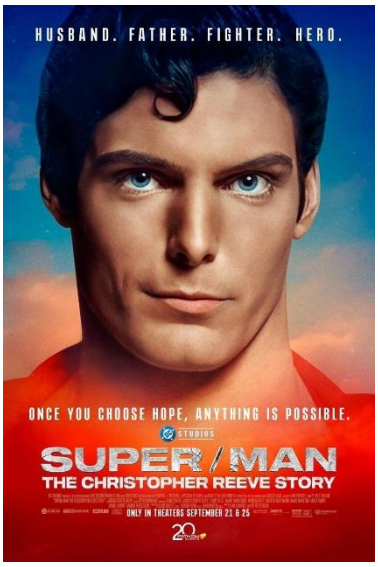

From Movie Icon to Disability Poster Boy: Masculinity and Disability in *Super/Man: The Christopher Reeve Story*

Sara Martín
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
October 2026

PLEASE, NOTE: This is a working paper protected by a CC BY-NC-ND Creative Commons License. This license enables reusers to copy and distribute the material in any medium or format in *unadapted form* only, for *non-commercial purposes* only, and only if *attribution* is given to the creator. To cite the paper, use the following format:

Martín, Sara. "From Movie Icon to Disability Poster Boy: Masculinity and Disability in *Super/Man: The Christopher Reeve Story*." Cerdanyola del Vallès, Spain: Dipòsit Digital de Documentació, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2026.

Please include the URL, this paper has no DOI.
You're welcome to contacting me at Sara.Martin@uab.cat

Abstract:
Super/Man: The Christopher Reeve Story (2024) is a documentary directed by Ian Bonhôte and Peter Ettedgui, co-scripted by them with Otto Burnham. Launched to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of Reeve's passing at the age of fifty-two, *Super/Man* explores how the accident that left him paraplegic transformed this iconic US actor into a likewise iconic disability activist. An homage by his three children to the father who played Superman for ten years, the documentary nonetheless subtly interrogates Reeve's idealized masculinity, revealing the imperfect real man. The article discusses the main issues raised by the film—masculinity and disability—to conclude that Reeve's highly valued crusade did not significantly alter the perception of men's disability. The article also defends that dependence is a still underresearched concept in relation to disabled men, and that Reeve's embodiment of heroism on the screen and as an activist offers a key case study to further explore this issue in the context of Anglophone culture and beyond.

Keywords: disability; activism; masculinity; celebrity; dependence; *Super/Man: The Christopher Reeve Story*; documentary; Superman (character); Christopher Reeve; Gender Studies; Masculinities Studies; Disabilities Studies

1. Introduction: Documentaries, Masculinity, Disability

The representation of men and masculinity has received considerable academic attention in the last decades, but it has neglected non-fiction. To correct this neglect, if only minimally, I published in 2023 *American Masculinities in Contemporary Documentary Film: Up Close Behind the Mask*. In this book, I explored a selection of more than forty documentaries in sixteen chapters organized around a particular type of man, from the good man to the writer. In Chapter 8, I analysed two excellent documentaries. One is *Life, Animated* (2016, Roger Ross Williams), a film dealing with a young autistic man, Owen Suskind, based on the 2014 memoir by his father, noted journalist Ron Suskind. The other is *Gleason* (2016, Clay Tweel), a film documenting the first stages of the Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), or Lou Gehrig's disease, which affects former New Orleans Saints NFL player Steve Gleason. Exceptionally, Gleason and his wife, artist Michel Varisco, invited a documentary crew to follow their lives for five years after his diagnosis, providing a unique testimonial.

I called the mentioned chapter "The Dependent Man" instead of "The Disabled Man," aiming at considering disability from another angle. The diverse cases of Owen Suskind and Steve Gleason demonstrate that disability is a vast category that covers too many different circumstances to be truly coherent. Thus, while Suskind's mind makes him dependent on the care of others despite his healthy body, Gleason's mind is intact but his body requires constant care. I am not myself dependent and I am far from being a specialist in Disability Studies,[1] but my perception is that the dependence on care is a key factor to better understand disability, for not all disabled persons require care. As regards masculinity, the issue of dependence is crucial. Both documentaries—*Life, Animated* and *Gleason*—emphasize how dependence undermines the masculinity of the disabled men, and how their care usually becomes the responsibility of the women in their closest circles: mothers and wives.[2]

Wishing to further my own exploration of the intersection between disability and masculinity, I offer here a discussion of the documentary *Super/Man: The*

---

[1] See for an introduction Davis's edited volume *The Disability Studies Reader* (2017) and the two volumes edited by Ellis et al. (2019, 2020).

[2] As far as I know, only Nicole Markotić has researched disability and masculinity in documentary films. The chapter "Play the Facts and the Truth: Disability in Documentary Film" (142–153) of her book *Disability in Film and Literature* (2016) analyses *Citizen Sam* (2006, Joe Moulins), a film documenting the experiences of a Canadian quadriplegic politician. Markotić is also the editor of a special issue on film and disability of the *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* (2018). In the introduction, Markotić vindicates the term 'problem body'—from her volume *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Film* (2010, co-edited with Sally Chivers)—because it "denotes a complicated approach to bodies deemed physically problematic due to multiple forms of difference, including racialization, gender, age, queerness, and disability" (2018: 9).

