

Guy Trebay. 1997. No Pain No Gain: The mainstreaming of kink. *The Village Voice* (New York) November 11, 1997 XLII (45): 32 - 36.

Kraft-Ebbing is dead. Sade is in the ascendant. Even as the trolls of the Christian right indulge their orgies of sexual repression, there's a deliciously perverted countercurrent being swept along by the zeitgeist. The evidence of it is everywhere. But Janet Jackson's nipple ring may be a good place to start. It can't be without meaning that, when the breathy little sister of the Gloved One finally escapes the shadow of her brother's global fame and agonized gender dysphoria, it's as a woman who toys with edgy sex? "The expression of sexual fantasies can be beautiful if there's trust, love, and understanding," says Jackson, unconsciously paraphrasing the s/m code of conduct--"safe, sane, and consensual." Posing for Vibe in a nipple ring and a latex cat suit to hype her latest effort, *The Velvet Rope*, she boasts of her high threshold for pain and chirps that "pushing the limits of pleasure is exciting."

Certainly no one understood this better than Bob Flanagan, the performance artist who styled himself a "Supermasochist." Before his death last year from cystic fibrosis, the 43-year-old artist did more than anyone since Sacher-Masoch to uncloset the pleasures of kink. Pierced, flogged, gagged, and mummified in public--usually by his life partner and collaborator Sheree Rose--Flanagan found few things more pleasing than expounding on how "hammers, clothespins, padlocks, eyebolts, thumbtacks, staple-guns, and alligator clips" got him erect.

In the not too distant past, Flanagan and his fetishes would have been shoved to the back of our sexual-cultural armoire and locked up tight (which might also have made him hard). But, before his death, the artist found himself the subject of a packed one-man museum exhibition at the New Museum. And the director of that institution recently cited as critical the purchase of a Cibachrome portrait showing Flanagan in full Supermasochist regalia. "It normalizes an extreme practice for the viewer and makes it understandable," Marcia Tucker remarked.

One measure of how understandable s/m has become is the theatrical release this week of *Sick*, Kirby Dick's ultragraphic film of Flanagan's life, which also won a Special Jury Prize at the Sundance festival--still held, if memory serves, in Mormon Utah. The poster for *Sick* is taken from that famous Cibachrome of Flanagan--seminaked, collared, shackled, and with a 10-pound chrome weight suspended from his testicles. Is the image shocking? Not too shocking to post outside Manhattan theaters. Does it scare the horses? Apparently not anymore. And why should it, when Marilyn Manson's appearance on this year's MTV awards was noteworthy less for the singer's antichrist boilerplate than for the sight of his bare bottom in cutaway bondage chaps? Or when Gucci's bestselling shoe of the season is a severe stiletto with five-inch steel heels? Or when a Bass Ale ad unabashedly depicts a slave slaving over a woman's blue patent-leather boot?

Just a few years back, when this paper ran a story about the modern primitives of L.A.'s Club Fuck!, it was thought that readers would retch at the sight a pierced nipple on a newsstand. Back then, the Re/Search crowd's genital hole punching and distended earlobes still seemed somewhat

transgressive. Now, with every Main Street piercing parlor equipped to do New Guinean ampallongs, the Club Fuck! set has come to seem about as naughty as a quilting bee. When an acquaintance recently called hoping to titillate with news of a weekend spent at a New Jersey bed-and-breakfast equipped with its own private dungeon, her report sounded unexpectedly quaint. After all, weren't Marv Albert's garter belts playing that morning on the cover of the Post?

We've all been there before, of course--with Nine Inch Nails; with Helmut Newton shooting models in prostheses and s/m drag for the pages of *Vogue* in the '70s; with Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood's bondage clothes in the glory days of punk. Johnny Rotten's fettered trousers, McClaren once claimed--with all the persuasive powers of a snake oil salesman--were "about the explosion of the body, a declaration of war against repression." They were nothing of the sort. They were about the market, as any dog or cat knows, and so was Madonna's delightfully misunderstood *Sex*.

