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## “I Think I’m Gonna Throw up...”: Toward a Cultural Theory of Shock Radio

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Toward a Cultural Theory of Shock Radio  
Joy Elizabeth Hayes & Dana Gravesen

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## Introduction

After a July 26<sup>th</sup>, 2001 broadcast in which he and his on-air crew vividly described the sexual and excretory act referred to as a “blumpkin,” influential shock jock Howard Stern’s corporate parent, Infinity Broadcasting, received a fine of \$27,500 per syndicated airing by the FCC. This was the highest fine ever imposed by the FCC on a radio broadcaster for indecency. The total fine was in the millions. As a result, Infinity suspended Stern for a brief period of time (Hilliard & Keith, 2009). Rather than signaling the end of Stern’s career, however, this incident signaled an era of renewed success for the *Howard Stern Show* and the self-described “King of all Media.”

This study examines the thematic content and language of the *Howard Stern Show* for the period 1999 to 2003 in order to identify the cultural resonances and implications of shock radio. Although Stern had been on the air since the late 1980s, this was a time of national popularity for Stern, a high point of FCC scrutiny, and the period right before Stern moved to satellite radio. We do close readings of several full-length recordings of the show posted on YouTube by program fans, and we supplement those readings with an analysis of daily program summaries posted on the website MarksFriggin.com. Our goal is to explicate the cultural work of the *Howard Stern Show* and develop a broader theorization of shock radio as a broadcast format.

By drawing on theories of the body and its relationship to communication media, our goal is to expand on the conceptualization of shock radio offered by Susan Douglas and others (Douglas, 1999; Fiske, 1996). Douglas describes shock radio as part of a conservative backlash against the feminist movement that aimed to contain women culturally, and help men redefine masculinity in a post-feminist world. While we find this to be a persuasive reading of Stern and other masculinist talkers

like Don Imus and Rush Limbaugh, it begs the question of why the backlash took the form of a fascination with, and objectification of, women's bodies and bodies in general. As Douglas observes, Stern and other shock jocks sound like "horny, insubordinate twelve-year old boys" who engage in aggressive gross-out humor, obsess about women's breasts, and openly explore their bodily functions (p. 292; p. 318). By drawing on Linda Williams's concept of body genres, M.M. Bakhtin's grotesque body, and the work of radio scholars who conceptualize the relationship between the voice, the body and the medium, we argue that the exploitation of women's bodies in the *Howard Stern Show* was part of a larger obsession with the limits and possibilities of the human body both in shock radio and in turn-of-the-millennium culture more broadly.

### **Approach and Overview**

While the *Howard Stern Show* dealt with various current cultural and political issues, guest celebrities, and daily news, the primary focus of the four-hour-long show was on the human body as a site of fascination, humiliation, disgust, arousal, and play. Our study is based on textual analyses of five four-hour-long programs from the five-year period 1999-2003, including the October 25, 1999 "Divorce Show," the September 8, 2000 "Drunk Show," the September 11, 2001 broadcast (over five hours long), the March 27, 2002 broadcast, and the April 16, 2003 broadcast. We examine language use and the vocal performances of Stern, his crew, guests and callers, as well as program features and topics covered. In order to gain a broader view of the content themes and trends central to the show during these years, we supplement our analyses of these individual shows with a study of daily program summaries posted on the website MarksFriggin.com. MarksFriggin.com is a long-running fan-produced site that has been endorsed by Stern as a repository of program information. We collected a modified random sample of 60 detailed program summaries in order to get a more representative view of broadcast content during the period 1999-2003.<sup>1</sup>

The *Howard Stern Show* during was known for its sexual content, and a great deal of time was devoted to porn stars, strippers and other women willing to take off their clothes and perform sexual acts in the studio in exchange for cash, publicity, or other goods and services. However, data from program summaries indicates that the bodily “gaze” of the program was not only aimed at women’s bodies as sexual objects, but at bodily functions more broadly. Specifically, when we tracked the number of body-related topics covered in the MarksFriggin.com summaries, we found that the majority focused on bodies in a non-sexual way (see Table 1). According to detailed program summaries, about 10% more references were made to non-sexual body topics than sexual body topics. Although sexual topics regularly took up more airtime than non-sexual topics, the sheer number of non-sexual body references indicates a broader interest in the body that goes beyond sexual titillation and objectification.