Christopher Reeve Story (2024), a fine film directed by Ian Bonhôte and Peter Ettedgui, and co-scripted by them with Otto Burnham (also the film's editor). The directors had previously worked together on *McQueen* (2018), a portrait of fashion designer Alexander McQueen, and *Rising Phoenix* (2020), a history of the Paralympic Games. Ettedgui was "very struck" (in Reed 2024, online) by footage of Christopher Reeve acting as master of ceremonies in the opening of the 1996 Atlanta Games. They could not use that footage in *Rising Phoenix* but, coincidentally, archive producer Daniel Kilroy contacted Reeve's eldest son, Matthew, to check whether his family would be willing to lend private material for a possible documentary. Ettedgui explains that the late actor's children—Matthew, Alexandra, and Will—"had always slightly resisted" (in Reed) all projects. However, as Will granted in a Sundance Film Festival panel when the film was first launched, he and his siblings agreed that 2024, the twentieth anniversary of their father's death, "felt like the right time to reintroduce him and his *heroic story* to the world" (in Carey 2024, online, added italics).[3]

The directors succeeded in eliciting the full trust of Reeve's children. As Bonhôte acknowledged admiringly: "They bare their soul on the screen. And I think that's rare as well, that people were so ready to go to places and to share with the world and to expose some vulnerability. And I think if you want to get close to an icon and a person, you need people to accept, to share and to let you in their own life because it's their legacy" (in Carey 2024, online). The involvement of Reeve's children does not mean that *Super/Man* is an uncomplicated hagiographic biopic. Ettedgui explains that watching with his co-director Reeve's films they concluded that "He felt trapped by Superman" (in Ehenulo 2024, online) as he was later trapped by disability, and this became the documentary's central concept. Reeve, aged only twenty-four when he first played Superman in 1978, was forty-two when he suffered in 1995 the riding accident that paralyzed him from the neck downwards. He had been struggling for almost two decades to be accepted in other roles, but when he resurfaced as a paralysis activist, the overlapping between actor and heroic character was reinforced. The directors were certainly interested in Reeve's career and activism. However, *Super/Man* deals above all with the impact on his family of the accident, particularly with how becoming quadriplegic changed Reeve's perception of fatherhood and his relationship as a husband with his wife Dana.

[3] The film was made independently by Passion Pictures, Misfits Entertainment and Words + Pictures, with no previous contact with Warner Brothers, which bought it at Sundance. WB's DC Studios (owners of the *Superman* film franchise), HBO, CNN Films and Max distributed it jointly in theatres and platforms.

The directors did not expect, Bonhôte remarks, that Dana, Reeve's second wife and Will's mother (Matthew and Alexandra are the children of his former partner Gae Exton), would play "such a massive role into the film" (in Ehenulo 2024, online). In his memoirs *Still Me* (1998)—a text that the documentary follows closely, frequently using Reeve's own voiceover presumably from an audiobook version—he recalls that, once he returned home from the Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation:

> Gradually Dana and I assembled a staff of nurses and aides to provide me with the twenty-four-hour care I needed and to allow us a more normal family life. A psychologist at Kessler once said to me, "Don't turn your wife into your nurse or your mother." We considered ourselves very lucky to be able to follow that advice; in many cases the patient's spouse has to become the primary caregiver, and the stress on the marriage is intense. (194)

Dana does not play the same role as Michel Varisco in *Gleason*, where she appears as her husband's main caretaker, but it is manifest that Reeve's survival depended on his wife's dedication. Her tragic passing only eighteen months after his death, from lung cancer though she never smoked, could even be attributed to the stress of their situation and not, as suspected, by her passively inhaling tobacco smoke in her years as a cabaret performer. Her absence and her fate leave a very bitter aftertaste in a story that is already tragic.[4]

Ettedgui and Bonhôte made a controversial decision by tracing an analogy between Reeve's injury and kryptonite, the substance that cancels Superman's superpowers. They asked their CGI team at Passion Pictures to generate an elegant image of Reeve's naked body as a sort of bronze statue seen suspended against the dark background of the universe. This sculpture is repeatedly infested by kryptonite throughout the film. Bonhôte claims that, knowing that their documentary would use many Superman images, they "wanted to inject [their] own visual identity" (in Schiller 2024, online), though the visual metaphor is at points too heavy handed, bluntly suggesting that disability is a condition as devastating for ordinary masculinity as kryptonite is for the extraordinary Superman. The focus on Reeve's younger athletic body, as it was in the *Superman* films, also elicits doubts about the genre of the documentary. Reeve was an accomplished sportsman since childhood. His catastrophic accident

[4] Similarly, Bonhôte comments (in Schiller 2024, online) that the directors were surprised by the audience's interest in the presence of Robin Williams in archive footage. Williams and Reeve had been close friends since they met at Juilliard's in New York in their late teens. In the film, Glenn Close rashly claims that if Reeve had not died, Williams would not have committed suicide, even though he passed away ten years after Reeve. In his memoirs, *Still Me*, Reeve shows deep appreciation for Williams, though with a certain moderation.

happened during a sporting event, when his horse Buck suddenly stopped in the middle of a jump.[5] In *Still Me*, Reeve insists that although some of his favourite sports involved risk, "I never felt that I was courting danger, because I always stayed within my self-imposed limits. In all aspects of my life I enjoyed being in control, which is why my accident was a devastating shock not only to me but to everyone who knew me" (1998, 17).

In the discourse on masculinity, disability and sports the issue of the degree of control during the practice of risky pursuits is crucial. The documentary on this theme that has attracted most scholarly attention is *Murderball* (2005, Henry Alex Rubin and Dana Adam Shapiro), a film which portrays the rivalry between the Canadian and American wheelchair rugby teams before and during the 2004 Paralympic Games. These men, Steve Gleason, and Reeve also use wheelchairs, but the rugby players have spinal cord injuries that still allow them to move their arms and torso. Austin explains that, accordingly, the players' bodies are remasculinized, so that the wheelchair is in *Murderball* "a fighting machine, not a containment or restriction; its inhabitant is a 'gladiator', a warrior and competitor, not an object of pity or shame" (2010, 58). Austin further argues that the "able-bodied templates of masculinity" are present in *Murderball* in three ways: the injured men take pride in having been "impaired in moments of dangerous activity that constitute some of the normative givens of (relatively young) adult male behaviour" (58–59); second, the loss of mobility is assumed using "ableist standards against which these damaged bodies are judged to fall short" (59); and third, normative masculinity supplies "[the] frameworks within which the men seek to gain validation—largely via the social apparatuses of competitive sport" (59).

Since competitive sport, however, is no longer an option for Gleason or Reeve, both regain their lost normative masculinity through another kind of competition: trying to excel in disability activism, each through their own foundation.[6] I focus next on how Reeve developed that aspect of his new life as a disabled, dependent man.

