benefits of wartime, postwar Americans required persuasion to embrace consumerism. Government and business joined forces to introduce the importance of capital to media and using it to inform media's intentions.

As television became designed to institutionalize capitalist consumerism, talk shows came to shape the commodification of content and audience. In *Television Talk: A History of the TV Talk Show*, authors Bernard Timberg and Bob Eler describe the induction of the genre in three stages: "the experimental phase from the late 1940s into the early 1950s; a period of consolidation in the mid- and late 1950s, when the networks began vying with powerful advertising agencies and sponsors for control; and the period following the quiz-show scandals at the end of the decade, when the networks assumed full control."<sup>4</sup> Two television networks would come to dominate this period into the 1960s: CBS and NBC. Not only did these networks produce many of the talk show's most enduring forms, but they created a systemic guideline of principles and rules for the programs to follow. Christine Quail argues in *Vulture Culture: The Politics and Pedagogy of Daytime Television Talk Shows*, "through content commodification and intertextuality, talk shows' intertextual commodities help blur the boundaries between program and advertisement, as the ads become topics around which shows are structured, such as a celebrity interview with an artist who showcases and distributes to the audience their new album."<sup>5</sup> Choosing to rely on products to form content is antithetical to creativity, and as a result "the creative process is transformed, making room for advertisers earlier in the writing and producing process and opening the door to further commodification. The talk show genre thus becomes more formulaic and restricted, as their reliance on revenues from intertexts limits the

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<sup>4</sup> Bernard M. Timberg and Bob Eler, *Television Talk: The History of the TV Talk Show* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002): 21.

<sup>5</sup> Christine Quail, *Vulture Culture: The Politics and Pedagogy of Daytime Television Talk Shows* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005): 34.

types of shows they produce.”<sup>6</sup> Highly structured and strict formulaic elements such as the opening monologue, celebrity interviews, audience participation, comedic sketches, man-on-the-street segments, and musical performances appear to be spontaneous but they are designed to air topics appealing to the widest possible audience, and more importantly, to appeal to their advertisers. Considering the simple fact that reprehensible content would cause a fallout with advertisers, the connection between political economic influence and content control is seen more clearly. Quail continues, “talk show audiences play an important role as media institutions bind together the audience, media, and advertisers. The reciprocal relationships are such that media sell audiences which perform three key functions for the survival of the system: audiences market goods to themselves, they learn to vote for candidates in the political sphere, and they reaffirm belief in the legitimacy of the politico economic system.”<sup>7</sup> Essentially, advertisers buy access to audiences.

Steve Allen’s first-ever monologue that introduced *The Tonight Show* was delivered in 1954, and ironically, his introduction somewhat inadvertently describes the nature of late-night talk shows that would follow: “It’s not a spectacular. It’s gonna kind of be a monotonous [audience laughter].”<sup>8</sup> Never straying far from the formula of *The Tonight Show*, the late-night talk show genre is a stubbornly traditional art form. The core components of a late show’s program format that constructs the bland, soothing block of entertainment is in order to appeal its audience who finds themselves up late at night—likely tired, less perceptive. It is a branch of television most resistant to change, but rarely challenged to begin with, and its underlying appeal to conservative values reflect how deeply imbedded it is in the history of the television industry. These programs have witnessed some transformations, however, with nods to the comic

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 37

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 37

<sup>8</sup> Frank Guan, “The Eric Andre Show Was the Only Late Show Weird Enough for 2016,” *Vulture*, November 8, 2016, accessed November 20, 2017. <http://www.vulture.com/2016/10/rap-politics-twin-peaks-meet-in-eric-andre.html>.

community—Garry Shandling’s *The Larry Sanders Show*, Arsenio Hall’s reign in the early ‘90s, David Letterman’s sense of snark, Conan O’Brien’s youthful sense of snark—while these self-aware and subversive attempts were valuable to enlivening the genre, they also remained loyal to its fundamental constraints, and “the change they brought tended to be absorbed into the general spirit of late night, with its aura of ritualized, somnolent, prolonged decrepitude. The underlying protocol—prolonged light entertainment for people slipping in and out of consciousness—remained the same.”<sup>9</sup>