Table 1. Sexual and Non-Sexual Body-Related Topics Identified in Summaries of *The Howard Stern Show*, 1999-2003

MarksFriggin.com Stern show summaries (12 summaries sampled per year)	Number of <b>Sexual Body-Related Topics</b>		Number of <b>Non-Sexual Body-Related Topics</b>	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
1999	27	45%	33	55%
2000	24	41%	35	59%
2001	23	43%	31	57%
2002	36	42%	50	58%
2003	61	44%	79	56%

Obsessive attention to the body characterized every segment of the show from celebrity interviews, to the daily contests and challenges featured on the show, to the interactions of Stern’s in-studio crew. While Stern relentlessly pursued questions about celebrities’ sexual bodies and experiences, he was similarly intrigued by questions of bodily excess. In some cases, bodily functions

that could be read as sexual were treated in a non-sexual way. For example, musician Tommy Lee reported that a photographer got a picture of his “morning stiffy,” and Stern related having an “accident in his pants” after getting excited at a strip club (MarksFriggin.com, 9-23-02; 10-2-02). Although the topics were erection and ejaculation, they were described as de-sexualized bodily functions like urination and defecation. Rather than focusing on sexual arousal and release, Stern was interested in the unruly body that could not be controlled (as in the case of stuttering, vomiting, diarrhea, etc.).

Stern’s interest in the bodily grotesque was evident with celebrities who were well known for their “extreme” bodies (such as Roseanne Barr, Rosie O’Donnell, Anna Nicole Smith or Pamela Anderson), as well as in cases where body issues were obscure or only loosely connected to the interviewee. For example, Stern asked Justine Priestley to talk about a car accident in which her actor brother Jason Priestley got his nose torn off of his face (MarksFriggin.com, 2-4-03). A similarly bizarre example was noted in the MarksFriggin.com summary for October 4, 1999:

Howard brought up an interesting fact that he found in "[The Guinness Book of World Records 1999](#)" this morning...actor Andy Garcia was born with a tennis ball sized conjoined twin on his shoulder. It was removed shortly after birth.

Howard said that would make for a good interview. He wasn't interested in interviewing him in the past but now he is (10-4-99).

According to Stern, a physical anomaly – an excess that had to be surgically removed – made Garcia an interesting guest for the show. Along these lines, celebrities were regularly probed about accidents, abnormalities, surgeries, assaults and other unusual or gruesome physical experiences undergone by themselves or their families (for example, Kelsey Grammer and Chuck Zito) (MarksFriggin.com, 9-30-99; 11-29-99).

Contests and challenges were another feature of the show in which non-sexual bodily functions often played a central role. For example, the “Gossip Game” with Mike Waller was a regular feature

during this period that required Stern, his guest and crew to guess which of four gossip stories was false. These stories typically involved grotesque bodily experiences; in one case they included celebrities urinating, having collagen implants, and having toe surgery (MarksFriggin.com, 9-12-03; see also 2-5-99). In addition to games, the show frequently employed physical challenges designed to induce disgust and vomiting if possible. Along with eating various repulsive substances, a common challenge involved eating some kind of food item that was stuck in one of the crew's ass cheeks (MarksFriggin.com, 2-9-01; 9-15-03). In a different vein, visitors and callers frequently performed "tricks" with their sexual organs that were not designed to arouse or titillate, but to display the unusual capacities of the human body. One group of visitors performed penis tricks for the crew which involved dropping their pants and manipulating their penises into various shapes, including a hamburger, the Eiffel Tower, a ship, and a smashed rat (MarksFriggin.com, 10-5-01). Similar tricks along these lines included a queefing contest and a caller who could crack his penis like knuckles (MarksFriggin.com, 2-19-02; 3-24-03).<sup>2</sup>

