

ERIC ANDRE AND MIKHAIL BAKHTIN'S CARNIVALESQUE BODY

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THE RESPONSE OF ALT-RIGHT conspiracy theorist Alex Jones to fellow cultural provocateur Eric Andre's invasion of his stage at the American Republic Nationals Convention saw Jones announce to his crowd, "He's talking about sex and pee, he's filming this and going to edit the footage."¹ This statement revealed Jones's unfamiliarity with Andre's work. Those better acquainted with Andre's performances, particularly his television program *The Eric Andre Show*, will know that the comedic actor does not rely on the manipulations of editing to falsify his provocations or to modify the reactions of his targets. Instead, Andre's provocation is his focus on the corporeal. This is because Andre presents himself, to use Mikhail Bakhtin's terms, as a carnivalesque or grotesque body—a body that, in emphasising its orifices and related animalistic practices, performs a symbolic degradation that aims to bring elevated phenomena down to earth.

Bakhtin's text on the carnivalesque, *Rabelais and his World*, was originally published in 1965. It is concerned with the folk humour that characterised the European medieval carnival, and is anchored by the portrayal of these carnivals in

1. Adult Swim, "Eric at the RNC | The Eric Andre Show | Adult Swim," July 18, 2018, video, 2:38, <https://youtu.be/vL8Dz4mGv1g>.

the writings of the sixteenth-century author François Rabelais and his pentalogy of novels, *The Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel*.² Traversing the limits between art and life, medieval carnival was not a spectacle for the people. It was in effect a “second life” that was extra-political and extra-ecclesiastical. Carnival allowed for the suspension of the established order and in doing so opened up a space to bring the elites down to earth. Carnival served as a reminder that all hierarchical ranks, norms, and privileges were changeable, could fall prey to dissolution and perish before a new coming. In the carnival, the degradation of the elite is achieved through the privileging of a collective body—a figure held up as a site of revival and renewal, symbolic of the imperishability of the greater populace. Collectivity sees the carnivalesque body as an ancestral corpus that, in its communal immortality, becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable and, above all, indestructible.

The cooptation of the term carnival in our current times to refer to a mere holiday for an individual who remains subject to the state’s dominant hierarchies and social conventions belies Bakhtin’s belief in the immortality of the carnivalesque—or the grotesque body, as Bakhtin also describes it.³ For Bakhtin, the carnival represents a constant potential for the death of the old and the birth of the new. As this article will contend, Bakhtin’s vision of the carnival may be seen in the comedic provocations of Eric Andre. In examining Andre’s performances through the lens of the carnivalesque body, the article will show that this form of grotesque bodily humour still provides a potent mode of transgression.

Eric Andre is best known for his late-night TV program *The Eric Andre Show*, which alternates between candid-camera-type, man-on-the-street stunts and the ubiquitous reality television staple: the talk show. In the opening credits, Andre declares his subversive intent, an intent that quite literally sees the deconstruction of the entertainment talk show format

2. See François Rabelais, *The Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel*, trans. M. A. Screech (UK: Penguin, 2006).

3. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 26.

with its accompanying cult of celebrity. Each opening sequence of *The Eric Andre Show* begins with its eponymous host and creator, Andre, hurtling himself onto the set, smashing his desk, jumping onto his shelf, launching himself onto the backdrop curtains—destroying them in the process—and generally demolishing everything in sight as the house band plays a form of chaotic free jazz in accompaniment. The desk and band offer the viewer semiotic signposts of the entertainment talk show; yet, the aggressive anarchy of Andre and the erratic music produced by the show's band all serve to subvert these conventions. The subversion is generally completed by Andre stage-diving into the drummer, before staggering back to a desk that has been reassembled—along with the rest of the set—by several nonplussed stagehands. Each opening sequence differs and, as the series progresses, these opening outbursts become increasingly violent. During one episode, Andre pulls out his teeth, then smears the resultant blood over an unsuspecting woman. In another, he appears naked with his hands embedded in raw chickens and with a raw turkey concealing his head. In later episodes, Andre simulates fornication with a snowman before punching its head off, or douses himself with petrol, having been pepper-sprayed before he can light a match. However, these gross, obscene, and violent openings offer much more than shock value. They present a truly rebellious provocation to the viewer. As this article will contend, this provocation is even more forceful because Andre's destructive power has ideological roots in the vision of a "second life" offered by the carnival.