2. The Heroic Activist: From Movie Icon to Poster Boy

Gard and Fitzgerald warn that their discussion of disability passes through two main points: "First, there is the obvious conclusion that popular media encourage their consumers to see disabled bodies as grotesquely 'other' and therefore

[5] Reeve could not explain why Buck "just stopped" (*SM* 23), though he may have been spooked by a shadow or a rabbit. Reeve concludes that "I may have done something to cause the accident, and I have to take responsibility for it" (23).

[6] The Christopher Reeve Foundation, renamed in 2005 the Dana and Christopher Reeve Foundation (https://www.christopherreeve.org/) and Team Gleason (https://teamgleason.org/).

objects of pity. Secondly, because its assumed consumers are non-disabled people, the popular media offer a tragic/heroic account of disabled lives and the subjectivities of disabled people" (2013, 45). An example of the intolerant attitudes that must be overcome is the 2003 interview by Geraldine Bedell on occasion of the broadcasting on BBC of *Christopher Reeve: Hope in Motion*, a documentary by Reeve's son Matthew.[7] Bedell watches Reeve, hardly hiding her disgust, as his nurse applies make-up (for the harsh photographer's lights) and his aide discreetly empties a urine bag: "All this ought to be a *gross indignity* for a man who was formerly so powerfully, so conventionally handsome"; yet he, Bedell notes, "goes on talking, as if all this were a minor inconvenience, a broken arm rather than a *broken body*." Bedell, "Without wishing to sound facetious," calls Reeve "a good actor" who is now "an awesome quadriplegic […] in control, his huge physical presence not diminished by the *uselessness of his body*" (2003, online, added italics). The disrespect needs no further comment.

If Reeve, a beloved actor and a very attractive man, still faced difficulties to be accepted as a (normal) man after becoming a dependent quadriplegic, what can ordinary men expect in a similar situation? Noted Disabilities Studies scholar Lennard Davis protests that "few 'normals' have resonated with people with disabilities. The reasons for this are telling. No whites will become black; few straights will become gay; but every normal person can become disabled. […] Christopher Reeve, one day Superman, next day a quadriplegic, is the most dramatic example of this quick-change act" (3–4). Both in the documentary and in his memoirs, Reeve acknowledges his own lack of empathy for disabled people before his accident, even though he had played twice the role of a disabled man. In 1980, he was Kenneth Talley Jr., a paraplegic Vietnam War veteran, in the successful Broadway production of Lanford Wilson's play *Fifth of July*. He was coached then by Vietnam disabled veteran Mike Sulsona. His last role before the accident was as Dempsey Cain, a police officer paralysed by a bullet wound, in HBO's movie *Above Suspicion* (1995). Reeve trained then with a young woman paralysed during a recent earthquake, who still had not fully adjusted to her condition. At the end of their sessions, Reeve writes, "I would retreat to the comforts of the Sunset Marquis Hotel, thinking all the while: Thank God that's not me" (*SM* 192).

In the documentary and the memoirs, the narrative of how Reeve copes with his disability is interrupted with flashbacks recalling the main points of his biography. Catherine Scott argues that this technique produces "a narcotic

[7] Matthew made two documentary films, part of an intended trilogy that Reeve's death interrupted: *Christopher Reeve: Courageous Steps* (2002) and *Christopher Reeve: Hope in Motion* (2003, available on DVD).

effect" so that "the fear and anguish of the disabled autobiographer need not be seriously confronted, and the narrative of triumph can remain sutured in place" (2006, 311). I most emphatically disagree. The revisiting of the past several times along the narrative multiplies the impact of Reeve's sudden loss of mobility and of his long-lasting dependence in both texts. The pain of his bodily transformation is stressed in the documentary with the images of the Kryptonite-infested sculpture and by the interviews, in which family, friends and colleagues recall positive aspects of Reeve's life. This is not a placid account, but a narrative of repeated trauma. Similarly, the memoirs begin with Reeve's recurrent vivid dream that his spinal cord is healed, a dream followed by the traumatic daily discovery on awakening that he is still paralysed.

Reeve's fame as Superman was both a blessing and a curse. The directors of *Super/Man* maintain, as noted, that Reeve was trapped by this character, which made it almost impossible for him to triumph in other roles, either on the screen or on the stage.[8] When Reeve auditioned to play Superman, he was new to cinema but was already an experienced theatre actor; he also enjoyed some TV fame thanks to long-running soap opera *Love of Life*. Reeve brought to his performance of the quintessential American superhero a more nuanced approach than could be expected from an action movie. If I'm allowed a subjective but widely shared opinion, Reeve is still today the most handsome Superman (only Henry Cavill comes close), though his image was not as muscular as that of later actors in the same role. In *Still Me*, Reeve comments that "By the late 1970s the masculine image had changed. […] Now it was acceptable for a man to show gentleness and vulnerability. It was even admirable for him to cook dinner, change diapers, and stay home with the kids. I felt that the new Superman ought to reflect that contemporary male image" (159). In his two incarnations as mighty superhero and meek journalist Clark Kent (for whom he drew inspiration from young Cary Grant) Reeve's Superman was a far cry from the hypermasculine superheroes that would follow in the 1980s, beginning with Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989). In de Haven's opinion, Reeve "rescued the character from the irrelevance of so many other once-major fictional heroes. It's a screen performance perfectly suited to its historical, its generational moment—definitive 1970s male American movie acting, the way Jack Nicholson's achievement is in *Chinatown*, or Al Pacino's in *The Godfather*, but played with optimism dominant, instead of fatalism and tragedy" (2010, 175). Quite another matter is how the perfect suitability of

[8] Reviewer Ryan Gilbey criticizes in that sense *Super/Man* for failing to consider "Reeve's tendency to go for gay material whenever he wanted to prove his authenticity, whether playing Jeff Daniels's lover on stage in *Fifth of July*, making a tongue sandwich with Michael Caine in *Deathtrap* or directing the AIDS drama *In the Gloaming* two years after his accident" (2024, online).

the actor to the role was spoiled in the money-grabbing sequels, in particular *Superman III* and *Superman IV*, which Reeve abhorred.