Managing the rare feat of simultaneously offending people at the fringe and in the center, *Sex* was noteworthy less for the fact that Madonna had tracked down edge players from Vault and Clit Club territory than because the Mistress of Media Manipulation had misgauged the moment--for once in her career. She was too early. She was also outside the loop. Even as Ciccone was strapping on thigh boots, the Web was ahead of her, an electronic samizdat furiously pressing at the boundaries of taboo. Without Restraint, the BDSM (bondage/discipline/sadism/ masochism) Web site, already had Pansexual Bondage Socials in formation. The New York Renegades home page offered tips on full body shaving and

mummifying sex pals in Saran Wrap. The SM/Leather/Fetish Community Outreach project was hyping monthly events for leather women sponsored by the Lesbian Sex Mafia. And the Gay Male S/M Activists were logging 200,000 monthly hits at a Web page that promotes seminars on such formerly unspeakable practices as "electric play." Meanwhile, over at the Piercing and Bodymod site, online discussion ran to the charms of voluntary genital bifurcation--for fellows who don't mind sitting to pee.

So busy was Madonna caning her chihuahua that she failed to foresee the proliferation of local "dungeon" spaces--30 at last count. And she missed entirely the battles being fought by such activists as Pat Califia to decriminalize possession of s/m material, and the efforts of feminist pro-s/m lobbyists to revise the National Organization for Women's condemnatory stance on sexual dominance and submission. "Personally, I think that s/m can be dangerous because it is very hard to separate sexual violence from domestic violence," claims Anne Conners, president of NOW NYC. "That's based on a condescending view of women's sexual choices," responds Susan Wright, who coordinates a pro-kink faction within NOW. What used to be considered "institutionalized patriarchy violence" is in the process of officially mutating into consensual fun. And there's an s/m theme restaurant on 23rd Street where you order a paddling with your escargot.

"Until the 1960s," writes Gloria Brame, author of 1993's *Different Loving*--a flawed and scatterdash but useful "exploration of the world of sexual dominance and submission"--the main source of information on these practices was clinical. That had all begun to change by the '80s, when a nascent political alliance was formed between

traditionally isolated erotic minorities, both straight and gay. "In the 1970s," writes Brame, "heterosexuals--influenced by the early and exhilarating victories of gay liberation as well as the formation of consciousness-raising groups by feminists--seized on the idea of forming s/m support groups." The Eulenspiegel Society, the first such group in the United States, was founded in 1971. Two decades later the National Leather Association--an umbrella organization for s/m support groups and social clubs--reported an "international network of well over 400" leather and fetish organizations. On a bright October day, representatives from some of these s/m umbrella groups--now grown to include thousands of members nationwide--meet at the Lesbian & Gay Community Services Center on West 13th Street for an eight-hour seminar on the media politics of kink. According to advocates from Gay Male S/M Activists, The Eulenspiegel Society, the Lesbian Sex Mafia, and the S/M Policy Reform Project, the realities of a sexual identity in which the erotic and the political are so tightly entwined remain widely unacknowledged. Even as the mainstream beckons, serious players are bedeviled by grotesque urban legends (among the hoariest "gerbiling," revived in a recent issue of *Time Out*), bad law, and a peekaboo press.

"The operative myths are that there are only a few people actually doing this, and that there's no normal life connected to it," says Michele Buchanan, an academic completing her doctoral thesis on lifestyle s/m. "Over the past five years I've documented an enormous amount of so-called normal life connected to the scene," she says. Among the events are bridal showers, baby showers, birthday parties, and the union of a couple married in two separate ceremonies—once for fetish and once for so-called "vanilla" friends. "People are

increasingly choosing to socialize along these lines," says Buchanan. "The network is very strong. You'd never know it from what you read, but there's a lot more to the scene than being dressed up in pervy outfits."

Despite Buchanan's assertion, even the Daily News can now refer--as the paper did recently in an excellent series on sex in the city--to a local "slave trainer" and presume that readers will comprehend the job description. "The s/m scene is the fastest growing segment of the sex industry in New York," proclaimed Master Pasha in the series. "It appeals to a lot of people. It's fun, it's safe and it's becoming more socially acceptable."

Just how socially acceptable s/m has become is a matter of debate. "Visibility is important, because when there's stuff that says we exist, it reduces sexual shame," says writer and longtime s/m advocate Califia. "On the other hand, the machine of pop culture steals from minorities. It comes to us for titillation and rips off our symbolism. At the MTV level, s/m looks more acceptable. The reality, for actual perverts, is it's not." "In this country," Califia goes on, "you've got Operation Rescue coming to s/m events, photographing things out of context and showing these films as propaganda. They target this marginalized group that people are already scared of as a way to convince everyone that what we all need is a more moralistic and authoritarian government invading our lives." Califia cites the 10-year-old Spanner case, in which a group of Englishmen were arrested in a police sting for engaging in s/m sex. Despite the fact that the acts they took part in, and occasionally videotaped, were all consensual, the 16 defendants were arrested and charged with abetting assault and causing "actual bodily harm." "In the case of the bottoms,"

explains activist Val Langmuir, "they were 'abetting' assaults on themselves." All 16 were convicted and repeatedly lost appeals as the case dragged on in the English courts. Three defendants were jailed. One died while awaiting a final decision. As a last ditch effort in 1993, advocates renewed their appeal at the European Court of Human Rights, which recently ruled to uphold the original convictions.