In his book on Rabelais, Bakhtin quotes a passage from Rabelais's fourth book of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* in which Pantagruel and his companions are depicted visiting the "Island of Procuration" and meeting the Chicanous, a race of peoples who earn their living by allowing themselves to be beaten.⁴ Bakhtin observes that the image of Chicanous society illustrated by

4. François Rabelais, "How Frère Jean Assayed the Temperament of the Chicanous," in *The Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel*, 1861–1869.

Rabelais was immediately drawn from the “living popular-festive tradition of his [Rabelais’s] time.”⁵ Medieval carnival commonly saw effigies of winter “beaten, torn to pieces burned or drowned” in celebration of its death and the renewal that constituted the rebirth of spring.⁶ Likewise, the traditions of carnival saw the enactment of a coronation for the “King of Carnival.” Elected by the people, the Carnival King’s reign is brought to a close almost immediately, as he is mocked by the people and physically abused before having his robes metamorphose into the costume of a clown. Read through the lens of carnival, Andre’s opening segments constitute (in Bakhtin’s words) “a dimension in which thrashing and abuse are not a personal chastisement but are symbolic actions directed at something on a higher level, at the king.”⁷

For medieval carnival, the king was a personification of all of society’s officialdom and power. In the context of the late-night talk show, Andre’s openings, with their self-directed abuse and destruction, also take aim at officialdom and power, thus conforming to carnivalesque tradition. Where various late-night talk show hosts have been given the title of “the king of late-night TV” (including Johnny Carson and, more recently, Steven Colbert), Andre’s abuse can be seen as an instance of the “king’s uncrowning.” However, with Andre, as in the carnivalesque, the symbolic uncrowning is followed by a rebirth in the form of the unscathed Andre. In this light, we see Andre follow the traditional medieval carnival system of images in his introduction, beginning with travesty and then thrashing to uncrown the old authority so as to birth something new—all performed by Andre with comic precision. The use of the comedic to symbolically dethrone the established authorities is also an essential tradition of the carnivalesque, which was, after all, an expression of the “festive life.”⁸ Carnival comedy is a comedy based on inversion, a mode of resistance that operates through a recognition of social

5. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 198.

6. *Ibid.*, 197.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*, 8.

inequality. Therefore, in the carnivalesque, it is appropriate that social antipodes—clowns and kings—are linked by the rules of inversion: clowns are disguised as kings until their reign ends, at which point they again revert to clowns.

If we return to Bakhtin's commentary on Rabelais's tale of the Chicanous, we note that, at one point, Pantagruel witnesses a beating that he fears may have resulted in the chosen Chicanous having been "battered to death," only to then watch the "rascal" jump "back on his feet, as happy as a king or two."⁹ Bakhtin points out that Rabelais's use of the metaphor "happy as a king" is no accident, as he would later write that "kings and clowns have the same horoscope."¹⁰ Tellingly, the beaten Chicanous is referred to as "Red-snout," a name that accords to him the traditional red-nosed appearance of a clown.¹¹ Andre, as a comedian, is essentially a clown, and it is the clown, rather than the king, who has emerged victorious from Andre's self-abuse. Ultimately, Andre's violence is a kind that has developed into a symbol of death and regeneration in the comic aspect. It is this representation of change performed by Andre in the opening segment of the show that sets the tone for our enjoyment.