Finally, another feature of the show that focused on non-sexual bodily excess was the interaction between Stern and his crew. Members of the crew frequently berated and teased each other about bodily flaws and traits (having bad teeth, bad hair, being overweight, etc.), with a particular focus on vocal imperfections like whistling vowels, throat clearing, cackling and stuttering (MarksFriggin.com, 3-4-02). Members of Stern's crew also participated in the show through bodily "expressions" such as belching, farting, vomiting, getting drunk, passing out, urinating, and masturbating. They also "competed" with each other for worst childhood trauma, which for Stern included being beaten up and threatened by "blacks" in high school (and having his pants taken), and for Quivers included being sexually molested by her father (MarksFriggin.com, 3-27-03).

Although sexual content dominated the *Howard Stern Show* and garnered the most attention from both fans and the FCC, our overview of the show indicates that the non-sexual body was also of

primary interest. While Stern's objectification and exploitation of the female body must be contextualized within the broader anti-feminist project identified by Douglas (1999), we argue that it was also part of a larger concern with embodiment that shaped every aspect of the show during these years. To address this question, we look at the problem of embodiment during the socio-cultural moment of the turn-of-the-millennium, and then draw on several bodies of theory to explore how radio became a key site for the exploration and exploitation of this problem.

### **The Problem of the Body at the End of the Twentieth Century**

The socio-cultural terrain of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century reveals a deep concern with the body as a site of social organization and cultural meaning. Transformations in post-industrial society and the rise of a "computer-based infrastructure" had profound repercussions for labor, leisure, health, and everyday life (Masuda, 1986, p. 621). Both in the U.S. and around the globe, people found their physical mobility increasingly restricted and controlled as promises of labor mobility via new technologies translated into decreased mobility for individual bodies. People spent more and more time commuting in the tight spaces of cars, trains, shuttles, busses and planes, in order to spend their workday behind a counter, desk, steering wheel, communication device or computer screen (Florida, 2010). Indeed, the global rise of talk radio is directly connected to technological changes and the expansion of urban commute times in countries as different as China, Mexico and the U.S. (Hayes, 2001). With talk radio, the constrained body of the "mobile" listener mirrored the constrained body of the talk jock, who was tied to an audio console in a cramped radio studio.

Along with this mobility-constraint dialectic came a deep concern over where to philosophically situate the corporeal body in a rapidly changing social, cultural, and technological landscape. For over thirty years, scholars from disparate disciplines have debated the ontological implications of the automation, industrialization, medicalization, mechanization, and computerization of our bodies (for an

overview, see Bell, 2001). While the technology of cloning, for example, raised questions about the nature of individuality and obsolescence (Baudrillard, 1994; Campbell, 1997), the rise of “virtual worlds” introduced a number of anxieties about human embodiment (Bell, 2001; Eco, 1986; Fukuyama, 2002; Hayles, 1999; Hills, 1999; Robins, 2000). In sum, rapid and large-scale technological change at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century raised many questions about the possibilities and limits of human bodies.

The problem of embodiment was also explored and exploited in a range of popular media. Along with shock radio, bodily excess was examined in film genres from gross-out comedies to horror, and in a growing number of reality television shows and video productions. Stern aired a condensed, videotaped version of his morning radio show on the E! Entertainment Television cable channel (1999-2004), highlighting the sexualized bodies of female guests. At the same time, the adult video franchise, *Girls Gone Wild* (started in 1997), copied and cashed-in on Stern’s lucrative business model of persuading women to exploit their bodies for the pleasure of male audiences with little or no compensation. In the cultural mainstream, both men and women participated in bodily exploitation and humiliation as contestants and viewers of the popular reality programs of the period like *Fear Factor* (2001-2006), *Jackass* (2000-2002) and *Survivor* (2000-).<sup>3</sup> Bodily trials and tests that provoked vomiting, pain and even injury – particularly by eating substances deemed inedible – were a riveting component of popular culture during the late 1990s and early 2000s. At the movies, films by David Cronenberg such as *Crash* (1996) and *eXistenZ* (1999) eroticized the interpenetration of bodies and technologies, while gross-out comedies, including the Farrelly Brothers’ films *Dumb and Dumber* (1994) and *There’s Something About Mary* (1998), brought uncontrollable bodily functions to mainstream film comedy (Snart, 2005). In a social world characterized by increasing bodily restraint, then, popular cultural texts explored bodies gone wild, out of control, at the limits of their endurance, and suspended between the erotic, technological, and scatological.