*The Eric Andre Show* is clearly a product of Andre’s antagonizing and acute awareness of the archaic banality of late-night talk shows. Yet this awareness is complicated by a distinct “affection for the inherent idiocy of the form and by the knowledge of how late night incorporates the revolts aimed against it by ritualizing them.”<sup>10</sup> The drummer is always tackled, yet the percussion in the theme song always remains undisturbed; the set is completely destroyed, but then totally restored to its original condition as the host slumps back into his chair, exhausted by pointless labor. The show is littered in a “venerable heritage of burned-out and co-opted insurrection.”<sup>11</sup> Andre’s capacity to humiliate himself echoes *Larry Sander’s* tendency to take jabs at the host; Bures’ sour detachment is similar to Letterman’s; Both Andre’s blackness and his affinity for inviting rappers as musical guests gives nod to Arsenio Hall. His process overall goes beyond parody and subversion, and he becomes a critic of art in a methodology that requires exploration of not what makes art considered to be art, but how art is “a matter of culture in the shifting between possible worlds.”<sup>12</sup> In the *Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard urges us to “wage war against totality,” and to witness “the unrepresentable” and to “activate the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Miško Šuvaković, “Status and Priorities: A Preconsideration for Manifesta 3” *Platforma SCCA*, No. 1 (2000): <http://www.ljudmila.org/scca/platforma1/misko02.htm>.

differences.”<sup>13</sup> Oscar Wilde proposed this in response to attitudes of late Victorian culture, offering critical engagement “as a space of imagination and creativity.”<sup>14</sup> At the end of his 1891 essay *The Truth of Masks*, Wilde writes:

Not that I agree with everything that I have said in this essay. There is much with which I entirely disagree. The essay simply represents an artistic standpoint, and in aesthetic criticism, attitude is everything. For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth. A truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true. And just as it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can apprehend the platonic theory of ideas, so it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can realize Hegel’s theory of contraries. The truths of metaphysics are the truth of masks.<sup>15</sup>

Not only is Wilde distancing himself from his statements, he seems to be doubting any position that could occur. Through this passage a postmodern space appears, where language is “unbalanced” and truth is “unstable” and fractured—making it deeply contradictory.<sup>16</sup> Wilde’s term ‘art-criticism’ suggests what the artist as critic practices, a praxis that does not have an end in and of itself, but a continuous exploration and discovery into “hidden treasures of a text, even if that means inventing them sometimes.”<sup>17</sup> This position of Wilde’s begins to parallel Lyotard’s postmodern thought, and especially David Carroll’s concept of ‘paraesthetics’. Paraesthetics, he explains, is an:

Aesthetics turned against itself or pushed beyond or beside itself, a faulty, irregular, disordered, improper aesthetics—one not content to remain within the area defined by the aesthetic. Paraesthetics describes a critical approach to aesthetics for which art is a question not a given, an aesthetics in which art does not have a determined place or a fixed definition.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Regis Durand, ed. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984): 82

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Kemp, “The Importance of Being Postmodern: Oscar Wilde and the Untimely,” *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*. Vol. 5, No. 3 (Fall 2013): accessed November 22, 2017, <http://rupkatha.com/v5n3.php>

<sup>15</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde: Volume IV, Criticism: Historical Criticism, Intentions, The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, edited by Josephine M. Guy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007): 228

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Kemp, “The Importance of Being Postmodern”

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> David Carroll, *Paraesthetics* (London; New York: Methuen, 1987)

Carroll's concept of paraesthetics refers to the fascination with the borders of possible worlds. The concept is empowered by Wilde's claim that, "in aesthetic criticism, attitude is everything", language takes the place of the author's subjectivity, and insists that only within "the stylized rubric of a particular 'writing' will any individuality be found."<sup>19</sup> In postmodernity, truth is entirely a matter of style, but how does it function? Paraesthetics does not intend to resolve the issue of 'borders' in art and theory, but it initiates a game of shifting, representing, and delaying possible inscriptions of discursive identities of art and theory. This has to do with events that are being inscribed in the process or of a behavior that is being inscribed in a wider discursive body:

The task of paraesthetic theory is not to resolve with questions concerning the relations of theory with art and literature, but rather, to rethink these relations and, through the transformation and displacement of art and literature, to recast the philosophical, historical and political 'fields'—'fields' with which art and literature are inextricably linked.<sup>20</sup>

