Superheroes and Children's Culture

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Abstract

The last two decades have seen an increasing media convergence and the promotion and distribution of popular narratives through cross-media texts. The superhero genre forms an important part of children's media environments and contemporary children's culture, in particular for boys. Children are not merely consumers of media texts, they are also actively engaged in a range of activities - fantasies, make-believe play, drawing, writing and other forms of meaning-making – reflecting, expanding and commenting on these media texts. Children as storytellers, players and artists draw upon familiar elements from superhero narratives, to create their own meanings. Children's ability to move across media platforms and across modes of meaning-making with particular ease, may explain the phenomenal success of cross-media narratives such as superhero stories. The paper provides an overview into different areas of children's participation in the superhero narratives within and without the context of formal educational settings and provides a longitudinal case study of one boy's engagement with superheroes in his play and meaning-making activities. The paper calls for a re-evaluation of children's media culture and cultural practices, including educational practices around superheroes.

1.   Introduction

Children today are immersed in media and cross-media environments. As they watch television and movies, videos and DVDs, play computer games, listen to CDs, play with and collect toys and other merchandising, wear branded clothing, and read comic books, certain mediated themes become a ubiquitous part of children's culture. In many cases it has become difficult to determine which products are core and which are subsidiary to the success of a media narrative and a distinction between modes may become increasingly irrelevant. It is not easy to find a single term that encompasses the complexity of interaction between producer, text and audiences of the rich narrative universes of *Batman (1939)*, *Star Wars (1977)*, *Pokémon (1996)* or *Harry Potter (1997)*. Is it a 'media phenomenon', a 'craze,' a 'hype', or a 'franchise'? Is it to be understood as 'cult', 'mythology' or 'cultural practice'?

The last two decades have seen an increasing convergence and consolidation of major media corporations in terms of production, broadcast ownership and strategies of concerted exploitation through syndication and licensing, which exert a far-reaching impact on the global media market. However, children are not merely consumers of media texts, they are actively engaged in a range of activities - fantasies, make believe-play, drawing, writing and other forms of meaning-making – reflecting, incorporating and commenting on these media texts. Some of these activities involve the purchase of particular media products – for example branded toys or games – others such as role-play, drawing or storytelling do not, at least not necessarily. Children as storytellers, players and artists draw upon familiar elements from media narratives to create their own meanings.

This phenomenon of cultural participation is not limited to children's popular culture, but here it seems to become more all–pervading. It is children's ability to move across media platforms and across modes of meaning-making with particular ease, that may explain the phenomenal success of cross-media narratives.

This paper will address the various ways in which children engage with one particular cross-media narrative, the *superhero narrative*, in more detail. It will be concerned with a range of responses that adults have shown regarding children's enjoyment of and engagement with these narratives, placing emphasis on a shift of perception among researchers and practitioners. For many decades the dominant discourses around the *superhero universe* have been of dismissal and condemnation. However, there are an increasing number of voices calling for a re-evaluation and re-appraisal of children's media culture and cultural practices, including educational practices around superheroes.

This paper will address some of the ways in which the superhero 'myth' is part of contemporary children's culture both as a media product and as social and cultural practice.

2.　Definition of the Superhero Genre

For the purposes of this paper I want to define the superhero genre in very broad terms: superhero narratives are stories of action and adventure in which the main protagonist uses some form of supernatural power in order to overcome one or several antagonists. In many ways they are similar to stories about heroes of mythology and fairy tales, as found in many cultures. Essentially, superhero stories are about the struggle of good over evil and the striving for identity, or (in Jungian terms) the realization of the self.

In contrast to the earlier heroes of mythology superhero narratives are not situated in a mythical past, but in the present, in an imaginary world both similar to and different from ours. Unlike earlier myths the origins of these stories are not lost in history and deeply connected to religious practices, but are created and developed as media products and commercially exploited as brands. However, they have also been appropriated by readers and have been incorporated into a wide range of cultural practices. Both adults and children have actively participated in turning superhero stories into 'myth'. Superhero stories in this sense originated with the advent of *Superman* (1938) and *Batman* (1939) at the end of the 1930s, and have since inspired innumerable others.

For a certain narrative to become a genre or 'myth,' participation and appropriation has to be possible. Media corporations to a greater or lesser degree allow appropriation through fans: while aggressively protecting their products and branded heroes and prosecuting violations of copyright, they also increasingly understand the importance of fan cultures.

Since the prefix super- and the suffix -man (-or woman) cannot be copyrighted, an unlimited number of superheroes is not only possible, but countless are already in existence. Legions of superheroes have not only been invented by media producers but are being invented by children every day. Superheroes as a whole are therefore generic,

and belong to the public domain just like Hercules, Robin Hood, King Arthur, Dracula, Cinderella and Snow White.

Superheroes may be represented in many different modes, in films, animated series, comic books, in children's toys and video games. Superheroes as a cross-media genre can be defined by certain characteristics in terms of story and plot, characters and iconography and their essence may be summed up in specific icons. Like any other genre, the superhero genre is flexible, open ended and ever changing.

One useful theoretical framework for the discussion of superhero narratives is the work of Carl G. Jung, and, based on this, the studies of Joseph Campbell. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces'* Campbell analyzed the structures underlying 'the hero's journey' in mythical stories from many cultures (Campbell, 1949). Christopher Vogler, working as a story analyst for Disney animation adapted and simplified this model of mythic structure, and his book *'The Writers Journey'*, which applies Campbell's thought to cinema has become one of the most important reference books for screenwriters today. The framework developed by these authors defines the role, use and function of archetypes and describes the fundamental principals of the dramatic structure of heroic narratives.

Superhero narratives share many distinctive features with mythological stories and fairy tales and this may be one of the reasons why they have such widespread appeal. In both myth and superhero story the protagonist often is orphaned, but he is endowed with special gifts that he uses to overcome enormous difficulties and adversaries. Often the protagonist is a reluctant hero who is somehow forced into action, obliged to accept what seems to be his destiny, and sometimes haunted by shadows of the past. Against all odds he achieves great things, usually not for only for himself but also for the world at large. Quite often it is our world or humanity as a whole that is at stake. The obvious difference from fairy tales and classic epics, for example in Greek and Indian mythology, is that the protagonist's gifts are not given by the gods nor (with exceptions) achieved

through magic, but are acquired through some other means, often related to science and technology.