In *The Comedy Studies Reader*, Evan Elkins describes *The Eric Andre Show* as "remarkably, intentionally, and gleefully off-putting." As Elkins continues, "It's also one of the funniest shows on television—that is, if the viewer is able to get onboard with Andre's warped mindset."¹² However, laughing at *The Eric Andre Show* is not so much a case of getting "onboard with Andre's warped mindset" as of adopting Andre's perspective, which is not as unique as one might immediately think. Andre's performances revolve around the carnivalesque theme of death and resurrection, and it is here that the rationale for his destructiveness lies. The carnivalesque is the second life of the people, a life that stands outside the "official" life of social

9. *Ibid.*, 197.

10. *Ibid.*, 198.

11. *Ibid.*, 200.

12. Evan Elkins, "The New Logic of the Absurd: *The Eric Andre Show*," in *The Comedy Studies Reader*, eds. Nick Marx & Matt Sienkiewicz (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), 59.

hierarchies, economic classes, and the law and order that preserves inequality in the order of things. The second life of the carnival is a life that is unknowable and indeed outside the consciousness and understanding of those who wield power. The violence, excess, and obscenity of *The Eric Andre Show* is a platform where viewers—through Andre—may critique the socioeconomic norms and structures inherent in the official life. The show symbolically wrests power from the powerful through Andre’s use of the carnivalesque, which in turn grants viewers a sense of rebellion. Andre, like the carnivalesque, celebrates the integral violence that is perpetrated on the powerless and, in doing so, undermines that power. Mike Presdee, in *Cultural Criminology and the Carnival of Crime*, writes of this celebration of violence: “When punishment becomes a desired outcome, to be worn as a medal to demonstrate our ability to ‘riot for pleasure,’ then legislators become impotent in their struggle for law and order.”¹³ Presdee goes on to observe that this same sense of pleasurable castigation mobilises the carnivalesque, undergirding its “challenge to both the law and lawmaker.”¹⁴ In short, the carnivalesque becomes transgressive, and marks an opportunity to indulge in one’s subversive desire to be free of one’s own impotence vis-à-vis the inequalities one faces and observes in life. Further, the carnival—which allows us to dispense with the rational in favour of the bizarre, to disrespect hierarchies (and in doing so escape their reach), and to rebel against the individualism of Enlightenment thinking and its role in the politics of modernity—returns us to the reality and immortality of our collective, earthly bodies. This process allows us to inhabit a different world “beyond the reach of the rational”: that is, “a world where the ‘fart’ rather than the ‘thought’ is of more importance.”¹⁵

13. Mike Presdee, *Cultural Criminology and the Carnival of Crime* (London: Routledge, 2000), 29.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, 9.

The highlighting of the lower stratum of bodily functions is, as Presdee notes, a primary feature of the carnival aesthetic. It is also an aesthetic to which *The Eric Andre Show*

is acutely attuned. Within the carnivalesque, “higher” and “lower” have strict topographical meanings: “high is heaven” and “low is earth.”¹⁶ In this topography, the earth is the cosmic repository of the grave and the womb. The carnivalesque body is aligned with this cosmic aspect of high and low, with the head being high and the lower body—the belly, genitals, and buttocks—constituting the low. These absolute topographical definitions are used in reference to the carnivalesque body or the grotesque body to degrade the target. It is important not to confuse degradation in the carnivalesque sense with satire, which sets itself above the object of its degradation. To debase or degrade in a carnival sense is simply to disenthral—“to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something new and better.”¹⁷ The carnivalesque is a Janus-faced outlook on life, where destruction is intrinsically linked with creation. As Terry Eagleton writes on this mode of comedy, “Carnivalesque comedy is a form of vulgar materialism.” He continues:

