

## Bob Flanagan: Taking It Like a Man

Carrie Sandahl

In mainstream literature, film, and theatre, disability often serves as a metonym for emasculation.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, this association signals a male character's loss of power and masculinity. And on the other hand, in what Fred Pfeil calls "sensitive guy" films, a macho man's empathetic encounter with disabled characters or his own experience of temporary disability transforms the hero into a more benevolent patriarch. Kenneth MacKinnon makes a similar point about action genre film, in which spectators take pleasure in "the suffering of the wounded or broken body of the male hero with whom the spectator is invited to identify, but the masochism must be temporary."<sup>2</sup> David Savran goes so far as to argue that a temporary decent into masochism (often through disability) and a triumph over victimhood characterizes contemporary masculinity.<sup>3</sup> Savran argues that many mainstream dramatizations of male masochism assuage "the anxious white male subject only by magically restoring his imaginary wholeness and integrity, by convincing him that he is not castrated, that he does not love pain, and that he can triumph over his victimization."<sup>4</sup> Either way, disability's association with powerlessness, asexuality, masochism, medicalization, and infantilization makes it incompatible with full, adult, American manhood, especially when disability is a permanent state.

While mainstream representation seems unable to conceive of disability as anything other than a rite of passage to achieving full masculinity, the late performance artist Bob Flanagan transformed traditional notions of disability to remake meanings of masculinity itself. Flanagan is perhaps best known as "that performance artist guy who nailed his penis to a board," but he was also an artist (painting, video, installations), poet, stand-up comic, folk singer, and—for a time—an improv actor with the Groundlings. Though he died at age forty-three in 1996, he was one of the longest-living survivors of cystic fibrosis, a disabling congenital disease characterized by the overproduction of mucous in the lungs and pancreas. Flanagan led a sado-masochistic lifestyle (as opposed to just having

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S/M sex); he was a slave for over fourteen years to his mistress, Sheree Rose, who was his collaborator on a number of art projects.<sup>5</sup> In his live performances, video work, and installations, Flanagan challenged impotent disability imagery through the use of explicit S/M sexual play, bloody body mortifications, and references to a not-so-innocent childhood—all done with a wicked sense of humor. Flanagan made use of his disability in his art not as an obstacle to be overcome, but as a condition to revel in.

Flanagan's extreme representational strategies were warranted given the long-entrenched and well-documented use of disability imagery simply to signal male impotence in mainstream representation. Paul Longmore has pointed out that physical disability in the movies often represents "asexuality or sexual incapacitation," "[m]ore than one male character with a disability refers to himself as 'only half a man.'" <sup>6</sup> Disabled male characters often "opt for suicide partly because they believe they have lost the ability to function sexually."<sup>7</sup> Along with sexual impotency, permanent disability is associated with dependency, a condition antithetical to American manhood, which requires men not only to be independent, but to be providers. As psychologist Simi Linton argues, "America's glorification of independence has not served disabled people well. Individual worth [is] judged in terms of financial and social independence, a goal of very, very few disabled people . . . could reach."<sup>8</sup>

Linton further suggests that disabled people are often portrayed as incapable of initiating either pleasure or power. She writes that:

The capacity to engage in pleasurable activity—experiences sought for their own sake, for the stimulation and enjoyment they provide—is assumed to be out of the reach of the disabled... This notion is fed by deterministic arguments that accord tremendous weight to disability, in effect saying that it eclipses pleasure, joy, and, to an extent, creativity.<sup>9</sup>

She contends that, ultimately, disabled characters are represented as "pleasure drains." Ultimately, disability becomes "something to do something about, to control . . . not something to understand and interpret."<sup>10</sup>

Unlike these tendencies to represent disability as a temporary state of victimhood to be overcome (to do something about) or as a permanent condition of dependency and joylessness, Flanagan asserted pleasure and power in unexpected ways and conceived of disability as an ongoing source of masculinity, not a drain. To begin with, Flanagan spent his life seeking pleasurable activities through S/M sex, which he and Rose documented obsessively. In his work, Flanagan portrayed his disability not as emasculating, but as exactly what made him a man, what made him a masochist. Lynda Hart argues that "s/m activity is frequently about [...]

living in, experiencing, and (re) creating paradoxical contradictions."<sup>11</sup> For Flanagan, this paradox is his insistence that perpetual masochism is a viable masculinity. He told an interviewer that the stereotype of the masochist is of a "sniveling weakling."<sup>12</sup> But to be a masochist entails being in full control of one's body, being able to control pain, and to give up that pain to others.