Similarly to fairy tales, the defining element is the supernatural, which prompts and guides the protagonist on his journey and/or provides the antagonist, the entity against which the hero has to battle. In the superhero story the magic of fairy lore is replaced by futuristic science and technology; the story is not set in the past of once upon a time, but is projected into the future, or set in the present day in one of many *possible worlds*, placed in a universe similar and parallel to our own.

The superhero and villain are inextricably opposed. The antagonist is the hero's nemesis and provides the necessary tensions and conflicts for a dramatic plot: the greater the villain, the greater the story. Antagonists may be human, anthropomorphic creatures, monsters or aliens. Other typical characters are mentors and allies; both have become more prominent in superhero stories of the last three decades. Mentors are often spiritual or martial-arts masters. Allies are encountered along the way or form part of a superhero team, which usually includes female superheroes. In recent years females have increasingly become main protagonists.

Other distinctive elements of the superhero genre are based on the iconography: superheroes are usually defined by their costume, and often wear a mask. Most of the classic superheroes such as *Superman, Batman,* and *Spiderman (1962)* wear an emblem, usually on their chest, that serves both as the symbol of their power and as the logo for the particular comic-book brand. The mask stands for an important trait of the classic superhero: the secret identity. The superhero often leads a double life: one where he blends in and becomes one of 'us', the other where he becomes the vigilante taking 'truth and justice' into his own hands. The secret identity usually supports a subplot, often involving a romantic interest, and at the same time provides a rational explanation as to why this love cannot and will not find fulfilment.

At the heart of the classical superhero narrative is the act of transformation from ordinary human being to superhero, the moment of truth and self-actualisation and important turning point of the story. The act of transformation may provide spectacular sequences and iconic images, repeated in every sequel, providing the comfort of the familiar.

Superhero narratives appeal to audiences of all ages. The simplicity of the superhero plot appeals to younger children, who are also drawn to the themes of power, good and evil, the weak transforming into the strong, friendships, allies and enemies. The secret identity plot is a fantasy that strikes a cord especially with adolescents, during a time in their life that is all about struggling for identity, and fraught with hidden erotic desires and love interests.

The superhero 'myth' is open to many interpretations, and media producers have employed this openness in creating a range of very diverse texts, ranging from violent action adventures and dark dystopias to cute children's fantasy, family sitcom, satire, parody and camp. The narratives also offer varying degrees of self-reflectiveness and intertexuality. Many media products are based on genre mixes - integrating some elements of the superhero genre with other genres. In this sense not only classic superhero characters such as *Superman, Batman,* and *Spiderman* belong to this genre, but also a wide range of others, from *Star War's* Luke Skywalker (1977), the *Care Bears* (1981) and the *Ninja Turtles* (1984), to *Pokémon's* Ash Ketchum (1995), *Harry Potter* (1997) and *Buffy*, *the Vampire Slayer* (1997).

3.   Superheroes: Sites of Struggle

This paper proposes the argument that, if it were not for the richness and complexity provided by superhero 'myths,' neither *Star Wars*, nor *Pokémon* nor *Harry Potter* would have been as popular. If these narratives did not reflect unconscious psychological needs, and if they were not able to support many ways of engagement and participation, they would not be able to enjoy enduring success.

Star Wars and even more so classic superheroes such as *Superman*, *Batman* and *Spiderman* have demonstrated surprising longevity. They have been convincing enough to engage several generations of audiences, have developed enough complexity and allowed for sufficient diversity in their reading to appeal to a wide range of audiences of different age groups, gender identities and nationality.[1] 'Superhero myths' have been the subject of and inspiration for many ways of participation: from children and adults dressing up as superheroes, fan art and fan writing to amateur filmmaking. Some of the fans eventually turn into a new generation of authors, writers and filmmakers. As a genre

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[1] The history of *Superman*, *Batman* and *Spiderman* casts some light on how a superhero myth can survive for three-quarters of a century, adapting and responding to, and changing for, new markets. The early years of *Superman* and *Batman* with DC as the publisher are generally considered the 'Golden Age' of comic-book history. The 1950s saw a backlash against the success of the comic-book industry, with fierce attacks fired by moral panics and a general commercial decline coinciding with the advent of television. Comic-book publishers managed to revitalize characters and modernize the story lines in response to changing markets and public opinion, and authored the Silver Age of comic-book heroes. Superheroes found their way onto television screens; this was their first step in venturing into other media and diversifying. Notably, the parodic television adaptation of *Batman* stands for the beginning of a quite diverse set of readings, which still divides Batman lovers today: There are the 'ironic' and 'camp', and there are the more serious 'dark', Gothic readings of the same myth. The reading of the connection between Batman and Robin as a homosexual relationship is enjoyed by some and fiercely contested by others. Fan art and writing was becoming a part of comic-book culture. Dedicated fans turned into comic-book artists and started entering the comic-book industry as professionals.

The 1970s and 1980s saw further changes in the industry and new developments. Marvel's *Spiderman* was the response to the decline in credibility of more of the heroic superheroes of the past. *Spiderman*, with his alter ego of an ordinary teenager, featured psychologically more convincing storylines grounded in emotional reality, and appealed to the younger, and also increasingly to female, markets. The emergence of teenage superhero teams including female superheroes (*X-Men, Teen Titans)* added a new dimension to the narratives, with an emphasis on relationships. The development of innumerable television series, mostly animated *(Teenage Mutant Turtles, The Powerpuff Girls*), and sometimes live-action (*Superman*), again opened up new markets. In order to capitalize on the brand name, superheroes became the subject of adaptations for the movie screen, to some commercial but very limited critical success. In the late eighties and nineties, the superhero genre entered a phase of re-evaluation and redefinition, with increasing themes of self-reflectiveness: the superhero is in crisis; his identity and moral authority are not self-evident any more, and the quest for legitimacy becomes part of the story itself. Themes of increasing self-reflection and intertextuality are apparent in very diverse products – comic books, reinvented as 'graphic novels', for example *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* by Frank Miller and *Watchmen* by Alan Moore, or films as diverse as M.Night Shyamalam's *Unbreakable*, or Disney's *Toy Story* and Pixar's *The Incredibles*. (Pearson, 1991; Brooker, 2000)

the superhero story has been able to accommodate adaptations and diverse changes, finding new meanings with every new generation of audiences.