## Radio Studies and Embodiment

While the human body became a source of deep cultural concern at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it had long been a pressing problem for radio broadcasters, listeners and scholars alike. The physical and visible absence of corporeal bodies from radio transmissions raised obvious concerns about the authenticity and sincerity of invisible radio speakers. At the same time, it was understood that the invisible radio voice could create a strong sense of intimacy, as the speaking and singing bodies of the performers seemed to be present in the texture of their broadcast voices (Hayes & Gravesen, 2013).

Scholarship has focused on two broad kinds of embodied radio voices: those that “make love” to the audience with intimate speech and “crooning” voices (McCracken, 1999; Simonson, 2012); and those that reject cordiality and civility (often at the expense of the listener) in order to present an artless and unrestrained radio personality. Shock jocks like Stern drew on both traditions. Following in the footsteps of radio talkers like Arthur Godfrey and Ted Malone, Stern “touched” his guests and listeners with his resonant, microphone-enhanced voice (often used to ask sexually explicit questions and describe his own state of arousal). For both Malone and Stern, the voice became a sensuous extension of the body that aimed to evoke an emotional and physical response on the part of the listener (Hayes & Gravesen, 2013). Simultaneously, Stern drew on the aggressive and even vicious tactics made famous by broadcasters such as W.K. Henderson and Father Coughlin in the 1920s and 1930s, and updated by Joe Pyne’s “insult radio” in the 1960s (Doerksen, 2005; Soley, 2007; Hilliard & Keith, 2009). Henderson provides a particularly apt early example of a broadcaster who, like Stern, harangued listeners who contacted him and used a combination of profanity, humor and vitriol to express his views (Doerksen, 2005.) In 1929, Henderson described his audience as follows:

They want it strong. They want to hear you ride somebody. If not, why do they spend their good money for telegrams? They want to be entertained. They razz

me and wait for me to bawl them out over the Radio. I never disappoint them if they sign their names (Henderson cited in Doerksen, 2005, p. 94).

Like Stern during the early 2000s, Henderson was also locked in battle with the powerful Federal Radio Commission (precursor of the FCC) that added to his “authentic” vernacular persona.

Intense physical and emotional responses on the part of radio personalities, then, conveyed intimacy and sincerity. In their famous study of U.S. singer Kate Smith (1946), researchers Robert K. Merton, Marjorie Fiske, and Alberta Curtis found that listeners responded to the way that Smith’s radio voice communicated (both described and performed) her physical exhaustion and bodily sacrifice during her bond drive broadcasting marathon. Paddy Scannell makes a similar claim in his study of British wartime crooner, Vera Lynn. Her ability to vocally convey her emotional and physical commitment to the troops and the homeland – to perform “as if she believes what she sings” – provided evidence of her sincere and intimate “presence” via the radio (Scannell, 1996, p. 67). In both cases, the voice was an extension of the body and, as such, a measure of sincerity and “authenticity.”