It is a theory that is defined by art "being a question (and in question) rather than a given."<sup>21</sup>

Paraesthetics attempts to "bridge the boundaries between the language of criticism and the language of art."<sup>22</sup> For Wilde, art and criticism are dependent upon interpretive processes, however, criticism is viewed as a superior process because of its unique position as a "mediation of a mediation."<sup>23</sup> This meta-strategy is explained in *The Critic as Artist*:

The critic occupies the same relation to the work of art that he criticizes as the artist does to the visible world of form and colour, or the unseen world of passion and of thought. He does not even require for the perfection of his art the finest materials... I would say that the highest criticism, being the purest form of personal impression, is in its way more creative than creation, as it has least reference to any standard external to itself, and is, in fact, its own reason for existing... Certainly, it is never trammled by any shackles of verisimilitude. No ignoble considerations of probability,

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<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Kemp, "The Importance of Being Postmodern"

<sup>20</sup> David Carroll. *Paraesthetics*, 189

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 14

<sup>22</sup> Ewa Bobrowska, "Paraesthetics: Irvine School of Aesthetic Theory and Criticism," *An Anthology of Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 8: 180

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Kemp, "The Importance of Being Postmodern: Oscar Wilde and the Untimely"

that cowardly concession to the tedious repetitions of domestic or public life, affect it ever.<sup>24</sup>

*The Eric Andre Show* is a suitable study for the concept of paraesthetics to emerge because it collapses the boundaries of aesthetics used to define the late-night talk show genre, and its criticism occurs in a frame parallel to its art. For Andre, the creation of *The Eric Andre Show* is not some “pre-human chaos, an indistinct chasm of nature,” but rather it becomes a defined practice—one that designates practice “within obvious social requirements, expectations and actions.”<sup>25</sup> Balancing a “constant play between the aesthetic and the extra-aesthetic,”<sup>26</sup> the show takes a formulaic and audience-friendly approach to television and disrupts it, with its creator existing in the same plane of the aesthetic he is simultaneously critiquing. The basic elements, as with any late-night talk show, are ripped directly from the *Tonight Show* and plunged into disorder. The set, no matter how many time Andre tries to destroy it, is reassembled, replaced, and fully restored by identical pieces. The cooled, smirking delivery of Johnny Carson becomes more purposeful when its contrast is shown by Andre, who antagonizes his guests and creates a destructive and vulgar spectacle. Even his monologues are worrying, anxiety-filled nonsense. One in particular, he repeats “Lindsay Lohan is in the news! Lindsay Lohan... is... in the news!” over and over again, causing the words to slowly lose their meaning. We are left questioning if those words had any meaning to begin with. Sometimes we catch a quick glimpse of Andre’s notes cards from his desk, but instead of questions and prompts, it looks as if he is reading from a doodled swastika or crude drawings of dicks. Because there is only a chair instead of a couch, deadpan co-host Hannibal Buress has to literally give up his seat for the guest and awkwardly stand for the rest of the interview, often lingering behind the guest’s right shoulder. As a co-host,

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<sup>24</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, 229

<sup>25</sup> Miško Šuvaković, “Status and Priorities”

<sup>26</sup> David Carroll. *Paraesthetics*, 16

Buress acts as a laconic foil rather than a boisterous and bolstering sidekick of the Ed McMahon-inspired archetype. He is often staring at his phone and only breaks from his complete disinterest to either remind Andre to introduce the next segment or, more often, to make a comment that undermines Andre's abilities as a host. When Andre delivers a monologue and the audience laugh track turns to booing, he stressfully calls out to his co-host for help. "I'm dying," Andre pleads, but Buress remains unsympathetic. "We all are."