Henry Jenkins' studies of fan cultures place emphasis on fans' active participation in their cultural practices: in exploring the potentials of new digital media production and distribution, they are changing the relationships between media producers, text and audiences: "Fans reject the idea of a definitive version produced, authorized, and regulated by some media conglomerate" (Jenkins, 2003). This appropriation of content by fans does not always go uncontested by media corporations eager to defend their copyrights and trademarks, although some are seeking to collaborate with fan communities. Fans appropriate, critique, change, transform and re-circulate media content while commercial culture consciously absorbs aspect of fan culture and amateur aesthetics – resulting in complex relationships between media producers and audiences.

However, children's active participation in popular culture, and in particular their engagement with superheroes has not necessarily been seen as a good thing. Superhero play today seems to be one of children's preferred narratives for fantasy role-play, and is particularly predominant among boys. Superhero animated cartoons make up a large share of television entertainment aimed at children. But superheroes also stand for a cultural divide between adults' and children's culture (Hoffmann, 2004). Children's engagement with superheroes and adults' responses to this have been controversial, to say the least.

Discussions about superhero narratives have to be understood within the context of a wider discourse about children, media violence and media effects and the commercialization of children's culture. As increasing media convergence allows the maximization of profits through the development of cross-media narratives, syndication of programmes and licensing of toys and other spin-off products this critical discourse

also focuses on the wider issues of corporate reach, cultural and political power of media corporations over different areas of children's culture (Giroux, 1995; Kline, 1995).

Many child-care practitioners, teachers, researchers and parents have taken a rather negative stance towards superheroes. Superhero play has been a controversial subject for over three decades and is very often banned from day-care centres, nurseries, kindergartens and schools, because it seems to bring many unwelcome distractions, interruptions and contentious issues into the classroom. Cupit (1989) noted "a general consensus, at least initially, that superhero play was without positive value, was inevitably disruptive and impossible to control" among practitioners. Historically these perceptions of superhero play seem to be largely based on personal histories and subjective approaches, rooted in what could be called pacifist and feminist perspectives (Holland, 2003).

The wide range of concerns expressed by parents, child-care practitioners, teachers and researchers in Britain, Australia and the US can be broadly summed up as follows:

- Concerns about noise and disruption as high levels of activity disturb other children's more peaceful activities
- Concerns about danger as risk of accidents increases
- Concerns about obsessive play, imitation, adherence to rigid play scripts and limitations to creativity
- Concerns about stereotyping in particular in regards to gender, emphasizing male dominance and strength, and race
- Concerns about aggression, violence and war and the effects of media violence
- Concerns about how and whether toys (action figures, toy weapons) help legitimize a culture of violence
- Concerns about power, with some children establishing dominance over some and excluding others, and using threatening and abusive language,
- General concerns about the influence of popular media and values, in particular television on children
- Concerns about over-commercialisation of childhood and consumerism

(Holland, 2003; Seiter, 1999; Hoffman, 2004; Cupit, 1989; Kline 2002; Paley 1984; Jones 2002; Dyson 1997)

However, there are also many practitioners and researchers, who argue for a re-evaluation of educational practices around popular culture, and superheroes in particular. In the following chapters I will provide a closer at look at the findings of practitioners, and researchers, who have investigated various ways of children's engagement with superhero narratives. It will show many diverse practices of cultural participation and ask for a re-evaluation of children's participation in media culture.

4. Superheroes in Children's Fantasies

As a response to those many negative adult concerns, in particular about violent children's culture Gerard Jones in *Killing Monsters* (2002) provides a passionate argument in favour of superheroes and fantasy violence. One important points he makes, is that contrary to commonly held views about children not being able to distinguish between fantasy and reality, it is the *adults* who often fail to make that distinction. As adults are "disturbed by children's appetite for the disturbing" they fail to acknowledge that fantasy violence and play is exactly that: fantasy. In focusing on the literal, adults overlook the emotional meaning of stories and images (Jones, 2002).[2]

A first step in finding out how and why children love superheroes would be to gain a better understanding of their fantasies. This has been done in a recent comparative study of children in Germany, Israel and USA and South Korea (Götz et al., 2003, 2006). Children from eight to ten years were led on a uniformly designed fantasy journey into their "big day dream" and later talked, wrote and drew their fantasies making fantasies explicit that normally are quite intimate. The study revealed that children's fantasies are surprisingly similar regardless of cultural context, as the researchers across cultural borders discerned certain typical patterns within the daydreams, and among them typical desires for action such as: [3] experiencing harmony, experiencing thrill, being special,

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[2] "We don't help children learn the difference between fantasy and reality when we allow their fantasies to provoke reactions from us that are more appropriate to reality. When a child is joyfully killing a friend who loves being killed, we don't make things clearer for them by responding with an anxious, 'You shouldn't shoot people!' Instead we blur the very boundaries that they're trying to establish. We teach them that pretend shooting makes adults feel threatened in *reality*, and therefore their own fantasies must be more powerful and more dangerous than they thought. The result for the child is more anxiety and self-doubt, more concern over power of violent thoughts, less sense of power over their own feelings, less practice in expressing their fantasies." (Jones, 2002: 56)

[3] Experiencing harmony: in a paradise-like world where all danger and stress is banned. Experiencing thrill: in particular boy experienced excitement, encountering adventures and dangers as a pleasurable experience. Being special: experiencing oneself and being acknowledged by others as someone special. Being connected: being in relationships with friends, groups and communities. Protecting and being protected: active and passive forms could be identified as alternating. Acting independently: freely organizing, managing and assuming responsibility, acting upon the world. (Goetz et.al. 2003)

being connected, protecting and being protected, and acting independently (Goetz et al., 2003).