In his prose poem, "Why?" (which ostensibly answers the question of why he practices S/M), Flanagan suggests that his disability and his ability to take pain define his manhood:

Because I learned to take my medicine; because I was a big boy for taking it; because I can take it like a man; because, as somebody once said, HE'S GOT MORE BALLS THAN I DO; because it is an act of courage; because it does take guts; because I'm proud of it; because I can't climb mountains; because I'm terrible at sports; because NO PAIN, NO GAIN [...] (emphasis in original)

As Flanagan suggests in this poem (which was integrated into several performances and installations), his disability and his ability to take pain are what made him a man. He was terrible at sports, but he nevertheless had more "balls" because of it. Flanagan appropriates what MacKinnon has identified as a key feature to contemporary masculinity: the "work-out ethic of pushing the body beyond the 'pain barrier' [...] and of glorying in the triumph over pain."<sup>13</sup> Flanagan wrenches the "NO PAIN, NO GAIN" cliché from the athletic realm, where in its original context it implies a temporary moment of pain. In Flanagan's context, the pain refers to his sexual masochism and also to his disability. Flanagan suggests that his disability experiences—even his childhood experiences of being hospitalized and ill—are erotic in and of themselves, that continual pain made him a strong man.

As the poem points out, disability enhances his sexual pleasure, is part of his turn-on. He transformed the physical restrictions and symptoms of disability into masochistic pleasure. When Flanagan drew on his disability and the pain associated with it as a source of sexual power, he directed this power toward consensual, negotiated S/M play, not male domination. Flanagan stated that he was "[n]ot into non-consensual pain or humiliation. Not interested in non-consensual power over anybody."<sup>14</sup> He explained that in S/M:

You're not overpowering someone, you're melding with someone. To overpower somebody is wrong, but to meld with somebody is a pleasure bonding which [...] if you crank up the juice with S/M, you get more enjoyment out of it.<sup>15</sup>

In the S/M scenes he performed in public and the private ones he and Rose documented on video, the negotiation of power is often foregrounded. Along with scenes of Flanagan being whipped, teased, and cut by Rose in the documentary, *Sick*, is a voice-over reading the actual “contract” that the two drew up, which details their mistress/slave agreement (including their sexual as well as domestic arrangements). Rose might inflict the pain, but Flanagan controls it. She has power over him, just as he has power over her. Their pleasures completely rely on each other’s full consent and active participation. The portrayal of their power negotiations was not always a smooth one, however. One particularly disturbing scene in *Sick* shows Flanagan and Rose in a wrenching discussion of their relationship when Flanagan’s illness takes a turn for the worse. Rose tells Flanagan, “If you still loved me, you’d submit to me.” Flanagan retorts through fits of coughing, “I can barely breathe half the time...what is the matter with you...I love you.”<sup>16</sup> Up until the end of Flanagan’s life, he and Rose continually made explicit the work—often difficult and repetitive work—of negotiating power.

A part of the original contract between Rose and Flanagan was Rose’s request that the two document their sexual experimentation. This documentation (in the form of photographs, video, and writing) made its way into their public art exhibitions. In this documentation, Flanagan is often portrayed as an erotic object, offering himself for Rose’s visual pleasure. MacKinnon’s work on contemporary masculinity revises Laura Mulvey’s gaze theory by taking imagery of erotic male objects into account (such images, MacKinnon points out, have exploded in advertising, popular culture, and the fine arts since Mulvey developed her theories in the seventies). MacKinnon argues that Mulvey overlooks “the possibility of (masochistic) pleasure on the part of the spectacle—the female or feminised object of the gaze.”<sup>17</sup> As part of *Visiting Hours*, a 1994 installation at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City that was designed to be reminiscent of a hospital ward, small black-and-white, close-up photographs of Flanagan’s face in the throes of pain and pleasure cover a wall.<sup>18</sup> Rose took these photographs to document Flanagan’s facial expressions during their S/M play. These photographs, as art critic Tom Hellstrom notes, portray the “body in crisis, the male body that is, with the economy of the gaze inverted by Rose’s role as photographer.”<sup>19</sup>

In addition to displaying himself for Rose, Flanagan also objectified himself, as evidenced in his explanation that Rose “videotapes my auto-eroticism so we can re-live it, and she’s excited by watching it. [...] I’m really an exhibitionist, so I love the fact that it’s on tape and I can watch it a million times.”<sup>20</sup> Such self-objectification, according to MacKinnon, is a key component of male masochism, “learning to view the body as object, to be worked on and studied by the man himself, to attract the attention and, it is hoped, the admiration of others.”<sup>21</sup> While MacKinnon refers to imagery of men with ideal body types, Flanagan’s self-objectification flaunts his disabled body: thin, often hooked up to an oxygen tank,

and scarred. By erotically objectifying his disabled male body, Flanagan again revised masculine masochism.