Sex for pleasure--that is, nonreproductive sex—will probably never be viewed without some horror in a puritan culture. The bygone debauches of the Hellfire Club, the Toilet, and the Mine Shaft--meccas of latex and fisting--pale in comparison with those of prerevolutionary France, where, according to Sade biographer Maurice Lever, the political foment of the period was fuelled by "an avalanche" of chapbook pornography and the fevered pursuit of la foutromanie, or "fuckomania."

Yet for many Americans, according to s/m activist John Weis, "anything but male-on-female, missionary position, preferably with the lights out, is going to be weird." As chairman of GMSMA, an organization with 500 dues-paying members, Weis is particularly alert to shifts in public perception. "Cultural imagery has transformed what's accepted," says Weis, who sees "lots of parallels to the gay movement of the '60s and '70s." Still, he adds, "there's a lot of ignorance of the type that allows straight people to say to a gay couple, 'Which one is the girl?'"

The imagery of kink has proliferated through the emergence of an astounding variety of niche markets. Among the many easily obtainable specialty publications that would make *Venus in Furs* seem tamer than *The Cat in the Hat* are, for example, *Bear*, *Mistress Mine*, *Shiny*, *Uncut*, *Vault*, and *Bound & Gagged*.

"When we started out there was no talk about bondage at all," says B&G editor Bob Wingate. "I remember Ann

Landers once printed a letter about it and she wrote that it was a sick fetish and the writer shouldn't indulge it. It was an important moment, actually, since she got so much response from people into bondage that she wrote another column and said, 'Well, just don't hurt anyone.'"

Wingate points out that the annual Mr. Leather Convention in Chicago has become one of that city's top-10 money-earning conventions. "Leather contests have three to four times as many booths and contestants," Wingate says. "It's big business now." Fifteen years ago, adds Weis, if you'd mentioned "play piercing" outside the confines of hardcore circles, "no one would have had any idea what you meant. That's changed. A lot of s/m organizations won't print the names of their board members. We do, because our policy is to show that real people do real s/m."

What is real s/m? Is it an "allegorical field" for transgressive narrative, as the theorists would have us believe? Is it the threshold for mental disorder, as characterized in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Psychiatric Disorders? That politically fraught diagnostic atlas continues to set down guidelines for identifying illness in such garden-variety manifestations of kink as urophilia and the fun-sounding frotteurism. Yet even practices as seemingly borderline as "cutting" now find advocates in unexpected places. "Self-mutilation is the exact opposite of suicide," claims Armando Favazza, professor of psychiatry and neurology at the University of Missouri in October's issue of I-D. "People who commit suicide want to kill themselves." People who mutilate

themselves "want to feel better," says Favazza in a cheery little "A--Z" of body modification. And people who hurt other people who feel better when they do now find it easier to come by the proper tools. As pop culture has drawn s/m imagery closer to mainstream acceptance, a substantial supply-side economy has tagged along.

According to D. Kirk Davidson, the author of *Selling Sin: The Marketing of Socially Unacceptable Practices*, the sex industry in the United States is currently worth \$20 billion a year. Although figures are difficult to obtain, a substantial part of that total is clearly the cost of toys.

"Up to five years ago," says the GMSMA's Weis, "it was very hard to find a good whip." There were few outlets, for one thing, and so most players were forced to settle for novelty items and inferior imported goods. Now, says Weis, it's simple to order a flogger from a variety of worthwhile sources, although the cognoscenti line up to pay \$300 for whips of bull, moose, or elk hide from Janette Heartwood, a Laguna Beach architect-turned-leatherworker who is widely considered the best in the business.

"Merchandising has changed a lot and that's good," says Weis. "There are more sellers, more catalogues, more conventions where you can test products. Are you going to spend \$2000 on a cage you've only seen in a magazine? No. You want to try it first. It's not like you can check this stuff out in Consumer Reports." Perhaps if Weis's and other organizations succeed in their evangelism, that will soon change. "As people are seeing more images that they don't understand," he explains, "they're experimenting with stuff that can be dangerous. They need education." To answer that need, GMSMA holds weekly

seminars on rope bondage, caning, role play, and "genitorture." "We've taken slams for de-eroticizing s/m," says Weis. "[S/M writer] Larry Townsend said, 'Can you believe they're giving classes?' But it's important people don't hurt themselves or others. There are skills involved."