If its ferocious demolition of abstract idealism has a smack of the death drive about it (a ‘wish for death,’ as Bakhtin himself puts it), it is also intertwined with a ‘wish for life.’ One can lay waste to the world as savagely as one likes, convinced that matter, along with the great body of the populace, is imperishable, and that each act of annihilation is simply the prelude to a new birth. If the earth is a grave, it is also a womb. The immortality of the collective body is reflected in the inviolability of the individual one, as men and women are ritually beaten and buffeted but in cartoon-like fashion remain magically unscathed. Carnival is violence fictionalised, virtualised, alchemised into theatre and spectacle, and as such a jovial kind of belligerence.¹⁸

After the violent, anarchical tactics of *The Eric Andre Show* openings, Andre does indeed emerge unscathed and, in “cartoon-like fashion,” is reborn. Retreating to his desk, Andre’s adoption of the carnivalesque body transgresses its limits by foregrounding his bodily orifices, now liminal sites where the individual collides with the greater world. As Andre proceeds

16. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 21.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Terry Eagleton, *Humour* (London: Yale University Press, 2019), 159.

with his talk-show format conceits throughout *The Eric Andre Show* (in guest interviews, in banter with his sidekick, the deadpan Hannibal Buress, and in skits), defecation, sweating, blowing the nose, spitting, and vomiting are all standard occurrences. This expulsion of bodily fluids, excreta, and gasses extends to the formal aesthetic of the program, while the sound design amplifies sighs, slurps, grunts, farts, and other bodily noises in the mix. In the first season of *The Eric Andre Show*, the visually low-fi set was matched by a degraded, analogue-style filming effect, complete with simulated malfunctions and technical breakdowns. Of course, the show's use of crude visual signifiers seems an obvious choice for a production that seeks to deconstruct the complacency of the slick late-night talk show. However, when the show adopted high-definition production values in its second season, it highlighted rather than diminished the show's most grotesque elements, with the blood, gore, and vomit now all appearing in the glory of high-definition video. In line with the carnivalesque or grotesque body, Andre's body is one of excess: it cannot hold its contents but must instead spill into the environment.

The imagery of bodily excess that populates Bakhtin's carnival serves as more than a rendering of humorous, gross physical remains. Instead, it is a focus on the body's orifices as liminal places that transgress the inner and outer self. Metaphorically, the body opens to the outer world and to others, serving to break down the closed individual, transforming them into a collective being. As Bakhtin writes,

All these convexities and orifices have a common characteristic; it is within them that the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome: there is an interchange and an interorientation. This is why the main events in the life of the grotesque body, the acts of the bodily drama, take place in this sphere. Eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body—all

these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and new body.¹⁹

For Bakhtin, the carnivalesque or grotesque body is one that emphasises the open or the penetrative: genitals, mouths, noses, anuses, and so on. But *The Eric Andre Show* highlights the decline of grotesque bodily imagery in current times, most notably through the reactions of Andre's celebrity guests. One of Andre's most infamous stunts involved him vomiting onto his desk, before reingesting the bile, as he interviewed MTV reality star Lauren Conrad, who proceeded to walk off the program, visibly upset. However, among images of the grotesque body, the performance of vomiting serves a primary symbolic purpose. It is not only the most extreme act of liminality—an act in which the inner self and the world literally collide—but, in line with the carnival aesthetic, it is also a physical act of inversion. Vomiting marks the endpoint of a sequence in which the body, beginning as hungry or empty, becomes sated or full, and lastly suffers discomfort before the relief of the purge.²⁰

Conrad's disturbed reaction to Andre's vomiting is indicative of our "new bodily canon."²¹ As Bakhtin writes,

The new bodily canon, in all its historic variations and different genres, presents an entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body, which is shown from the outside as something individual. That which protrudes, bulges, sprouts, or branches off (when a body transgresses its limits and a new one begins) is eliminated, hidden, or moderated. All orifices of the body are closed. The basis of the image is the individual, strictly limited mass, the impenetrable façade. The opaque surface and the body's "valleys" acquire an essential meaning as the border of a closed individuality that does not merge with other bodies and with the world.²²

Andre's reaction to this modern perspective of the body is to hyperbolise the "leading role" that orifices play within life.²³ Andre freely allows himself to sweat, sneeze, cough, and have

19. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 317.