A close reading of several Stern broadcasts from the years 1999-2003 indicates how central Stern’s description and expression of his own bodily excess was to the program. In particular, Stern’s body physically registered his excitement, anger, depression, and other physical and emotional states. This was evident across a broad range of program topics -- from Stern’s divorce, to the 9/11 attacks, to a show in which Stern and the entire cast got drunk on air. In the 1999 “The Divorce Show,” for example, Stern framed the entire show in which he revealed his separation from his wife, Alison, in bodily terms as a process of taking a laxative. “Today is castor oil Monday...Today I take my castor oil,” Stern quipped. “We’re entertaining people with this horror in our lives,” he commented to Robin. Throughout the broadcast Stern performed his feelings of sadness, depression and accountability as bodily sickness:

Howard: I think I’m going to be nauseous [belching, coughing]

Robin: Don't belch at a time like this

Stern continued to belch over the course of the program as he discussed his failings as a husband and sparred with listeners. By the end of the broadcast Stern diagnosed himself as falling ill as a result of the divorce/show: "I'm gonna have a sore throat, I'm sure, from all the stress of this! I've got another one of those nasty cold things going on" (10-25-99).

Stern's body played a similar, mediating role during the 9/11 broadcast. Throughout the over-five-hour-long broadcast, Stern's "radio body" expressed a range of emotional and physical states, including anger and nausea (for more details see Hayes & Gravesen, 2013). Stern's anger became increasingly audible and embodied as the nature of the attack began to unfold: "I swear to you I'm getting queezy...I'm having trouble breathin.' I'm very angry! I feel that people need to suffer now" (9-11-01). Stern's burps and belches signaled his churning stomach as he performed and described his body's reaction to the crisis. In response to callers' angry and emotional testimonies, Stern stated, "I'm in shock too, and I tell ya one thing...I'm getting increasingly, uh, woozy from this" (9-11-01). Stern's bodily response was a sign of sincere revulsion and anger, and provided listeners with a medium through which to share their own physical responses to the crisis.

The 2000 Drunk Show was explicitly designed to push the bodies of Stern and his crew to new levels of excess. Along with the increasingly impaired voices of Stern and his crew, drinking produced multiple forms of bodily surplus including urinating, throwing up, sexual arousal and exhibition, and passing out. This show specifically explored the tension around bodily excess and constraint when it contrasted Howard's out-of-control drunk body with his "professional" radio persona. After observing that, "my eyes are rolling into the back of my head," Stern declared in a slightly slurred voice, "I will not pass out. I'm a professional broadcaster" (9-8-00). As a whole, the show explored the way that uncontrollable bodies could challenge radio's professional procedures and disciplined voices.

The Drunk Show also explicitly critiqued and played with efforts to "technologize" and

“objectify” bodily excess when it brought in a breathalyzer, and a trained breathalyzer technician, to measure the crew’s level of drunkenness. While the machine was respected as a “rational” measurement of dangerous intoxication, it was also used and abused by the bodies at play in the show. The bodies of the participants were frequently testing the machine, rather than the other way around. When Quivers took her second breathalyzer test after more than seven Long Island Ice Teas, the technician quipped, “Robin, I think you blew a piece of hors d’oeuvre in there...” (9-8-00). While Stern and his crew “desecrated” their bodies with alcohol, Quivers’s drunken bodily residue inadvertently “defiled” the breathalyzer technology designed to objectify those bodies.

While the *Howard Stern Show* dealt with various forms of corporeal defilement, bodily desecration became a subject in and of itself in the *Divorce Show*. As Stern and Quivers discussed the comments on Howard’s divorce made by public figures and others, they note how many people had come out to “gloat” over Howard’s personal pain. In this context, the metaphor of forced, public bodily purging gave way to a description of bodily desecration. The following interchange between Stern and Quivers is characteristically both self-aggrandizing and self-deprecating:

Robin: Gary [Dell’Abate, the producer] said, “What do you think will happen when we die?” They’ll drag us down the street...

Howard: We’ll be like Mussolini. People will urinate on us...Right.

Robin: People will throw garbage on us (10-25-99).

Stern speculated that public hostility toward him would reach new heights now that his marriage was over because, “The one redeeming thing about me was that I was married for 21 years” (10-25-99). If bodily desecration was the larger theme of the *Howard Stern Show*, it seems fitting that Quivers and Stern playfully imagined that this theme would continue after they were gone, as an enraged public defiled their dead bodies “like Mussolini.”