So far, Superman has entered the cultural discourse on disability only peripherally. José Alaniz published in 2014 *Death, Disability, and the Superhero: The Silver Age and Beyond* and co-edited with Scott T. Smith *Uncanny Bodies: Superhero Comics and Disability* (2019), without mentioning Reeve. Smith and Alaniz note in their introduction that "Disability is largely absent in many recent studies of the superhero, suggesting a space for new conversations" (12). Actually, Maria Crilley[9] had already contributed to that conversation with a chapter on Superman in the collection *Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives*. Superman, she writes "is perfection" (2016, 80). Yet, "Neither his heroic progeny nor his creators, however, could fully emulate the ideals he embodies; superheroes have grown darker and more ambiguous, their heroism less straightforward and unproblematic, while the embodied lives involved in Superman's legacy have always been and will always be imperfect, mutable, and even disabled" (80). She refers then to Reeve's case, and to the rumour that Superman is somehow cursed, noting that "While such a tragic history may seem like a curse, these circumstances appear sinister only when contrasted with Superman's utter perfection" (80). As she stresses, Superman's legacy is "also impossibility" (80). No man can fulfil such a complete ideal, which might explain why Superman was created as an alien being rather than a human male.

As *Super/Man* narrates, after the accident Reeve considered ending his life by ceasing to use assisted ventilation. He decided to go on living, as he assures in the documentary, thanks to his wife Dana's support:

> She said, "I'm only gonna say this once. I'll support whatever you want to do because this is your life and your decision. But I want you to know that I'll be with you for the long haul, no matter what." And then she added the words that saved my life. "You're still you and I love you." I think if she had looked away or paused or hesitated even slightly or if I had felt there was a sense of her being noble, I don't know if I could have pulled through.

Once he decided to stay alive for the sake of his family, Reeve faced an extremely challenging situation. He was then the father of three-year-old Will, and also of Matthew (aged fourteen) and Alexandra (twelve), who lived in England with

[9] Crilley's focus is the 2004 graphic novel *It's a Bird ...*, written by Steven T. Seagle and illustrated by Teddy Kristiansen. In it, Steve, a comic book writer affected by Huntingdon's disease, gets the chance to write a Superman story. His work "not only exposes Superman's ideological underpinnings—the system of able-bodiedness that crafts the fiction of an immutable bodily perfection from real, decaying, and painful bodies—but also demonstrates that Superman is neither so perfect nor so normal as Steve once thought" (2016, 81).

their mother. Reeve had to face, besides, a complicated financial situation.[10] He could have chosen to lead a quiet domestic life, away from the spotlight. His doctor, Steve Kirshblum, "very kindly advised me," Reeve comments, "that I had no obligation to be the poster boy for spinal cord injury." However, he felt indebted to the patients he had met at the Kessler Institute: "I couldn't go home, devote my life to myself and my family, and ignore the larger picture" (*SM* 108). That decision changed Reeve's view of heroism. When *Superman* was released, he used to declare in interviews that "a hero is someone who commits a courageous action without considering the consequences" (*SM* 218); later, he realized that "a hero is an ordinary individual who finds the strength to persevere and endure in spite of overwhelming obstacles" (218). This is how he chose to present himself in public, exploiting his celebrity, first through the APA (American Paralysis Association) and, later, through the Christopher Reeve Foundation, established in 1996.

Super/Man highlights two key moments of Reeve's new trajectory in disability activism. One was the 1996 Academy Awards ceremony, when producer Quincy Jones invited Reeve to reappear in public, ten months after the accident. The other is the speech that Reeve gave at the Democratic Presidential Convention, also in 1996, invited by Vice President Al Gore. The simple, emotional speech of the Oscars became the far more elaborate text of the Convention. Invoking the example of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a man disabled by polio who believed that a nation could only thrive if it was healthy, but also John F. Kennedy's decision to conquer the Moon at any cost, Reeve argued that "if we can conquer outer space, we should be able to conquer inner space, too. And that's the frontier of the brain, the central nervous system, and all the afflictions of the body that destroy so many lives, and rob our country of so much potential" (*American Rhetoric*: online). The point that Reeve stressed throughout his decade as a paralysis activist is that investing on research is less costly, in the short and the long term, than spending funds on caring for disabled persons left with no hope for a cure.

Despite Reeve's immense popularity, the Democratic Convention speech, his support of research rather than care, his rash promise that he would walk again

[10] The insurance company offered to pay only for forty-eight days of nursing care after his return home, rejecting to finance a replacement ventilator or physical therapy. Because of the cap of 1$ million for each quadriplegic patient, in the 1990s many ended up in nursing homes with no therapy. Reeve, who was affiliated with three unions, had 3$ million to spend (Smith 1998, online). He accepted the contract to write his memoirs to adapt his home to his new needs (Gilmer 2002: online). Most of his income in subsequent years came from his speaking engagements, and also from directing and acting. He directed the TV movies *In the Gloaming* (1997) and *The Brooke Ellison story* (2004) and played the lead in a made-for-TV remake of *Rear Window* (1998).

by age fifty, and the 2000 Superbowl commercial in which he was seen to walk again thanks to CGI effects, deeply alienated him from the US community of disability activists. In a debate prompted by the Convention speech, Greg Smith, the founder of the disability radio talk show *On a Roll*, complained that Reeve "damaged our progress toward getting America to understand and respect us" (in Brown 1996, online). Smith worried that Reeve "has placed disability back (generations back) in the paternalistic medical model," aiming at providing the privileged with a cure, while forgetting "our people who are stuck in poverty, isolation, and segregation" (in Brown). Analysing the speech from an academic angle, Scherman observes that Reeve simply ignored the delicate moment that disability advocates were going through. The 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) had not been as successful as expected. Many persons with disabilities started resisting the medical model focused on a cure, while new terms "such as *impairment* versus *disability*, and *ableism*—the belief that certain bodies are superior to others, and the practices which are built upon that belief—were finding their way into academic and disabled community circles" (Scherman 2009, online, original italics). While diverse disabled persons complained against significant lack of accessibility to the Convention, Reeve was hailed with all the honours, though as Scherman notes, he "was both privileged and imprisoned by his symbolic link to Superman" (online).