As Flanagan exposed the erotic potential of disability itself, he also exposed the latent S/M of medical practices. In mainstream representations, disabled people passively submit to all-knowing doctors, who control their bodies and their very destinies. Flanagan explained, "I was forced to be in the medical world, so I turned that into something I could have control over instead of something that was controlling me."<sup>22</sup> Flanagan re-framed his medical experiences as sexual power games by twisting medical imagery to expose its sexual connotations and by literally taking control of his own body. For example, in his installations, he would transform medical equipment into sexual equipment. In *Visiting Hours*, he displayed a medical stool with a giant butt plug glued to the seat. Flanagan stationed himself in a bed for eight hours a day over a six-week period and spoke with visitors as they encountered him. He engaged in a dialogue about medicalization, body imagery and disease, instead of following "doctor's orders."

Flanagan did not leave needles and scalpels in the doctors' hands. He made use of these tools to shape his own flesh, and laughed while doing it. If disability conventionally symbolizes castration and loss of control to authoritative doctors, Flanagan's literal manipulation of his genitals was all about having control. In various performance pieces, he showed audiences what his body could do and what he could do with his body. He pushed his penis back into his scrotum and stitched it up, festooned his scrotum with needles, tied up his penis, put it in a tight harness, or hung weights from it. In his performance piece, "Nailed," Flanagan cracks jokes while nailing his penis and scrotum to a board. He sang clever ditties to accompany the act: "If I had a hammer, I'd hammer in the morning; I'd hammer in the evening all over this land."<sup>23</sup> As he says over and over in the documentary and in interviews, "I am in control. I invented this."<sup>24</sup>

Flanagan also played with the notion that the disabled are asexual children, not by denying the association of disability and childhood, but by explicitly and comically sexualizing both. In *Visiting Hours*, audiences encountered copies of the children's magazine, *Highlights*, that had had their inner contents replaced with S/M magazine content featuring infantile fetish practices. They could encounter a box filled with sex toys (giant dildos, whips, handcuffs), religious icons (crucifix), and children's toys (the game *Operation*, a Superman doll, a doctor's kit), a commingling that connects the erotic pleasures of these seemingly disparate objects. Atop a child's table stood Flanagan's version of the *Invisible Man* model, which he altered to represent his own body: phlegm dripped from its mouth, semen from its penis (which he had to craft because the "anatomically correct" toy did not have one), and feces from its buttocks. A wall of children's wooden ABC blocks alternated CF-SM-CF-SM (for cystic fibrosis and sado-masochism), and the usual childhood images re-painted with S/M accessories.

Flanagan's installation uncovered the S/M subtext of many children's toys, Christian imagery, and medical practices. Lynda Hart comments,

These articles mingled in such proximity present both a shocking juxtaposition and an unmistakable recognition that there is more continuity than the dominant culture cares to admit between categories that are constructed as if they are discrete: sexual fantasy and organized religions, childhood "innocence" and adult "maturity," the body as an object for medical restoration and the body as a site of orgasmic pleasure.<sup>25</sup>

In disrupting such distinctions, Flanagan reclaimed the power of childhood sexuality, a tactic that subverts the equation of disability with a powerless, asexual, perpetual infancy.