20. B. F. Haynes, "Elements of Carnival and the Carnavalesque in Contemporary Australian Children's Literature" (PhD diss., University of Technology Sydney, 2009), 19–20, <http://hdl.handle.net/10453/36464>.

21. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 320.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*, 317.

his nose run out of control. He also allows his stomach and bowels to expurgate through burping, farting and, as in the Conrad episode, vomiting. Indeed, if our current age is one of increasing self-individualisation—a time in which life is a concatenation of discrete actions by individuals devoid of overriding connection—then those who populate our television screens, who essentially promote their individuality through what Bakhtin calls “a certain accentuation of expressive and characterised features,”²⁴ may be said to perpetuate a state of affairs that is in direct opposition to the grotesque body. That is, to promote an image of the individual that accords with the contemporary cult of celebrity is to undermine the grotesque body, since the latter lays emphasis on the body’s orifices, taking them as symbols for the material dimension of life that connects humanity to each other and to the earth.

The dominance of the new bodily canon, with its function reduced to the expressive characterisation of the individual, is most apparent in Andre’s guests’ reactions to his use of nudity. In addition to removing his clothes while his guests attempt to talk to him, Andre simulates masturbation with an oversized prosthetic penis under his desk. In one notable moment, Andre admonishes his guest, the rapper T. I., for looking away from the accessory, commanding “Make eye contact with me, or I can’t come.”²⁵ In this scene, Andre’s act is devoid of pornographic qualities. Instead, the simulated masturbation scene, in its exaggeration and excess, displays the fundamental attributes of the grotesque body. The image of Andre masturbating defies modern conceptions of bodily exhibition, where one’s sexual life is made up of individual acts confined to the narrow and specific locus of private rooms. However, when viewed in the context of the medieval grotesque, the material element of this masturbation scene also attains a purely positive character, as the phallus performs the philosophical function of denoting

24. *Ibid.*, 322.

25. Adult Swim, “T. I. Part 1 | The Eric Andre Show | Adult Swim,” August 8, 2016, video, 1:26, <https://youtu.be/lln9EnaA0Bc>.

the fecundity of the people and therefore symbolises their immortality.²⁶ For the carnivalesque or grotesque body, which is part of the collective ancestral body, immortality is inherent, as each death will be renewed in the next generation.²⁷

Of course, the most politically powerful of all the acts of the body's orifices is speech, an act that appears to have survived the new bodily canon intact. However, a closer examination of speech in the context of the late-night talk show, and in modern society more broadly, indicates that speech is not the same "open" act of collectiveness and equality it is portrayed as in the carnivalesque aesthetic. As Krystyna Pomorska notes in her foreword to Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin repeatedly praises the Socratic dialogue as a "prototype of the discursive mechanism for revealing the truth."²⁸ Dialogue here stands in opposition to the "authoritarian word," exactly as "carnival is opposed to official culture."²⁹ As Pomorksa elaborates,

The "authoritarian word" does not allow any other type of speech to approach and interfere with it. Devoid of any zones of cooperation with other types of words, the "authoritarian word" thus excludes dialogue. Similarly, any official culture that considers itself the only respectable model dismisses all other cultural strata as invalid or harmful.³⁰

26. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 313–4.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Krystyna Pomorska, "Foreword," in Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, x.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*, ix.

31. *The Eric Andre Show*, series 4, episode 5, "Jesse Williams; Jillian Michaels," directed by Andrew Barchilon and Kitao Sakurai, September 9, 2016, <https://www.adultswim.com/videos/the-eric-andre-show>.