The heated discussion about whether Reeve was helping the community of persons with disabilities continued until his death in 2004 (see Goggin and Newell 2004). In his second autobiography, *Nothing is Impossible: Reflections on a New Life* (2002), Reeve replied to the controversy remarking that "Some tell me that there is no point in searching for a cure; others even say they are happy with life the way it is and don't want to be cured. It's difficult for me to understand their point of view, but I completely respect those individuals as long as they don't try to interfere with progress" (20). Reeve, an educated man with a degree in Arts from Cornell University, kept up remarkably well with the research on the regeneration of damaged nerve tissue based on using stem cells. His approach became extremely controversial among US Republicans, including President Bush, because stem cells are usually harvested from discarded embryos in IVF clinics, although ideally they should come from the patient. Reeve strenuously argued that the bioethical issues involved were negligible, since stem cells were never harvested from viable embryos implanted in human wombs. His opponents, however, criticized the research that his foundation was helping to finance as contrary to religious belief or to basic humanist ethics. Twenty years after Reeve's passing, stem cell therapy has not managed to return mobility to persons with spinal cord injuries, but it still is the most promising avenue for research (Mallapaty 2025, online).

Super/Man alludes symbolically to the significance of stem cell research by presenting a CGI animation of two cells that look as big as planets fusing. However, rather than simply defend Reeve's choice to support research above any other concern, the film stresses how his wife Dana introduced a new balance, reacting to criticism by extending the task of her husband's foundation. The Quality of Life program, which she chaired, sought to improve the daily life of the persons with paralysis. As their son Will comments, "Tomorrow's cure, that is all my dad. Where Dana comes in, is today's care. Because her whole life became dedicated to caring for my dad and for me and for our family." I turn then next to how Dana's caring sustained her husband masculinity throughout the last ten years of his life and, sadly, of hers, helping Reeve to maintain his public persona and his activism.

3. Beyond Marriage Vows: Propping up The Masculinity of the Dependent Man

When Reeve passed away, following an anaphylactic shock caused by antibiotic medication to treat an infected pressure ulcer, Dana announced in public her decision to continue working for the foundation, as *Super/Man* shows: "I promised to love, honor, and cherish him till death did us part. Well, I can't do that. Because I will love honor and cherish him forever." Only in the film's last segment, right after this announcement, it is finally revealed that Dana died shortly after her husband, leaving Will, then thirteen, orphaned. The end of the tragic love story forces spectators to consider retroactively what the children have been saying through the film about their father. So does the presence of Gae Exton, the English woman Reeve raised a family with for ten years, but whom he did not marry and eventually abandoned for a life back in the USA (he met Dana there five months later). The frank portrait of Reeve's flawed private masculinity leads reviewer Amber Wilkinson to write that although "All children know that Clark Kent is still a hero even when he doesn't have his cape on and the same could be said of Reeve," his three children "have proved to be his lasting super-power" (2022, online). I consider next the tensions in the presentation of Reeve as a reluctant husband and father who transformed himself into a committed family man once he became disabled and dependent, for, as he wrote, "The experience of feeling like a child gave me a new perspective on being a father" (*NI* 46).

Before the accident, Reeve was an actor whose worldwide fame had peaked but a man whose commitment to family life had radically improved. The accident came at a low point in his career when, Matthew recalls, his father was playing roles in undistinguished TV movies to pay for the bills. Reeve was by no means failing as only provider (Dana had abandoned her modest singing and acting career when they married), but he no longer had star status. The mature Reeve

was ageing well and keeping his good looks, but at forty-three, he was not in great demand. It is, then, paradoxical, that the role of Superman, which he last played seventeen years before the accident, became so indelibly attached to his person.

As the documentary and his memoirs note, professionally Reeve struggled to meet the expectations of his father, Franklin Reeve, a noted scholar and author. Franklin was dismayed when he realized that the Superman his son was to play was not the one in George Bernard Shaw's play *Man and Superman*, but the comic book hero. In *Super/Man* Reeve senior appears in archive footage complaining that playing a superhero "was not serious enough. It wasn't academic enough. It wasn't intellectual enough. It was embarrassing." Reeve explained in an interview also quoted in the documentary the connection between his father and his acting:

> "So, there's this really charismatic man who could do anything from translating Dostoevsky to sailing a boat and chopping trees and playing tennis. And it was really scary. I thought, I'm never gonna do anything to impress him, you know? I'd say, 'I was in this play,' he'd say, 'Eh.' 'I got good grades here.' 'Eh.' Nothing, nothing seemed to make any difference. But I found *relief from all this uncertainty* in playing characters" (added italics).

Reeve's life and his own masculinity was conditioned by Franklin in two main ways. Firstly, Franklin's divorce from Reeve's mother, Barbara, and the subsequent remarriages of both, left young Christopher not only with an extended family of half-siblings, but also with a deep distrust of marriage. On the other hand, although he tried to avoid replicating Franklin's aloof yet demanding style of parenting, he was failing to be a good father before the accident. Reeve met Gae Exton, a models' agent, in 1978 right after being cast as Superman, and stayed with her until 1987. Exton affirms in the documentary that they simply had no time to marry, and that their separation was amicable, but Matthew's declaration that his father left the day after he was born to go skiing with friends, paints a very different picture. Like his father, Reeve was not a constant presence in his family; in the years before the accident, his direct interaction with his English children was limited to the holidays, often as brief as two weeks. As Matthew complains, subtly but firmly, that their brief time together was wasted doing multiple activities instead of communicating. Dana, whom Reeve married only after therapy eased his fears that marriage could never succeed, assumed the role of keeping the father and his children attached, and of indicating to her husband when he was reproducing Franklin's unhealthy parenting.