## Shock Radio as a Body Genre

In the following section we turn to film and cultural theory to make sense of the role of the body in the *Howard Stern Show*. We begin with Linda Williams's (1991) influential essay "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess," in which she identifies three "body genres" in film—the melodrama, the horror film, and the pornographic film. These genres are marked "...by 'excesses' of spectacle and displays of primal, even infantile emotions, and by narratives that seem circular and repetitive" (p. 3). Body genres are "low" genres, or genres for which Williams argues there is no accounting for taste, and for which sensation, emotion, violence, and sex are "excessive" to the point of spectacle. Although Williams's framework has been applied, critiqued, and expanded in film studies (e.g., Williams, 1999, 2002; Case, 2000; Showalter, 2000; Hunt, 2000; Hills, 2005; Keith, 2007), it has only recently been applied to broadcast formats (Hayes & Gravesen, 2013).

We argue that shock radio combines key elements of these three body genres in its play of excess emotions (anger, humiliation, tears), combative interactions, and sexual titillation. The case of shock radio also suggests that Williams's framework should be expanded to include gross-out comedy as a body genre. Along these lines, Stephen Snart (2005) makes the case that gross-out film comedies such as *There's Something About Mary* (1998) and *American Pie* (1999) should be included as part of a distinct body genre. In particular, he points out that the focus on "spectatorship" and audience reactions is key to Williams's definition of body genre:

One of the many important aspects of her article is the new approach to genre distinction: the physical effect on the viewer. In this sense, the gross-out comedy must be taken into account within a contemporary revision of her theory. The genre not only satisfies the visual, aural and low-culture requirements of her body genre criterion, the genre's existence is fundamentally based on the act of bodily secretion and therefore must be considered as an integral member within this

analysis (Snart, 2005, para. 15).

As discussed above, the *Howard Stern Show* is fundamentally focused on bodily excesses and “secretions” and their deployment for shock and comedic value. While it is not our goal to define shock radio as a genre via film genre theory, we find this expanded concept of body genre helpful in theorizing the cultural work of shock radio. In particular, as Snart indicates, Williams’s concept is key for theorizing the relationship between shock radio and its listeners.

According to Williams, body genres are defined not only by excessive bodily display, but by the “perception that the body of the spectator is caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen...” (Williams, 1991, p. 4). The bodies on the screen (or on the air) become channels through which viewers and listeners express reciprocal physical and emotional excess. Body genres specifically work to elicit bodily reactions from spectators, including tears, accelerated pulses, screams, orgasms, hairs standing up, and even nausea or vomiting. Beyond sincerity and intimacy, then, body genres aim to create communicative reciprocity with their audiences.

M.M. Bakhtin’s theory of the grotesque body adds to this concept of embodiment as a means of reciprocal communication and social interaction. In *Rabelais and his world* (1984), Bakhtin views the grotesque body as one that focuses on the “convexities and orifices” of the body – the genital organs, the anus and buttocks, the belly, the mouth and the nose (p. 319). These parts of the body are associated with excrement and expulsion on the one hand, and sex, life, and sustenance on the other. The grotesque body is not an individuated body, but a social body that blurs together with other bodies, shares secretions, and produces new kinds of social contact. Grotesque, excessive bodies create zones of stimulation and interaction between bodies, in the same way that body genres emphasize reciprocal excess on the part of performers and audiences. According to Bakhtin, these grotesque bodies may become productive spaces for a socially situated critique of “official culture” and bourgeois civility (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 437; Douglas, 1999; Zechowski, 2002).

A closer look at the *Howard Stern Show* reveals how Stern's physical and emotional excess created space for listeners to project and explore their own excessive bodies. As a live broadcast with active participation by listeners and Stern's extended crew (present both in and outside the studio via telephone), listeners could respond to the show in real time. Callers regularly participated in the program with their own grotesque stories and bodily performances that became key parts of the show (such as "cracking" ones penis over the air). As discussed above, the 9/11 broadcast offers a particularly vivid case of the emotional interplay between Stern, his crew, and listeners. As members of his crew called in from various locations in New York to describe the attacks and express their anger and frustration, Stern increasingly echoed their demands to make someone "suffer" for what was happening (Hayes & Gravesen, 2013).