32. *Ibid.*

"That's all I had planned," states a slumped Andre after one of his anarchistic openings. "What should I do now?" he asks. "I don't know" replies a bored-looking Buress. "Do a monologue or something."³¹ The monologue is, of course, a talk-show staple; and *The Eric Andre Show* is a talk show, albeit a depraved one. At Buress's suggestion, Andre takes to the floor with a standing microphone and intones "words, words, words,"³² much to Buress's delight. This empty monologue is more than an attempt at humour based on Andre's incompetence. As this article argues, Andre is carnivalesque, and the carnivalesque is based on principles that value equality over hierarchy, the social self over

the individualistic self, the body in communion with the natural world over the body abstracted and privatised. The essence of the monologue is hierarchical, individualistic, and exclusionary; it is what Bakhtin calls—and denounces as— *autoritarnoe slovo*, or the “authoritarian word.”³³ The performer of the monologue simulates dialogue—that is, they act as though engaged in a cooperative, two-way conversation; however, the performer is in fact the creator of a closed world where the power of speech is theirs alone, and where the other is cast into the subordinate role of the listener. If Andre transgresses the modern standard of the “closed body” with his use of the “open” or “grotesque” body, then his use of a bodily orifice (here the mouth) to perform a closed act—a monologue—directly opposes the carnival aesthetic. Instead, Andre’s intoning of “words, words, words” not only shows contempt for the monologue but, in his anaphoric use of “words,” produces a conventional sign that fails to signify. This performance highlights the lack of exchange in, and the impossibility of creating new meanings and truths through, the monologue, revealing it as no more than a static device devoid of social value, and potentially totalitarian in nature.

Andre’s critique of the monologue suggests that it essentially serves the same function as ideology. However, Andre’s exchanges with celebrities in guest interviews also demonstrate how “dialogue” (or what passes for dialogue in late-night talk shows) is often no more than an unequal partnership in which a passive listener is reduced to a mere prompt for a more dominant speaker. In Bakhtin’s view, the self is inherently social, with discourse reflecting the accumulation of the greater social world in which the self is embedded. Therefore, dialogue, unlike monologue, is an opportunity to unearth the truths of the social world. Ultimately, dialogue is an unclosed world that is, in the words of Wilson Yates, “regenerative, corrective and

33. Bakhtin introduces this term in his essay “Discourse in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), 342; also see Pomorska, “Foreword,” in Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, x.

relative.”³⁴ Andre has celebrity guest interviews—opportunities for dialogue—at the centre of his program. The first season of *The Eric Andre Show* consists primarily of B-list celebrities; however, as the show has attained longevity, the guests have increasingly moved towards the A-list tier. Regardless of who he is interviewing, Andre refuses to allow his questions to become vehicles of self-promotion for his guests or, to put it another way, prompts for monologues. In an interview with the London actor and television personality, Julie Brown, Andre begins by saying, “I want to go on vacation. Where do you think I should go?”³⁵ This attempt at authentic dialogue, albeit trivial, leaves the good-natured Brown confused, as she had expected to answer a question about her own celebrity. Less trivial is Andre’s opening question to former member of the pop group the Spice Girls Melanie Brown (Mel B), which references her “Girl Power” trademark. “Do you think Margaret Thatcher effectively utilised girl power by funnelling money to illegal paramilitary death squads in Northern Ireland?” asks a monotone Andre. Brown’s giggly response, “Oh, I don’t know,” illuminates Andre’s anti-talk show format, with Brown, an entertainment veteran, resorting to laughter in order to maintain the late-night talk show rule of maintaining a light tone and hewing to uncontroversial subject matters. While Andre’s interview style may appear deliberately contrarian, or (as is the case for Brown) antagonistic, Andre’s tactic is to gesture towards the familiar—to advert to the generic attributes of the talk-show interview—in order to confound those same attributes.