The study showed that in approximately two-thirds of the cases either explicit or implicit media traces were evident as children incorporated elements from fictional media to a varying degree. While some dream worlds followed the original text very closely, others borrowed the setting, or only selected one object or element. They included characters, ranging from complete adaptation to selection of particular character traits, abilities or costume. In some instances factual programmes such as documentaries and science programmes would also trigger children's fantasies. Götz et al. conclude that the children are active and selective meaning-makers, integrating elements of their life experiences and their socio-cultural environment, as well as elements from the textual world of media that they inhabit, into their fantasies.[4]

Certain gender-specific tendencies were noted as more girls indulged in worlds of harmony and paradise and more boys in worlds of conflict and threat. "The girls' fantasies tend to place an emphasis on harmony and they frequently fill the entire picture with a landscape. Traces of media are less evident in the girls' make-believe worlds. The boys' pictures are often saturated with unequivocal references to current media contents, and many pictures portray a conflict situation" (Götz et al., 2003:15).

It is interesting to see that according to this study superhero narratives may cater for most (five out of six) of children's preferred fantasies.[5] Superhero stories may reflect the

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[4] "The question of which media fragments pass into the kids' fantasies and which they do not use is not primarily one of genre, style, fiction or non-fiction. Rather, the decisive criteria is whether they fit in the kids' themes and advance them. It must be material with which the children can symbolize their experiences, invent their own stories. Neither is the decisive element how spectacular is the media content or how much action it contains. Rather, they need to offer condensed forms of experience." (Götz et al., 2003: 15)

[5] In fact , Götz et al. quote one boy who integrated characteristics from a whole range of superhero figures into one powerful character, engaged in heroic adventures: "In my fantasy the world is exclusively mine, and I am the ruler. I wear this very special suit. The red cape is like Superman's. That green there is my hands that I can climb everything with, like Spiderman, and the blue there is from a fire laser-beam weapon. The red is a belt with Pokémons. That lilac colour is my flying shoes, and the horns come from Batman's mask. I am the Grand

children's desire for experiencing thrill, being special, being connected, protecting and

being protected and acting independently; this may provide an explanation for the

universal appeal of these narratives.

Master, and I have a sword like in Star Wars. That area around me is my room. It's very, very big and has many over life-size figures. There is a carpet and a bed and many things for training like walls for climbing. There are weights for muscle training, too, like they do at the Olympics. There are also Pokémon figures, for example a giant Pikachu. In this world there are good people and bad people and a school in a mountain like Hogwart's school in Harry Potter. I have already graduated from there. And there are tropical plants like in a jungle, but pets, too, such as a dog. In the middle of my world there is a mysterious island like in Jules Verne, with many whales like in Moby Dick. When I sleep, I dream of the super powers of the TV heroes, but I have also added a bit from my own imagination." (Götz et al., 2003: 13)

5. Superhero Play

a. Zero Tolerance

Free play among children is usually organized into 'play scripts', which prescribe the outline of the play, including suitable characters, actions and events, plot sequence and dialogue. Similarly to children's fantasies, play scripts may be based on observations and real-life experiences as well stories, books and media. Superhero play can be seen as a special form of play defined by Brenda Boyd as "active, physical play of children pretending to be media characters imbued with extraordinary abilities, including superhuman strength or the ability to transform themselves into superhuman entities" (Boyd, 1997). Jones (2002) articulates some of the uneasiness that adults feel when confronted with superhero play:

> "We may be happier when our kids become dinosaurs or knights or something else that hasn't been trademarked by a corporation, and they very often do. But there is a special power inherent in cartoon characters and action figures: they are individualized and yet universal, human and yet superhuman, unique visual symbols that can be held clearly in the mind's eye and are instantly recognized by everyone." (Jones 2002: 70)

Penny Holland (2003) noted that, over the last three decades, war, weapon and superhero play has been a cultural taboo theme. Zero tolerance, especially over the last fifteen or twenty years, has become the prevalent approach to war, weapon and superhero play in most school and early-years settings in England. Similarly, Boyd (1997) noted a growing concern among practitioners, researchers and public opinion in the US, with an increased number of teachers of young children banning superhero play since the early 1990s. This in effect means that

> "children are not allowed to bring manufactured toy weapons into settings, are not allowed to construct weapons … and are not allowed to enact scenarios associated with superhero, war or play-fighting. This ban is often extended to incorporate

> other forms of noisy, physically active play like chasing and running games. This
> area of play is almost exclusively associated with boys." (Holland 2003: xiii)

However, attempts to eliminate this kind of play, made over the last few decades, have proved to be unsuccessful (Holland, 2003; Boyd, 1997). As some children will always persist in such games, practitioners have to expend a great amount of time and energy in enforcing the zero-tolerance approach. Holland's research into the history and context of these policies found that this approach is based on 'unwritten rules' rather than research evidence, written policy documents, or education authority guidelines based on personal histories, attitudes and feelings, where war, weapon and superhero play are understood as patterns of male violence and sexist behaviour, to be discouraged in children (Holland, 2003).

Holland argues that there is not enough research evidence substantiating the belief in a causal connection between aggression and war, weapon and superhero play. Studies from the 1970s to the 1990s exploring or proving these connections are flawed, as they fail to distinguish between play fighting and real aggression and do not take into account research situations (especially laboratory situations), the presence of researchers, changes in routine, and the social, cultural and family context of the children.

b. Superhero Action: Rough and Tumble, Chasing and Martial Arts

Superhero and 'rough-and-tumble' play share several characteristics as they both involve fantasy role play and may involve typical behaviour patterns including running, chasing, fleeing, wrestling, jumping, shouting, falling (on soft surfaces) and laughing, all enjoyable physical activities that may also serve as a release of tension. (Cupit, 1989; Boyd, 1997; Holland, 2003;) A body of research suggests that 'rough-and-tumble play' may serve important developmental functions for young children, in particular boys: 'Rough-and-tumble play' may help to "develop and maintain friendships", "can reduce

conflict, by clearly defining a power structure within a group" and "offers children an opportunity to develop social skills, which consequently leads to successful peer interactions" (Boyd, 1997).