The interplay of emotional and physical excess was also evident in the *Divorce Show*. Stern opened the show by describing his weekend at home with his wife and family – finalizing his separation from his wife and telling his three children about the break-up – as a kind of "funeral." He observed that, "I haven't cried since college, and I cried all weekend," and "to say that I'm depressed would be an understatement" (10-25-99). Although Stern himself did not cry on air, several callers did. Some listeners, who viewed Howard and Alison as "soulmates" and "a great couple," were shocked and depressed by the news. A collaborator of Stern's, know as Ratso, called in and observed that the show was offering a very "sensitive and humanistic discussion of divorce." He described the show as "family therapy" with the crew and listeners as the family, and contrasted Stern's thoughtful discussion of divorce with the harsh and "insensitive" approach to the topic taken by radio host Dr. Laura Schlessinger. Ratso then began to sob loudly and Howard comforted him saying, "Ratso, let it out..." (10-25-99).

At the same time that Stern, his crew, and callers seemed to be sincere about their grief, some could not resist the urge to ridicule the melodrama of the moment. While callers cajoled Stern by

stating that they wanted to have sex with his wife, Stern and his producer, Gary, added sappy music at key moments and scheduled a visit with the “Sex Rabbi” during the show (10-25-99). The theme of Stern’s divorce actually continued on the show for years with this same dynamic of tragedy-parody. For example, during the 2002 show satirical sad music played in the background as Howard discussed taking a patch of lawn from his Long Island home after the divorce (MarksFriggin.com, 3-27-02).

The interactive nature of the *Howard Stern Show* took the communicative reciprocity of the body genre to a new level. While Stern’s bodily states sometimes echoed those of his listeners, his listeners also mimicked his emotional and physical responses. For example, Stern frequently railed against the process whereby his broadcasts were time-delayed so that indecent content could be edited out in real time. During one show, a listener called in to express his anger about how the show was being “bleeped” to the point of incoherence. This prompted Stern to demand that the person in charge of editing his show come into the studio. Andre, who worked adjacent to the studio, reluctantly came in and said that he had cut the words “poop” and also “full penetration” (MarksFriggin.com, 9-22-99). Andre’s visit highlighted the “penetrable” nature of the studio and the broadcast, and provided a window on the interactions between Stern and his audience.

In another case, a listener called in to tell Gary that the sound of his voice was making her sick. He was reading entries to a contest, and his wheezing voice sounded disgusting. Gary said that he was sick and still smoking. The caller told the crew that they either had to have someone else read the entries or stop reading them because she was getting physically ill listening to him (MarksFriggin.com, 4-16-03). The caller’s active intervention in the show was part of an ongoing practice of commenting on Gary’s disturbing and excessive body (protruding teeth and head, bad-smelling breath, etc.) (9-8-00). In particular, Stern and other crew members were constantly expressing disgust and anger at Gary’s wheezing, whistling, and throat-clearing noises that disrupted the sound of the broadcast (MarksFriggin.com, 3-4-02). Like Stern’s responsive body, the listener’s body registered revulsion

over the sound of Gary's vocal excess.