Reeve came from an upper middle-class background. His professional success had allowed him to maintain his position and to pursue a lifestyle very much centred on physical activity, learned mainly from his father. In his private life, Reeve was a sportsman, very keen on sailing, skiing and riding, a range of sports

typically middle or upper-middle class, which begs the question of whether his masculine identity was hegemonic. Steve Robertson writes that "Indeed, for those men whose impairment is a result of their involvement in sport, the preservation of hegemonic masculine identities can be exceptionally difficult, but so can discarding them" (2004, 78). Robertson comments that the gendering of disability begins with the rehabilitation process, which disabled women are said to face with "passive acceptance" but that implies for disabled men the need to make a "heroic effort" (78). Once he returned home, Reeve continued this "heroic effort," putting his body through an exceptionally strenuous regime of exercise. By the time he died, Reeve had regained some mobility in the hands and feet, though it is highly unlikely he would have walked again.

Writing in 1995, the year when Reeve was paralysed, Gerschick and Miller opened their article "Coming to Terms: Masculinity and Physical Disability," declaring that "Men with physical disabilities are marginalized and stigmatized in American society. […] The bodies of men with disabilities serve as a continual reminder that they are at odds with the expectations of the dominant culture" (183). A few years later, Tom Shakespeare introduced the term "disabled masculinity" in his key essay "The Sexual Politics of Disabled Masculinity" (1999). Shakespeare, who actually discusses gender rather than sex, mentions Reeve as "A poignant reminder of the frailty which is at the heart of male bodily power" (63), after noting that the loss of "physical prowess" can be particularly damaging for the men who build their identity "on the basis of strength and invulnerability" (63). Reeve, as I have noted, tried to limit risk in his sports practice, and suffered a life-changing accident during a low-risk riding exercise, yet he took much pride in his body, and made a point of maintaining its anatomy as functional as possible despite his disability. This is not perceived, however, in the film as maintaining a hegemonic position as a privileged man, but as taking care of a deeply damaged body to preserve the mind's good health and avoid terminal depression.

Loeser et al. explain that "A male *becomes* disabled when he does not or cannot fulfil the normative expectations of speaking, walking, seeing, thinking, and hearing because of his physiological impairment" (2017, xxi, original emphasis). The disabled man "is aligned with the 'feminine' realm, assumed to be devoid of self-mastery and control, social independence, physical and interactive competence and social productivity" (xxi). Arguably, a woman interested in sports that suffered the same injury as Reeve in similar circumstances would undergo a similar process of "becoming" disabled. Yet, what research indicates is that this hypothetical woman would not be perceived as less feminine. In contrast, a disabled, dependent man is twice feminized: by the loss of control over his masculine body, and because his dependence feminizes him, as the helpless subject of care.

As Shuttleworth et al. protest, 1980s and 1990s scholarship used disability negligently as a blanket category. In their view, "the minimal attention paid to differences in impairment, as well as to intersecting identities such as ethnicity, class, and sexuality, presented a rather one-dimensional picture of disabled men" (2012, 179). Remarkably, they note, the main focus fell on spinal cord injuries: "The biased focus on men with acquired injuries reflects a gendered as well as ableist viewpoint. That is, it is indicative of a concern primarily with 'real' men who lost their masculinity, rather than those who were never perceived as masculine in the first place because they had an impairment from an early age" (183). Returning to the other cases I have mentioned, the masculinity of a neurodivergent man like Owen Suskind, who has been dependent on his parents from birth, and the masculinity of an ALS patient like Steve Gleason occupy very different sociocultural categories. Owen is an object of pity because he has never been 'properly' masculine, whereas Gleason is pitied because he lost to illness the hegemonic masculinity he had accrued as a popular sportsman. It is obvious, then, that a far more nuanced discourse is required to understand masculine disability and dependent masculinity.

Disabled masculinity theory, which emerged in the early 2010s, studies how masculinity and disability intersect, and "turns a spotlight on the hegemonic structures underlying the ways gender and ability are understood," doing "cultural work" to reject "the terms of oppression and respond back to them" (Torrell et al. 2013, 210). From this activist point of view, *Super/Man* does not contribute significantly to altering the discourse on disabled masculinity because of the exceptionality of Reeve's case. The current article could perhaps contribute a little bit by pointing out the strengths of the film (the sincerity about Reeve's private person) and the flaws (the inexistent connection with other cases).[11] In the end, though, the documentary perpetuates the habitual medical discourse on disability affecting privileged white, cisgender, heterosexual successful men, whether they are seen as hegemonic or not. We do not see Reeve triumphantly walk again just as we do not see Steve Gleason miraculously heal, but the respective documentaries about them clearly recycle the classic hero's journey without considering less heroic, ordinary adaptations to life as a dependent man.

[11] Reeve's *The Brooke Ellison Story* (2004) is a TV movie about the disability activist of that name. Ellison, the first person with quadriplegia to graduate from Harvard University, appears in *Super/Man*. She declares that "For people with disabilities to be so visible was almost unheard of at the time [when Reeve appeared in the Oscars in 1996]. Disability was really not understood as a part of humanity worth including. And for Chris to be helping to change that narrative was life-changing. Well, I know it was for me." Ellison died in 2024, some months before the release of *Super/Man*.

If Bonhôte and Ettedgui's film has not been received with animosity, as Reeve's speech at the Democratic National Convention was, this is because, as I see it, it follows the same anti-sentimental rhetoric as *Gleason*. Steve Gleason went much further than Christopher Reeve, allowing the cameras to record with excruciating sincerity what it is like to lose progressively the control of one's body to neurodegenerative disease. Reeve, unlike Gleason, is not seen in footage made specifically for *Super/Man*, as he had already passed away, but in archive images, including domestic movies. He never made the decision to allow viewers to enter his privacy and intimacy as Gleason did. Besides, while Gleason accepted that there is no cure for ASL, Reeve hoped to walk again. Naturally, both films can be criticised for their masculinized avoidance of melodrama, though in *Super/Man* Reeve's children carry on their shoulder much of the burden of feeling. Will, in particular, comes across as vulnerable, but also as very thankful for the care received from his mother, his siblings and his adoptive family (that of his best friend).