For those who can't make a lifestyle commitment, there is, of course, La Nouvelle Justine. The 80-seat Chelsea restaurant with an s/m theme opened last May to a flurry of prurient press: "Dinner and a dominatrix!" "Have a whacky old time." "The chichi new bistro on West 23rd Street," wrote the Post, "also invites you to pay extra to lap your linguine from a dog dish while a waitress stands by with a whip."

Owner Hayne Jason, a tax lawyer--turned-restaurateur (she and her husband also own the drag-themed Lucky Cheng's), opened the place on a whim when a fully outfitted restaurant in the Chelsea location went bust. "It sounded like fun," says Jason. "But never in 1000 years would I have predicted the success of this place. I thought people might be horrified. But they flock."

In most ways a conventional restaurant with a bistro menu and touristy tariffs, Justine is noteworthy mainly for a waitstaff costumed in the sort of clothes that until recently were rarely seen outside of the Lure or the Vault. What illustrates the "mainstreaming of kink so succinctly," says Jason, "is that our customers are predominately conservative types. When we opened, I wasn't looking to have this Wall Street crowd and it was a big shock when men would call and book late-night reservations in tough-guy voices. I'd say, 'Sure, we're open late, no problem.' And they'd say, 'Good, because we wanna come after the hockey game.'"

Is La Nouvelle Justine--named for the scabrous novel by Sade that rendered Roland Barthes agog at "the complexity of combination, the contortions of the partners, the lavish expenditure of pleasure, the extraordinary endurance of the victims"--merely another peculiar efflorescence of our kooky little Gotham? Or will one be opening soon in Wichita? "It's really a more theatrical sports bar," says Jason. "So who knows?"

The issue is by no means trivial to people on a scene well-characterized by the term "queerscape"--which, as described by theorist Gordon Brent Ingram, is not merely a figment of gender politics, but "a social overlay where the interplays between assertion and marginalization of sexualities are in constant flux," and where the forces that "directly harm, discount, isolate, ghettoize, and assimilate" erotic outsiders are kept at bay.

"As a part of the leather and radical sex community, I can see a ceiling on the amount the mainstream can handle," says Lidell Jackson, activist and coeditor of *Black Leather in Color* magazine. "So I'm not easily convinced that these forays into nether regions are bellwethers of things to come. I take umbrage at the way the mainstream co-opts certain aspects of leather because I'm also aware that, among heavy players and sex radicals, people are forced to lay low because they don't want to be cracked down on."

True, says Jackson, there is now a "plethora of dungeons," of special gatherings for men and women with a taste for leather and lattes. True, there is a growing number of tristate bed-and-breakfasts where the Laura Ashley bedrooms are less crucial to

the ambiance than the basement dungeons fitted with video equipment and fisting slings. The emergence of kink may be "a cultural moment, even a seminal moment," says Jackson. "But it's one that scares me because I don't want to see my activities remarginalized."

Thirty-six states still carry statutes outlawing distribution of s/m material. In Arizona, photographs or drawings showing "penetration of the vagina or rectum by any object except when done as part of recognized medical procedure" are banned. In Kentucky, possession of material depicting flagellation is grounds for arrest. Of the grassroots movement to centralize s/m, the president of New York NOW states, "I feel this is detrimental for the feminist cause."

"What troubles me about the way s/m gets framed officially," says activist Susan Wright, "is that it distorts my experience. I used to meet men in bars and just go home and have sex with them. I would never again have sex with someone without talking to him first. It wasn't until I went to Eulenspiegel meetings and got into s/m that I learned how to take on a role, how to leave a role, and control the playing out of my desires."

Perversity will probably continue to make its impassioned inroads on the mainstream. The market will probably devour kink's signifiers and then, at some point, throw up a renunciatory wall. The dramatic narrative of cultural dominance and submission will undoubtedly replay itself forever, or at least until we change the script and accept that human erotic behavior is rich in all its nutty dispersion. "America is still a Calvinist place," adds anthropologist Buchanan. "Sure, the territory has been embraced by the market, but the public endgame remains one in which you're

only saved if you repudiate s/m. Candle wax and ice may be okay for Janet Jackson, but that doesn't mean you'll ever see branding at the mall."

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