A final example of interactivity reveals the ways in which listeners' experiences could become the focus of the show to the extent that it became a co-production of the radio "family" of Stern, his crew, and listeners. As Stern worked to set up a "Lesbian Bachelorette" game, that promised the lucky winner "lesbian sex" with porn star Tabitha Stevens, he talked to several women over the phone. Towards the end of the show he spoke to "Heather the Lesbian Mortician," and got onto the subject of what it was like to work with dead bodies. Stern asked what the strangest thing she had seen people dress their dead relatives in, and she answered a see-through blouse with no bra.<sup>4</sup> Howard commented that they've had the ashes of a dead fan in the studio for the past three years. Howard asked her when she got the desire to become a mortician, and she answered that when she was a kid she used to bring road kill home and bury it. As Heather thoughtfully answered Howard's questions, listeners began to call in to talk to Heather the Mortician. A woman called in to ask where she went to school because she also wanted to be a mortician and a couple of men called in to discuss coffin-related merchandise (MarksFriggin.com, 2-6-03). Despite his desire to be the center of the show – and his frequent assertions with some irony and much insecurity that, "There is no more interesting person on this planet than me!" (10-25-99) – Stern viewed the process of co-creating the show with his listeners as a regular part of the program. It is also interesting to note that in this particular case, the caller ultimately thwarted Stern's aim to objectify and sexualize her lesbian body. Instead, her embodied presence on the show was defined by her non-sexual, corporeal excess as someone who touched and manipulated dead bodies for a living.

## **Conclusion**

In general, and particularly during the period examined here, 1999-2003, the Howard Stern Show displayed the characteristics of a body genre. The show focused on the "lower strata" of the

body and exploited the grotesque capacities of the human body – both sexual and non-sexual. While Stern’s sexist and anti-feminist agenda framed his treatment of women’s bodies, his broader obsession with somatic excess reflected the particular cultural moment of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and the long-term problem of embodiment via the radio medium.

It might be possible to read the Howard Stern Show as an effort to discipline excessive human bodies and exploit them for economic gain, as has been claimed in the case of some reality TV shows (e.g., Wilson, 2010). This was certainly the intent of the show vis-à-vis the sexualized, marginalized, extreme or “abnormal” bodies of women who exposed themselves for Stern, his crew, and the listening audience. In particular, Stern’s tendency to combine sexual exploitation with moralizing about women being “good girls” or “bad girls” created a discourse of humiliation in which he tried to locate his female guests.

However, the show’s overriding spirit of grotesque play and social interaction created an environment that thwarted Stern’s disciplinary impulse on a regular basis. Indeed, the 2000 Drunk Show is one of the best examples of Stern’s willingness to explore the limits of bodily control and the possibilities of bodily excess for disrupting disciplining practices of professionalism and technological control. Certainly bodily excess was gendered and shaped by the larger political and economic objectives of the show. But the grotesque body, as a powerful social impulse itself, provided some space for critical reflection on the status of the body at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>1</sup> We used a random number generator to create a list of numbers between 1-31 in order to choose two days per month of MarksFriggin.com program summaries. If a number/date fell on a weekend, we sampled the next available weekday. We sampled two summaries per month for six months of each year, excluding “best of” shows, which usually had truncated summaries. We sampled the months of February, March, April, September, October and November because they are months of high listenership and include the periods when producers vie for audience ratings.

<sup>2</sup> These performances echo a history of “shock comedy” cinema, most notably director John Waters’s successful films like *Pink Flamingos* (1972), *Desperate Living* (1977), and *Polyester* (1981). Waters’s films implicitly reference more obscure “shock” art-house films such as Kenneth Anger’s *Scorpio Rising* (1964), and indirectly draw on Tod Browning’s *Freaks* (1932). All of these films are derived in one way or another from very early silent cinema shorts, which often used the spectacle of the human body to sell tickets (e.g., The Edison Company’s *Sandow the Strongman* [1894]). Finally, as much as Stern’s body trick gags seem influenced by shock cinema, gross-out prankster/trickster television shows of the early 2000s such as *Jackass* and *The Tom Green Show* seem just as heavily influenced by Stern.

<sup>3</sup> Scott Wilson (2010) offers a very different interpretation of *Fear Factor*’s rituals of public humiliation as abject experiences that discipline bodies, and confirm the hegemony of capitalist ideology.

<sup>4</sup> This happened in an episode of the HBO series *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005). Stern’s guest, then, may have been a case of life imitating art, art imitating life, performance art, or something else all together.