Tolerance for play-fighting in early-years settings may lead to less accidental injuries, possibly as a result of children having the permission to practice and thus gaining greater control over their movements. Play-fighting helps children in realizing connections between impulses, actions and real consequences. (Holland, 2003; Jones, 2002: 69)

Superhero play also refers to chase games, based on the simple play script of capture, escape and rescue. These games frequently involve not only set groups of boys, but girls, younger children, or children new to the setting. They may incorporate climbing structures, hiding places and playhouses to heighten the dramatic possibilities of the chase (Holland, 2003). Chase games are known to be common in young children's play in all cultures. Superheroes or their antagonists, i.e. the 'baddies', simply provide a new narrative for an old cultural practice.

In recent years, children's superhero play fighting has increasingly incorporated martial-arts movements (Boyd, 1997; Holland, 2003). One may assume that this is inspired by a history of media products from Hong Kong, Korea and Japan featuring martial arts and a growing interest in these practices as reflected in Hollywood movies, television series and video games. While Western adults increasingly understand and enjoy the aesthetics of carefully choreographed and stylized martial-arts scenes, children all over the world incorporate them into their play practice.

c. Gender Issues

The overwhelming majority of children who seem to be interested in war, weapon and superhero play are boys; therefore the discussion and research almost inevitably focuses on issues of gender. Many researchers have noted clear gender differences when it comes to pretend play: girls tend to prefer to enact domestic situations while boys in their play reach outside to the wider world, and into fantasy settings. Girls' play is often sedentary and more compatible with school settings, while boys' play involves high levels of physical activity, with the need for large spaces, preferably outdoors. Children use role-play to explore and define their own gendered identities and to negotiate their own social positions among their peers. Practitioners' own attitudes towards children's play have an influence on children's play behaviour, as certain types of play are encouraged over others. (McLoyd, 1983, Paley, 1984, Holland, 2003, Hoffmann 2004)

Practitioners such as Paley (1984) and Holland (2003) both began to question the structures in early-care settings, which "reward girls' domestic play while discouraging boys' adventurous fantasies". Both undertook small-scale case studies in the course of which they uncovered their own prejudices and preconceptions about children's gendered play, and explored the possibilities of accepting and inviting superhero play into early-care settings.

Holland subsequently came to the conclusion that the prevalent approach to gender relationships in care settings over the last two decades "has served to harden rather than challenge stereotyped behaviour", as practitioners typically ban, correct and punish young boys following their active and sometimes noisy play interests, while compliant, passive, quiet and sedentary behavior of young girls is valued and celebrated.

Girls' fantasies and imaginary play often involve witches and fairies with magical capabilities. While these are usually considered as traditional and therefore less

threatening (to adults), ultimately fairy-tale magic may serve the same purposes as 'superpowers'. Both magic and superpowers enable the participant to fly, to travel to imaginary lands and to resurrect from the dead. They serve to enact and vocalize fears, anxieties and feelings of powerlessness when used by 'baddies', monsters or evil witches. They inspire a sense of power, confidence and protection if used by heroes, good witches and fairy godmothers. (Paley, 1984; Holland, 2003; Hoffman, 2004; Jones, 2002)

Holland and Paley found that once war, weapon and superhero play was accepted and respected in the care setting, children were more willing to explore other gender roles and identities, with some boys joining in activities typically considered as girls' games and vice versa. Upon closer inspection superhero play involved more than just (male) fighting: for example, 'superpowers' could be used to find lost friends and to nurture people back to life – activities usually associated with female behaviour. It was also observed that in those settings children increasingly played in mixed gender groups across a range of activities.

d. Imagining Power or the Power of Imagination

Since superhero cartoons "have become a major source of play scripts" in pre-school settings (Cupit, 1989) practitioners from Britain, Australia and the US suggest that children's interest in superhero play should be used to support and encourage imaginary play in general. (Holland, 2003; Hoffman, 2004; Paley, 1984, Cupit, 1989, Dyson, 1997) Superhero play can have a positive impact on the social climate of groups, within and without the school context. Holland's study suggests that relaxing the zero-tolerance rule showed positive results in particular with children, who had been previously marginalized because they lacked social status, for example, or who were culturally or linguistically alienated. (Cupit, 1989, Holland 2003: 75; Jones 2002: 53)

Superhero play, it seems, may actually lead to *less* violence, and "if nurtured may in fact be harnessed to serve [children's] future as non-aggressive adults." Holland (2003) concluded that boys playing superheroes actually seem to be *less* involved in real arguments and fighting, than, for example, girls in the dolls corner, or boys playing 'workmen'. "Perhaps when you pretend to fight, you don't really need to fight" (Paley, 1984). Similarly Jones argues: "Play based on those well-contained fantasies will seem safer as a consequence, especially since popular culture also gives children a common language of symbols for organizing play-fighting with their friends. […] Superhero play has unstated but inherent structure and rules that can keep the aggression from flying out of control" (Jones, 2002: 72).

In summary, superhero play seems to serve a range of important functions in children's lives. It may provide an "opportunity to openly re-enact, process and discuss real events" and media experiences (Holland, 2003). It may help children to cope with frustrations, resolve feelings about power and control and offer "a sense of power to children in a world dominated by adults". It "may help children express their anger and aggression and become comfortable with these feelings, which may otherwise be frightening" (Boyd, 1997). Superhero play enables "children to pretend to be just what they know they'll never be" (Jones 2002: 11) and allows children to explore a wide range of positive and negative feelings and issues (such as fear, anger, power and powerlessness, frustration, curiosity, identity, friendship) in a safe and controlled context. The results may be "flexibility, resilience, mental fortitude, courage – in short empowerment" (Jones, 2002: 67).

e. Toys as Media

An important part of cross-media products for children are promotional and merchandising products, including games and toys. As part of the narrative universe of superheroes, two kinds of toy products especially are popular with children and controversially debated among adults: toy weapons and toy action figures. While it has become common practice to consider video games as media text, following their own inherent 'narrative' and 'grammar', this is more difficult with toys. Is a toy gun a toy, but a *Star Wars* light sabre part of a media text? Should action figures and dolls sold in shops and promotional figures of animated characters handed out through fast food restaurants and cereal boxes be considered as 'text'?