In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Buress admits "Sometimes it's funnier to say, 'What the fuck? And sometimes it's funnier to make the guest say, 'What the fuck?'"<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Buress and Andre work together in the process of breaking down the guests so that they will ditch any lingering interest in protecting their carefully constructed public personas. Guests are left onstage under hot lights without direction while quasi-psychological torture takes form of the heat on full blast, water leaking from the ceiling, and strange smells of rotten food. The distractions are relentless. Mouse traps, shock collars, and vibrators are often buried in the guest chair. Off-screen, staff members engage in simulated sex acts. Initially, guests will speak sincerely until Andre slowly starts to make them uncomfortable. While interviewing actress Aubrey Peeples, Andre leads into a question: "John Wayne once said, 'I believe in white supremacy until blacks are educated to a point of responsibility.' Why did you re-tweet that?" Wide-eyed, Peeples is quick to deny the allegation, regardless of its obvious absurdity. Another interview, this time with former Spice Girl Mel B, Andre employs a similar baiting tactic of edging on normalcy before quickly diverting from it:

"Do you think Margaret Thatcher had girl power?"

"[laughs] Yes! Of course!"

"Do you think she effectively utilized girl power by funneling money into illegal paramilitary death squads in Northern Ireland?"

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<sup>27</sup> Matthew Love, "Eric Andre Must Destroy the Talk Show," *Rolling Stone*, November 5, 2014. Accessed November 20, 2017, <https://www.rollingstone.com/tv/features/eric-andre-must-destroy-the-talk-show-20141105>

Guests are not announced and clearly not directed on how to make it to the stage, often making their appearance after blindly fondling the curtains in search for an opening. Additionally, musical guests are subjected to bizarre physical indignities: Hardcore thrash band Trash Talk performed while outfitted with noise-sensitive shock collars; Rappers Danny Brown, A\$AP Rocky, Open Mike Eagle, Nocando and Go Dreamer participated in a freestyle rap competition, on the condition that they perform while navigating an obstacle course containing mouse traps, pugil sticks, and a kiddie pool full of snakes, all while blindfolded. Atlanta rapper Killer Mike performs as a hype man opposite of an opera singer, enthusiastically spitting improvised lines like “We’re singin’ opera, ho.”

Eric Andre transcends the post-comedy, anti-trends of other non-talk shows such as *Comedy Bang! Bang!*, *Between Two Ferns*, *Primetime Glick*, and *Da Ali G Show* by spending four seasons not only stealthily constructing a narrative around his character, but dissolving his actual identity into the hyper-fictional character. At season three, his set and personal style change—he implies a larger budget than before, a character at the height of his success. Season four, however, is the hyper-fictional Andre’s downfall. Outside of the show, Andre commits to his character’s demise by growing out his hair and nails, ignoring personal hygiene, and refusing to clean his suit. By exploring the nebulous process of creating identity, Andre has no answers, only more questions. “You ever fall into, um, like, a clinical depression?” he asks during a monologue, and almost as an aside, whispers “Do you have any medicine?” From behind, Buress looks up from his phone and shakes his head, “This show has gone off the rails.”

Facing the intense and disturbing political climate of the past few years, the placating and accommodating qualities of late-night television have revealed just how ill-equipped they are with responding to it. The defining moment may have been *Tonight Show* host Jimmy Fallon engaging in spineless small talk with then-candidate Donald Trump. Hazlitt contributor Zachary

Lipez summarizes this moment aptly: “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.”<sup>28</sup>

While talk shows, and their advertisers, still thrive on the disingenuous positivity they seek to create, our culture’s infatuation with social performance is slipping into an atmosphere where ambiguous feelings are becoming more difficult to maintain. To fight one extreme with another, *The Eric Andre Show* deprives the televisual absurdity of its artificiality and provides new layers of discourse, posing questions about the power behind the holy pulpit of the TV studio, why we use facades and what makes them such a valuable commodity. The chief demographics of traditional talk show viewers are old, white, and overall conservative, making Andre’s anarchic destruction into sociopolitical commentary. How fitting that the current presidential administration not only boasts a similar demographic, but ironically, is also led by a personality that was shaped by television media long before his announcement to run for office. In deciphering the “real” within social performers, under the rule of a “reality” star for a president, and for an audience of “real” Americans that value “real” news, *The Eric Andre Show* will not unearth any absolute truth of our present—nor will it try—instead it multiplies questions surrounding our culture’s inception of art, and the strategies it uses to mediate media. If we are trapped within a culture that engulfs all art and expression, perhaps then we are all artists who inevitably must suffer for their art. Who is more suitable to express this sentiment than Eric Andre, when pained and exhausted at his futile attempts to escape, he snarls at a guest, “Thanks for being on the show!”