I would like to conclude my exploration of Flanagan's work with a brief analysis of an icon he created that epitomizes his representational strategies: The Supermasochist (see Fig. 1). The image appears on the cover of the *Re/Search* book about Flanagan, the video documentary *Sick*, and in several of his performance pieces. This image combines signs of hyper-masculinity, medicalization, and juvenilia. At a time when Superman imagery immediately calls to mind Christopher Reeve's disablement, which has been framed by the media as the ultimate "kryptonite," Flanagan's appropriation is especially apt. Reeve's controversial advertisement for Nuveen (which aired during the Super Bowl, a hypermasculine event if ever there was one) capitalizes on the trope of disability as a rite of passage to true masculinity, in an attempt to convince the viewer that "anything is possible" in the world of investments. The commercial features a guest speaker singing the praises of gene therapy, as elderly and disabled people inexplicably and astonishingly rise to their feet. Then, a computer-generated image of Reeve miraculously walking, almost hovering, parts the crowd. In this ad, Reeve, the Superman (during the Super Bowl) parades in front of the entire nation his belief that he will "overcome" his disability and be restored to powerful manhood. The competitive, masculine world of investment banking drew on Reeve's unshakeable faith in a cure, that he will be made a "whole man" again, to sell faith in their business.

In this context, I find Flanagan's image particularly powerful. He incorporates disability iconography into a standard Superman pose with humor and candor to re-make a revered masculine image. In the "Supermasochist" images, Flanagan's:

- hospital gown transforms into a cape;
- oxygen mask transforms into a superhero mask;
- rubber gloves simultaneously suggest rectal examinations, superhero costume,

and S/M latex fetish;

- dog collar, wrist and ankle cuffs allude to his submission and, at the same time, articulate power by suggesting that he needs restraint;
- very brief briefs frame his cock's superhuman feat (the man of steel?), revealing what Superman's clothed bulge conceals;
- his rose tattoo marks him as Sheree Rose's slave as does the "S" carved into his skin, echoing the large "S" on Superman's chest.

In addition, Flanagan flip-flops the superhero comic convention of giving the villain a disability. Bogdan et. al. point out that superheroes' nemeses were often monstrous, physically deformed characters (Ugly Christine, Mumbles, Bee Bee Eyes, Shakey, Mrs. Pruneface).<sup>26</sup> Flanagan's supermasochist can be both a "super man" and disabled.

Flanagan's version of manhood asks us to re-think masculinity and what it suggests (ability, power, domination, action). This new "Super-man," whose disability is an integral part of who he is rather than an outside force to overcome, provides an alternative model of masculinity. Flanagan's work provides powerful examples of how disability need not merely serve as a dramaturgical device to symbolize emasculation and infantilization. Issues of gender, disability, pain, and power are far more complex and interesting than that.

## Notes

1. See Paul Longmore, "Images of Disabled People," *Social Policy*, Summer 1985, 31-37; Robert Bogdan, Douglas Bilken, Arthur Shapiro, and David Spelkoman, "The Disabled: Media's Monster," *Social Policy*, Fall 1982, 32-35 and Fred Pfeil, *White Guys: Studies in Postmodern Domination and Difference* (London: Verso, 1995) for a discussion of this dramaturgical strategy.

2. Kenneth MacKinnon, *Uneasy Pleasures: The Male as Erotic Object* (London, Madison, & Teaneck: Farleigh Dickenson UP, 1997) 31.

3. "Reflexive sadomasochism . . . has become the hegemonic white masculinity in the United States since the 1970s and the distinctive mark of the white male as victim." David Savran, *Taking It Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998) 307.

4. Savran 308. MacKinnon similarly concludes, "the point of the masochistic moment's inclusion in the narrative may be to defuse the threat from it to 'activity' and to the pleasures of mastery" on 32.

5. Throughout this paper, I will refer to sado-masochism as S/M. I depart from this convention at times, though, when citing authors who use variations of this abbreviation such as s/m or SM.

6. Longmore 36.
7. 35.
8. Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (New York: New York UP, 1998) 48.
9. Linton 111.
10. 113.
11. Lynda Hart, *Between the Body and the Flesh* (New York: Columbia UP, 1998) 138.
12. *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist*, directed by Kirby Dick. (Lexicon Home Entertainment, 1997).
13. MacKinnon 30.
14. *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist*.
15. Quoted in Andrea Juno and V. Vale, *Bob Flanagan: Supermasochist* (San Francisco: Research Publications, 1993) 87.
16. *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist*.
17. MacKinnon 15.
18. *Visiting Hours* was originally mounted at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in 1992.
19. Tom Hellstrom, "Bob Flanagan (in collaboration with Sheree Rose): Visiting Hours." *Art Papers* (January and February 1995) 60.
20. Quoted in Juno and Vale 68.
21. MacKinnon 30.
22. Quoted in Juno and Vale 11.
23. 50.
24. *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist*.
25. Hart 137.
26. Bogdan, et. al. 34.



## PRAXIS