Post-war discourses about gender and violence have made toys that represent problematic notions of masculinity and femininity the subject of controversial and ideological debates. "As artefacts of popular culture, toys embody the controversies of their time. Sites of philosophical struggle, they form a text that invites a discussion of contemporary issues regarding empowerment, control, social roles and consumption" (Jackson, 2001). Considering toys as text means understanding them within the wider social and cultural context in which they are produced and used, and studying their meaning und use as cultural practice. This raises interesting questions, in particular with action figures. To what extent are the meanings and uses of these toys dictated by the toys themselves, or by the accompanying media texts? How are these toys 'read' by children? Researchers have provided conflicting answers to these questions.

Holland argues that toy weapons are signs with a singular meaning, and consequently should not be brought into early-care settings: "A manufactured weapon is a single-purpose toy and directs the child in how to play with it. A toy gun is to be pointed and

shot and indeed there is not a lot else that can be done with that. The toy determines the play, not the child" (Holland, 2003).

Holland advocates that children should be allowed to construct weapons from construction kits and other found materials on offer, as this involves an act of imagination and can also lead to the possibility of transformation. Holland observed that three dimensional 'weapon' construction enthusiastically pursued by young boys resulted in a high level of involvement, was often highly collaborative, and involved dialogue with an increasing range of vocabulary. Allowing children to pursue their interests in constructing weapons proved increased opportunities for learning technologies and improving motor skills (Holland, 2003; Cupit, 1989). Constructing weapons is a longstanding cultural practice among children, as they have never needed more than stones, sticks and strings to construct swords, bows and arrows, rifles and slingshots. In addition to that, children today incorporate found objects ranging from various waste materials to construction toys, and use elements from media narratives to give meaning to their constructions.

Jones presents a rather different view, that is that a toy gun "in the young child's is no gun at all, but a magic wand. A wand can have other functions too, especially transformation". [6]   (Jones, 2002: 49) The superhero play scenario is not necessarily limited to killing with weapons, as the notion of 'transformation' can play an important role. Super-weapons are instruments for 'zapping', 'beaming' 'freezing' and transforming. Super-vehicles can turn into time machines and facilitate magical journeys to imaginary lands. (Holland, 2003; Paley, 1984; Jones, 2002)

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[6] Jones compares toy guns to Harry Potter's magic wand, which may seem less threatening in adults' eyes, but actually very much works like a gun (Jones, 2002). The wand is used to blast people and set off explosions, to the extent that / with the result that it may only be used under 'controlled circumstances' at Hogwarts School of Wizardry, and may be confiscated by teachers 'for the students' own safety'. (Jones, 2002)

While Barbie dolls represent the gendered toy, *par excellence,* for girls, action figures are designed primarily for boys. Stephen Kline (2002), based on his study of boys' use of action figures, concluded that most of the boys had learned 'the patterns of superhero play' by the age of four and that they tended to refer to ritualized play scripts and lacked creativity. Kline's study on children's use of a set of action figures called 'Rescue Heroes' is flawed in its methodology, for similar reasons to those pointed out earlier (see Holland, 2003). Taking some boys and placing them in a laboratory situation may result in ritualized games of battle and confrontation, as boys stake out their social but this does not necessarily allow the conclusion that action-toy play is as limited when played in their home context, with friends and siblings. Kline seems to have a rather narrow view of superhero play and its "aggressive and militaristic themes" ignoring narratives, where superheroes appear more like guardian angels than fighting vigilantes.

Kline's study, however, demonstrates how both parents and media may play a role in expanding children's understanding and imagination. Watching 'Rescue Heroes' videos helped children to establish an interest in the figures and develop a depth of knowledge about the characters and narratives, resulting in the extension of their play scripts. Adult interaction was even more effective in helping the children to extend the range of play behaviour.

However, even though Kline suggests that we should not "think simplistically about toys as isolated signs" but that we should "understand [that] an action toy's meaning requires a 'reading' of the whole attitudinal field that surrounds them" (Kline, 2002), the study fails to look at the overall social and cultural context, as its focus is limited to the influence of the boys' mothers and one particular tie-in television programme. As other studies show, children readily adopt and incorporate elements of any media text into their fantasies and preferred play. These finding would suggest that any media text, even

a documentary about real 'Rescue Heroes', i.e. fire fighters or ambulance drivers, would inspire children's play (see Gotz et al., 2006).

Toys, whether they be girls' dolls or boys' action figures, may be 'read' by children in very different, even subversive, ways from the intended or 'dominant meaning', as children's imagination often surprises by crossing the boundaries of what is deemed possible, thinkable or acceptable.[7] Gunther Kress, in his detailed study of children's literacy learning, argues: "In the games which children play it is easy to see that all objects, all toys, no matter how seemingly predetermined and limited their assumed mode of use, are immediately integrated into patterns in which they might never have been imagined by their makers. Action-man can appear in an idyllic pastoral scene." (Kress 1997: 37) Jones draws on anecdotal experience to point out that some girls use Barbie dolls in violent play. He stresses that children use dolls and toys to "explore fantasies far more complex and powerful" than those that toy and media producers would suggest (Jones, 2002:82).

The relationships between children's use of toys, action figures and accompanying media narratives are complex, as the toys are marketed as media tie-ins, but are potentially open to more diverse uses and 'readings' than games such as video games or card games. More empirical research in this area might be needed to understand the relationships between children as both audience of these superhero texts and producers of elaborate play.

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[7] Similarly Fleming (1996) argues that "today's toys have the suppressed capacity to escape the very stereotypes of gender and power which they apparently reproduce" Amazon Synopsis of Dan Fleming, (1996) *Powerplay: Toys as Popular Culture*. Manchester University Press

4. Watching Superheroes

a. Product-based Animation

Superhero narratives are found across a wide range of media, including feature film and animated film, games and toys. Animated superhero cartoons are arguably the media genre that reaches more children than any other, and they have become a primary promotional vehicle for the sale of toys and other products. Their commercial success and popularity with children stands in contrast to most adults' dismissal of the genre; television cartoons may in fact be the most despised genre of children's television, focus of a long history of discourse condemning cartoons on the basis that they contribute to the corruption of children. This may be partly to do with their cheap production values and crude aesthetics, and partly with the cartoons' potential for subversive and anarchic content; either way cartoons have never lost their ability to raise controversy (Wells, 2002).