Andre further dismantles the capitalist media machine that undergirds the late-night talk show interview by deflecting the “high” celebrity status of his privileged guests, specifically by directing their awareness to the egalitarian nature of the body. In a comment about

34. Wilson Yates, “Francis Bacon: The Iconography of Crucifixion” in James Luther Adams and Wilson Yates, eds., *The Grotesque in Art and Literature: Theological Reflections* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 20, quoted in Schuy R. Weishaar, *Masters of the Grotesque: The Cinema of Tim Burton, Terry Gilliam, the Coen Brothers and David Lynch* (London: McFarland & Company, 2012), 26.

35. Adult Swim, “Preview – Lou Ferrigno/ Downtown Julie Brown,” October 18, 2013, video, 0:44, <https://youtu.be/QWDhhiYgwrQ>.

his guest interview strategy, Andre states, “When tarantulas and scorpions are popping out of my desk, it doesn’t matter who [the guests] are, they’re going to have a strong [physical] reaction.”³⁶ These reactions are achieved by tricks not visible on screen. For example, as Andre said in a different interview,

We have this Chinese water torture thing going on, where we’ll have water drip right on the guest’s head from the top of the ceiling. We’ll also stuff a heat duct with old clams and put it under the seat, so it reeks like a landfill. It gets really smelly and hot, like Guantanamo Bay. We did that to Krysten Ritter, pumping hot clam air all up into the back of her chair. She was so pissed.³⁷

These interview tactics could be viewed as mere cheap stunts to prompt embarrassment or confusion in his guests. However, their real effect stems from Andre’s complete disregard for his guest’s self-promotion; instead, Andre subjects guests to the demands of their bodies, demonstrating to viewers the primacy of the body in their lives. The tendency of comic characters to reveal the body’s primacy over the mind is far from new. The same tendency is typified by the conduct of Panurge, a “comic character”³⁸ in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*:

Item: he had another pocket full of plume-alum itching-powder, some of which he would toss down the backs of the women he deemed most haughty, making them strip off before everybody, while others jumped about like a cock on hot coals or drum-sticks on a tabor.³⁹

The body, as Andre continually remind his guests, is the people’s immortality. It is collective and ancestral, dying and rebirthing with each successive generation. As Bakhtin writes, “The material bodily lower stratum is productive. It gives birth, thus assuring mankind’s immortality. All obsolete and vain illusions die in it, and the real future comes to life.”⁴⁰ Andre’s use of tricks to distract his guests from their “vain illusions” by forcing them to focus on the needs of the body undermines the elevation of celebrity culture,

36. Lanre Bakare, “Comedian Eric Andre: ‘We Don’t Tell Guests a Thing—They Waltz into a House of Horrors,’” interview with Eric Andre, *Guardian*, June 27, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/jun/27/comedian-eric-andre-we-dont-tell-guests-a-thing-they-waltz-into-a-house-of-horrors>.

37. Adam Linehan, “Eric Andre is Never Going to Get to Interview Lauren Conrad Again,” interview with Eric Andre, *Maxim*, November 10, 2014, <https://www.maxim.com/entertainment/eric-andre-never-going-get-interview-lauren-conrad-again>.

38. See, for example, W. M. Frohock, “Panurge as Comic Character,” in “Humour,” special issue, *Yale French Studies* 23 (1959): 71–76.

39. Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, 219.

40. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 378.

directly reminding his guests that their body is as corporeal as ours. Importantly, however, it also shows the collective nature of humanity through the common needs of the body, issuing a reminder that is particularly poignant in the late-night talk show format, which privileges the individual.

Andre's "man on the street" stunts reinforce the collective nature of the carnivalesque or grotesque body quite literally. One sketch has Andre walking the streets of New York City attached to a row of dolls made in his own image, trying to enter a pornography shop, among other places.⁴¹ Other sketches explicitly nod to the carnivalesque when Andre wears a medieval jester's costume; others still evoke the mutability of the carnivalesque body when Andre dresses as a centaur and catches public trains. Again, these stunts result in physical accidents, whether caused by the cumbersome nature of Andre's costumes or by altercations with the public. Yet, Andre's ever-unscathed presence on screen represents the indestructible nature of the collective body. As Bakhtin writes of this collective body,