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<sup>28</sup> Zachary Lipez, “That Joke Isn’t Funny Anymore,” *Hazlitt*, September 20, 2016, accessed November 20, 2017, <https://hazlitt.net/feature/joke-isnt-funny-anymore>

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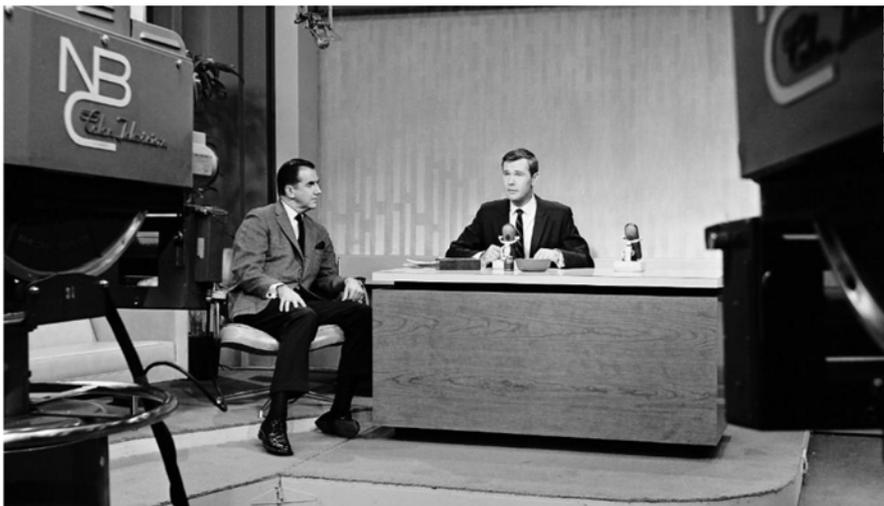
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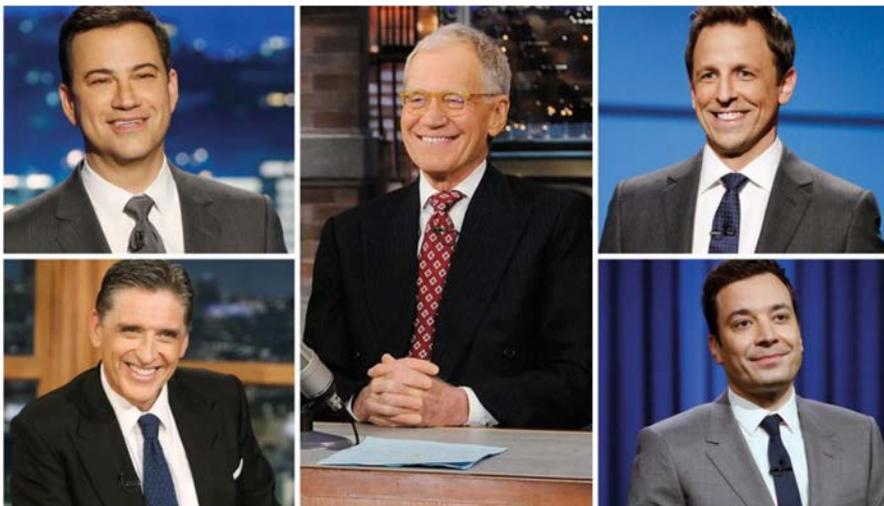
*I'm not sure this is comedy. It presents itself as a talk show. ...We seem to be viewing some sort of inescapable closed universe containing nothing but an endless slightly nightmarish talk show. It feels like a bad dream, half remembered. It feels like there's some unspeakable horror lurking just off-camera that the people on-stage can see, but, we can't, and they can only stay safe by pretending to ignore it.*

*—IMDB user: diesixdie*





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“Aesthetics turned against itself or pushed beyond or beside itself, a faulty, irregular, disordered, improper aesthetics—one not content to remain within the area defined by the aesthetic.



Paraesthetics describes a critical approach to aesthetics for which art is a question not a given, an aesthetics in which art does not have a determined place or a fixed definition.”



“The critic occupies the same relation to the work of art that he criticizes as the artist does to the visible world of form and colour, or the unseen world of passion and of thought.”









HOW DO I GET OUT OF HERE?



[as]