In the eyes of most adults, superhero cartoons feature a set of one-dimensional and stereotypical characters, a highly predictable and formulaic plot, and, in the case of cheaper (often Japanese) productions, crude drawings with a minimum of background detail. Narratives are situated in a universe where good and evil are clearly defined: the stories are highly moral, if not moralistic. What gives cause for adult concern, in particular, is the unapologetic use of 'gratuitous' violence. Earlier cartoons such as *Tom and Jerry (1940), Roadrunner (1962)* and *Whacky Races* (1968) incorporated violence in scenes with falling objects, crashes and accidents. With superhero cartoons, plot structures have changed. Usually the dramatic conflict between protagonist and antagonist finds a climax in one long physical confrontation or battle. (Kline, 1995) Similarly to the host of blockbuster action-adventure movies produced since the late 1970s, these animations display an unapologetic spectacle of action, violence and battle. Rather than promoting negotiation or compromise, and to the disapproval of parents, practitioners and researchers, these cartoons present fantasy violence as fun.

The superhero character acts within clearly drawn moral codes, and displays specific qualities: mastery, bravery and audacity. He always remains confident and competent in all the changing confusion he encounters, and emotionally detached from the surreal or horrific events he is surrounded by. The superhero is often part of a team of friends, and his special capabilities mark him out as a leader among peers. Some animation series present teams of superheroes with different and complementary capabilities having to join forces in order to defeat their adversaries. (Cupit, 1989; Jones, 2002; Kline, 1995)

The predominance of male superheroes may be attributed to the fact that girls learn to identify with both male and female protagonists at an early age, while boys do not. Researchers seem to agree that girls will watch television programmes with male protagonists, but boys will not watch girls' programmes; however, this may be changing as new formats with female protagonists are developed. A recent study shows that the ratio of male to female superheroes has changed to 2:1 and that the portrayal of female superheroes is less reliant on traditional feminine stereotypes compared to overall television programming (Baker, 2004). Female superheroes usually display a wider range of emotions than their male counterparts, and stories differ as characters are immersed in a context of social and emotional relationships (Jones 2002; Baker, 2004).

But why are children and adults so divided over the issue of superhero cartoons? Holland found that adults' own preconceptions and prejudices about war, weapons and male violence influenced practitioners' attitudes towards young boys' play. Similarly, Jones argues that it is adults' own preoccupations with violence and fears that "bring them into conflict with young people's thoughts and feelings." Adults actually contribute to young people's insecurities, as they themselves blur the distinctions between reality and fantasy. While violence has been largely removed from "officially sanctioned culture – from the classroom, from bedtime stories, from adult-approved play" (Jones, 2002), children simply love superhero stories and fantasy violence, and for good reason.

Superhero narratives allow for themes rarely found and reflected in children's fiction. Science fiction may be derided as a fantastic film genre containing ludicrous characters and story lines; however, science fiction enables 'big questions' to be raised that other genres cannot: questions of what it means to be human, for example, and about the nature of time, space and 'reality'. Superhero narratives enable children to engage with 'big themes' about the nature of good and evil and to address primal fears and anxieties about pain, separation, and death. Urwin, for example, argues that a television series like the 1980s' *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1987), unlike most of children's literature, allowed the exploration of dystopian and apocalyptic fantasies and catastrophic anxieties (Urwin, 1995).

In defence of fantasy violence, many authors refer to Bruno Bettelheim and his '*Uses of Enchantment'* (Bettelheim, 1975) as the first to defend the crudity of fairy tale plots, emphasizing their emotional relevance for children: "The wolf who devours grandma and is then hacked open matches the children's own imaginative and emotional power" (Jones 2002: 60). Bettelheim studied fairy tales from a wide range of cultures, identified common universal themes and argued against the bowdlerization of fairy tales. Even though Bettelheim himself would most likely not have approved of television cartoons (Jones 2002: 144), researchers today apply his findings to narratives of popular culture (Urwin, 1995; Hoff, 1982; Jones 2002). They argue that these narratives would not be as successful if they did not respond to deeper psychological needs. "To hold attention and to be experienced as psychologically convincing, the fictional work must be consistent with ways in which unconscious processes operate" (Urwin, 1995).

The appeal of superhero narratives may also lie in the fact that they help children to address issues of adults' power over children and to process their own feelings of helplessness through the fantastic reversal of power relationships. The control and use of power is a central theme in children's fantasies, play and meaning-making. Children's own interest and fascination with issues of power sustains the continuing production and

commercial success of these narratives (Mathews, 1999; Urwin, 1995; Jones, 2002). Thus researchers from different disciplines seem to agree that listening to stories, watching movies and cartoons, and engaging in fantasies and pretend play are all active processes that help the child to work "through anxieties, desires and conflicts though symbol formation" (Urwin 1995; Jones, 2002; Hofmann, 2004; Hoff 1982; Smith 1985; Götz, 2003a; Mathews, 1999).

b. Talking about Television

Within the framework of a social theory of media literacy, children's engagement with superheroes and activities such as viewing, reading, talking, playing and drawing can be understood as actions where children "seek to define their social identities, both in relation to their peers and in relation to adults" (Buckingham 2003: 48). David Buckingham's case study on *Children Talking Television* (1993) provides some insights into children's diverse views and their sophisticated understanding of television. When prompted to discuss certain films or shows, they tended not to narrate movies as linear, causal and complete stories, but to focus on the 'best parts': those which appealed to them most on an emotional level. As an audience, children brought very diverse readings to any given media text and used complex criteria of judgements and distinction situated somewhere between the actual text and the social context. Children's talk could not be understood just at face value, but had to be also understood as a social practice.

Children's tastes and viewing preferences are often understood to reflect their identification or aspirations. When children express preferences for violent or other 'distasteful' content, this causes adult concern about imitative behaviour. Buckingham raises doubts about the notion of fictional characters as sources for wishful identification. Children in his study often tended to criticise and mock media texts, or certain elements, such as plot, characters, modality or producers' intentions, and often displayed a

distanced and ironic view. Modality judgements – talking about what is 'realistic' and what is not – "provide a very effective means of undermining the 'power' of the text and thereby asserting the power of the reader" (Buckingham 1993: 239).