Both *Gleason* and *Super/Man* have the saving grace of praising the women whose lives were dramatically altered by the disability and, above all, the dependence of the men they loved. The emotional core of *Super/Man* is a passage from Dana's diary, written in 2000, that Will reads:

> "The whole man took his last walk away from me five years ago today, leaving only mind, soul, heart and heartache behind. I think of him in certain lights. Dawn, late afternoon, bright, windy days that would be perfect for sailing. I miss most, even now, his hands, the expressive grace and heft of them. The heat of his hands on my skin. The wrap of his arms, two becoming one."

This is not a widow mourning a dead husband, but a wife mourning the body of a living, beloved husband. Will insists that while his dependent father was "still the same, bright, quirky, thoughtful man," Dana was "playing the role of mother, physical father, and caregiver to a husband." Dana herself is seen in footage from a domestic movie putting on a brave face: "We do adjust because what are the alternatives? I mean, it would be miserable not to, but do we long for our other life? Yes, every day. I mean, it's a drastic change."

The attention to Reeve's former partner, wife and children, then, portrays masculine disability in *Super/Man* from a very different angle compared to the heroic competitivity of, for instance, *Murderball*. Instead of the warrior, an activist hero is celebrated. The shock of seeing Superman become the split, dependent Super/Man of the title, is accompanied by the lesson that Reeve was very different from the role that gave him fame, but learned from it how to show vulnerability without fear. Superman, Reeve declares in the documentary, "may be make-believe. But, the qualities of courage, and of character, that make him unique are very real." Whereas Superman's job is to rescue persons in danger, Reeve was

himself rescued by Dana, a woman whose heroism the documentary praises even beyond that of the dependent hero that her husband became. And this what makes *Super/Man* in the end worth watching and a proper object of study to understand contemporary masculinity, disability and dependence.

Conclusion: The Man Behind the Icon

The main purpose of this article has been to call attention about the importance of considering the representation of men and masculinities in documentary films. Following my own previous research, I have focused here on Ian Bonhôte and Peter Ettedgui's notable documentary *Super/Man: The Christopher Reeve Story* to demonstrate that films like theirs offer a valuable resource to explore how masculinity is understood today. Reeve's story, from movie icon to disability poster boy, is presented as a heroic journey and, in many ways, so it was. The involvement and presence of his children, however, contribute a subtle critique of their father's heroism since, despite loving him deeply, they reveal his flaws.

The children's testimony is also essential to understand that Reeve's disability was shared with his wife Dana. He acknowledged that the decision to go on living depended on her unwavering support. The children, above all her son Will, stress that she kept the family together, even when Reeve was still healthy, and continued to do so after the accident. Dana was not, like other wives or partners of disabled men, her husband's main caregiver, but she was responsible for the running of the household, and it is evident that without her contribution, Reeve's activism (and his foundation) would not have even started.

This means that men's disability cannot be seen as a condition that affects only the patient, but as a situation that affects his most immediately circle. Not all disabled men are dependent, but severe cases like Reeve's require constant care, which made him totally dependent on a professional team, and, above all, on Dana. Reeve's (hegemonic, privileged) masculinity could resist the crisis of the accident, ultimately, because Dana accepted the terms of their new life together. That she herself passed away so soon after her husband may have been a tragic coincidence but her loss is part of the tragedy involving her husband.

It might be perhaps offensive to speak of the Reeves' heroism, whether his or hers, and of their tragedy to other persons with disabilities that struggle to be accepted in society. Many disabled men may possibly think that Reeve was privileged from the cradle to his grave, and blessed with professional and personal success at all stages of his life. In a way, not even *Super/Man* fully accepts Reeve's disability, for the splendid image used in the poster shows him in his prime, as an astonishingly handsome Superman. Yet, this is the reality of the current discourse on men, disability and dependence: it is failing to

acknowledge the lives of less privileged men, and to normalize the representation in fiction and non-fiction.

It is also failing to acknowledge that beyond the central issue of how a man can protect his gender identity from ableist discrimination, there are caregivers propping up his masculinity, and these caregivers are mainly women. Reeve's children understood this when they renamed their father's foundation, adding Dana's name to it. Perhaps *Super/Man*, then, should also have been called *Super/Man and Super/Woman: The Reeves Story*, for this is what it ultimately is.

References

Alaniz, José. 2014. *Death, Disability, and the Superhero: The Silver Age and Beyond*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Austin, Thomas. 2010. "Damaged Bodies in Documentary: *Black Sun* and *Murderball.*" *Studies in Documentary Film* 4.1: 51–64.

Bedell, Geraldine. 9 February 2003. "You'll Believe a Man Can Walk". *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2003/feb/09/features.review1.

Brown, Steven E. October 1996. "Super Duper? The (Unfortunate) Ascendancy of Christopher Reeve." *Mainstream: Magazine of the Able-Disabled*. http://www.independentliving.org/docs3/brown96c.html.

Carey, Matthew. 22 January 2004. "Christopher Reeve's Children 'Bare Their Soul On Screen' in Touching Documentary *Super/Man: The Christopher Reeve Story*–Sundance Studio." *Deadline Hollywood*. https://deadline.com/video/super-man-the-christopher-reeve-story-sundance-documentary-matthew-reeve-alexandra-reeve-will-reeve-interview/.

Chivers, Sally and Nicole Markotić, eds. 2010. *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Film*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

Crilley, Maria. 2016. "Drawing Disability: Superman, Huntington's, and the Comic Form in *It's a Bird* …". In Foss, Gray and Whalen 2016, 80–94.

Davis, Lennard J., ed. 2017. *The Disability Studies Reader*. London and New York: Routledge.

Davis, Lennard J. 2002. *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, And Other Difficult Positions*. New York And London: New York University Press.

De Haven, Tom. 2010. *Our Hero: Superman on Earth*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.

Ehenulo, Kenechi. 31 October 2023. "Interview with Directors Ian Bonhôte & Peter Ettedgui (*Super/Man: The Christopher Reeve Story*)." *Moviemaker*. https://moviemarker.co.uk/interview-with-directors-ian-bonhote-peter-ettedgui-super-man-the-christopher-reeve-story/.