Even the pressing through, the physical contact of bodies, acquires a certain meaning. The individual feels that he is an indissoluble part of the collectivity, a member of the people's mass body. In this whole the individual body ceases to a certain extent to be itself; it is possible, so to say, to exchange bodies, to be renewed (through change of costume and mask). At the same time the people become aware of their sensual, material bodily unity and community.⁴²

41. *The Eric Andre Show*, series 4, episode 4, "Tichina Arnold; Steve Schirripa," directed by Andrew Barchilon and Kitao Sakurai, August 26, 2016, <https://www.adultswim.com/videos/the-eric-andre-show>.

42. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 255.

43. *Ibid.*, 279.

What is most important about Andre's on-the-street performances, as well as his live performances, is that they remove the structure that frames his television show, thus allowing the audience to become aware of their "material bodily unity and community."⁴³ In writing of Goethe's journey to Italy, Bakhtin describes Goethe's observations about the amphitheatre of Verona and the effect Goethe proposed it had on the people

who gathered there. As Bakhtin writes, the amphitheatre allowed the people to “perceive the concrete, sensual, visible form of their mass and unity.”⁴⁴ Bakhtin then quotes the observations made by Goethe directly:

Crowded together, its members are astonished at themselves. They are accustomed at other times to seeing each other running hither and thither in confusion, bustling about without order or discipline. Now this many-headed, many-minded, fickle, blundering monster suddenly sees itself united as one noble assembly, welded into one mass, a single body animated by a single spirit.⁴⁵

This unity renders the carnival devoid of footlights, dissolving the distinction between performer and audience. Instead, carnival encompasses all, its very essence embracing the multitude and engaging them in a play that shows their collective power.

Nevertheless, as this article has indicated, the majority of Andre’s work comes to the people through the medium of television. It has been reiterated throughout this article that carnival is a communal state, a real and organic—albeit a “second”—life of the people. Television, in contrast to this communal state, is a technological and therefore artificial construct. Yet, one needs only reflect on one’s own personal TV viewing experiences to see the intrinsically social nature of television. As Robert V. Hamilton and Richard H. Lawless note, “television [is] a part of the social matrix in which the individual personality exists.”⁴⁶ As the authors suggest, the content viewed on television may spark discussions in private, casual conversation but lead to more complicated political and cultural discourse. Although the TV-viewing experience has changed dramatically in recent years with the advent of streaming services, the viewing experience does not end when the television is turned off. Instead, further technology-based communication continues after the programming ends, including through TV-specific content published online on

44. Ibid.

45. Johann Wolfgang Goethe, “The Roman Carnival,” in *Italian Journey*, trans. W. H. Auden and Elizabeth Mayer (Pantheon, 1962), 446, quoted in *ibid.*

46. Robert V. Hamilton and Richard H. Lawless, “Television Within the Social Matrix,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (1956): 393.

fan sites and through other interactions on social media.⁴⁷

In joining Bakhtin's analysis of the carnivalesque body with the genre of the late-night talk show—a spectacle that celebrates capitalist individualism and the cult of celebrity—this article has shown how *The Eric Andre Show* achieves a provocative rendering of the power of the carnival. What is unique about the medieval carnival—and, by extension, *The Eric Andre Show*—is that they both offer an alternative vision of the world through lived experience. Respectively, they create this vision by arranging a collective gathering of the medieval body or by exhibiting, through Andre, the use and abuse of the human body, which triggers physical reactions in the show's guests and viewers. These productions use carnival as an instrument not merely to inspire but to enact a revolution—a revolution not only of the mind and spirit but of the body too.

47. James Lull, "Foreword," in *Social Interactive Television: Immersive Shared Experiences and Perspectives*, eds. Pablo Cesar, David Geerts, Konstantinos Chorianopoulos (New York: Information Science Reference, 2009), xvii.