Ellis, Katie; Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Mike Kent, and Rachel Robertson, eds. 2020. *Interdisciplinary Approaches to Disability: Looking Towards the Future, Vol. 2*. London: Routledge.

Ellis, Katie; Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Mike Kent, and Rachel Robertson, eds. 2019. *Manifestos for the Future of Critical Disability Studies, Vol 1.* London: Routledge.

Foss, Chris; Jonathan W. Gray and Zach Whalen, eds. 2016. *Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gard, Michael and Hayley Fitzgerald. 2013. "Tacking *Murderball*: Masculinity, Disability and the Big Screen." In Jespersen and McNamee 2016, 40–55.

Gerschick, Thomas J.; Adam S. Miller, David Frederick Gordon and Donald Sabo. 1995. "Coming to Terms: Masculinity and Physical Disability." In Sabo and Gordon 1995, 183–204.

Gilbey, Ryan. 31 October 2024. "*Super/Man: The Christopher Reeve Story* Review – Fascinating Tribute Undermined by Bombast." *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2024/oct/31/superman-the-christopher-reeve-story-review.

Gilmer, Tim. 1 November 2002. "The Missionary Reeve." *New Mobility*. https://newmobility.com/the-missionary-reeve/.

Goggin, Gerard and Christopher Newell. 2004. "Fame and Disability: Christopher Reeve, Super Crips, and Infamous Celebrity." *M/C Journal* 7.5. https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.2404.

Jespersen, Ejgil and M J. McNamee, eds. 2013. *Ethics, Disability and Sports*. London: Routledge.

Loeser, Cassandra, Vicki Crowley and Barbara Pini. 2017. "Introductory Essay: Disability and Masculinity: Corporeality, Pedagogy and the Critique of Otherness." In Loeser, Crowley and Pini 2017, xxv-lxxiv.

Loeser, Cassandra, Vicki Crowley and Barbara Pini, eds. 2017. *Disability and Masculinities: Corporeality, Pedagogy and the Critique of Otherness*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mallapaty, Smriti. 24 March 2025. "Paralysed Man Stands Again After Receiving 'Reprogrammed' Stem Cells." *Nature*. https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-025-00863-0.

Markotić, Nicole. Spring 2018. "Punching Up the Story: Disability and Film." *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 17.1: 2–10. https://doi.org/10.3138/cjfs.17.1.2.

Markotić, Nicole. 2016. *Disability in Film and Literature*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

Marshall, P. David. 1997. *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

Martín, Sara. 2023. *American Masculinities in Contemporary Documentary Film: Up Close Behind the Mask*. London: Routledge.

Reed, Christopher Llewellyn. 16 December 2024. "Interview with *Super/Man* Co-director Peter Ettedgui." *Film Festival Today*. https://filmfestivaltoday.com/interviews/interview-with-super-man-co-director-peter-ettedgui.

Reeve, Christopher. 2002. *Nothing Is Impossible: Reflections on a New Life*. New York: Random House. E-book.

Reeve, Christopher. 1998. *Still Me*. New York: Random House. E-book.

Reeve, Christopher. 1996. "1996 Democratic National Convention Address." *American Rhetoric*.

https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/christopherreeve1996dnc.htm.
Robertson, Steve. 2004, 1993. “Men and Disability.” In Swain, French, Barnes and Thomas 2004, 1993, 75–80.
Sabo, Donald and David F. Gordon, eds. 1995. *Men’s Health and Illness: Gender, Power, and the Body*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
Scherman, Elizabeth. January 2009. “The Speech That Didn’t Fly: Polysemic Readings of Christopher Reeve’s Speech to the 1996 Democratic National Convention.” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 29.2. https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v29i2.918.
Schiller, Griffin. 18 October 2024. “*Super/Man* Directors Ian Bonhôte & Peter Ettedgui Talk Christopher Reeve, Robin Williams, & The Art Of Documentary [Interview].” *The Playlist*. https://theplaylist.net/super-mandirectors-ian-bonhote-peter-ettedgui-talk-christopher-reeve-robin-williams-the-art-of-documentary-interview-20241008/.
Scott, Catherine. March 2006. “Time Out of Joint: The Narcotic Effect of Prolepsis in Christopher Reeve’s *Still Me*.” *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 29.2: 307–328. https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2006.0045.
Shakespeare, Tom. 1999. “The Sexual Politics of Disabled Masculinity.” *Sexuality and Disability* 17.1: 53–64.
Shuttleworth, Russell; Nikki Wedgwood and Nathan J. Wilson. 2012. “The Dilemma of Disabled Masculinity.” *Men and Masculinities* 15.2: 174–194.
Smith, Dinitia. “A Life With a Before and an After; For Christopher Reeve, It Isn’t as Simple as Superman or Victim.” *The New York Times* 30 April 1998, https://www.nytimes.com/1998/04/30/books/life-with-before-after-for-christopher-reeve-it-isn-t-simple-superman-victim.html.
Smith, Scott T. and José Alaniz. 2019. “Introduction.” In Smith and Alaniz, 2019, 1–34.
Smith, Scott T. and José Alaniz, eds. 2019. *Uncanny Bodies: Superhero Comics and Disability*. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press.
Swain, John; Sally French, Colin Barnes and Carol Thomas, eds. 2004, 1993. *Disabling Barriers: Enabling Environments*. London: Sage.
Torrell, Margaret Rose; K. Arndt and M. Wappett. 2013. “Potentialities: Toward a Transformative Theory of Disabled Masculinities.” In Wappett and Arndt, 2013, 209–225.
Wappett, M. and K. Arndt, eds. 2013. *Emerging Perspectives on Disability Studies*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
Wilkinson, Amber. 22 January 2022. “*Super/Man: The Christopher Reeve Story*: Sundance Review.” *Screen Daily*. https://www.screendaily.com/reviews/super/man-the-christopher-reeve-story-sundance-review/5189664.article.