While Buckingham's research does not discuss superhero stories or television cartoons in particular, the findings may most probably be applied to those genres. Despite adult claims that children might not be able to differentiate between reality and fantasy, it is likely that children understand the fantastic nature of these narratives and their relationship with reality, and respond with complex and diverse readings of those texts.

Götz et al. studied children's responses to a superhero text: *Dragon Ball Z*[8] (1989), a popular animated series aired in the early years of this decade, was derided for its crude aesthetics and notable violence. They found that children watched the series for a range of motives, one of which was to be able to join in classroom discussions, but not necessarily as a result of a genuine interest. Children found value in watching the series because they were seeking to define their social identities in relation to their peers, and to younger and older children (Götz et al., 2003a). The high intensity of violence was considered a challenge (not only for adults): being able to stand the violence, and not be frightened, was seen as proof of maturity and strength, and used to distinguish older from younger children. Götz et al. found that the fictional characters offered opportunities for identification and for the projection of fears and children's own experiences (also of violence) as expressed in their own meaning-making: some children had achieved quite some expertise in drawing, in particular Manga-like cartoons. The researchers found some increased sense of confidence, self-control and willingness to act aggressively among a small number of children, according to their own testimonials, as a result of watching the series, though they point out that no direct conclusion can be drawn from this study with regard to actual behaviour changes (Götz et al., 2003a).

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[8] Dragon Ball Z is of Japanese origin and was first aired 2000 in the UK, 2001 in Germany

5.   Drawing Superheroes

Classical superheroes first gained popularity through comic books over seventy years ago. Children subsequently started to draw comic-book heroes and comic strips, as noticed by art educators in the 1960s and 1970s. Views about the relative dangers and merits of these kinds of activities were divided, just as they seem to be today. Many art educators have adopted the almost universally accepted idea that copying is to be discouraged, in the tradition of art-education pioneers Franz Cizek, Viktor Lowenfeld and Rudolf Arnheim; among these, copying comic-book art is derided. Others like Ernst Gombrich found merits in copying, in the tradition of art students imitating paintings by older masters as essential learning strategies. Consequently, as pop art was gaining recognition and starting to make its way into galleries and museums, some educators argued that drawing skills could be developed even by copying figures found in comic books (Brent Wilson, 1974; Wilson & Wilson 1977; Robertson, 1987; Craig, 2005). Today, children frequently copy superheroes and comic book characters by the age of five or six, but also invent their own figures and comic-strip plots.[9]

Discourses about art education reveal fundamental differences in the understanding of children's art itself: for many decades children's art was understood and studied in terms of development towards an increasing realism; more recently children's art is seen as the increasing capability to form and employ visual signs, similar to the process of language learning (see Wilson & Wilson, 1977; Kress, 1997; Anning/Ring 2004). In adopting elements from comic books and cartoons, then, children learn to express meaning though the use of signs.

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[9] "They draw figures that run, leap and fly across several frames; zoom in for a close-up of their heroine; and show perspective and dimensionality in ways that children a generation ago couldn't do. Rather than discourage such creative activity, teachers and parents should take full advantage of children's fascination with popular culture and use it to develop their drawing abilities beyond the most basic level." (Craig, 2005)

Nancy Smith (1985) studied comic strips drawn by children of six to thirteen years of age participating in a Comic Book Club. In accordance with research discussed earlier, superheroes were found to be a popular theme. Smith grouped 164 comic strips into the following categories: superhero, humour, science fiction, horror, romance, commonplace accidents and fears, and everyday circumstances and events. Variations on the superhero theme, including parodies, formed the single largest category, followed by realistic fears and daily events. Smith found that children tended to borrow and use certain elements of popular culture, such as imagery, characters and narratives, while ignoring others. The use of these elements facilitated personal expression and playful invention. The relative simplicity of the genre enabled children to use it "as a vehicle for exploring feelings, ideas and experiences." She found that "cloaking strong emotions in the experiences" of media characters "may help express emotions these individuals would otherwise find difficult to reveal." Smith concludes that drawing comic strips brings benefits to emotional as well as artistic growth. "Children's capacity to organize emotions through visual expression is an early manifestation essential to art, that process by which the interplay of thought and feeling are rendered visible" (Smith, 1985: 154). Mathews (1999) draws similar conclusion, arguing that children's use of themes provided by popular media cannot be explained in terms of simple copying. Rather, children only use elements that correspond to their deeper needs and interests.[10]

Brent Wilson (1974) studied the drawings of a boy who created hundreds of superhero drawings. He noted the complex influence of comic books on his art and his choice of typical themes, such as triumphant heroes and the opposition of good and evil. Wilson understood these drawing activities as 'play art' as distinct from 'school art'. Spontaneous 'play art', which notably takes place mainly outside art classrooms, is in

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[10] Going against commonly held opinions, he states, "Television is not a major influence on children's representational play. […] all children's interaction with television is both guided and constrained by their attractor systems. Children are able to use the themes which appear in moving pictures only to the extent that they? themselves are spontaneously generating them. The success of certain programmes with children is due to the way these programmes use themes and actions, which form structures the children themselves are forming. Although children may play Superheroes, this is because plots of these programmes are based on the deep structures of representation and expression" (Mathews 1999:104)

Wilson's view a form of arousal-seeking play behaviour, driven by a sense of boredom.[11] The boy had discovered how to be an active agent in producing stimulating experiences rather than merely "passively experiencing the productions of others" (Wilson 1974:3).

Anning/Ring provide detailed case studies of young children from the age of two to five and their meaning-making as situated within their socio-cultural context. They found that children process elements both from their everyday lives and from second-hand sources and popular culture in their artwork. Again, gender differences were found. Many boys, "particularly in later elementary grades", "drew images related to popular culture", "whereas the majority of girls drew images that involved self, family and friends" (Kendrick/McKay 2002:46). In particular, boys' interests reached out to a world outside domestic contexts, and some of them were preoccupied with superhero themes. Boys showed a preference for imaginative-play activities, which were later re-created in drawings. These 'action drawings' "became dynamic extensions of their whole body movement as the drawing tool 'hit' the surface". They re-present the action, but also serve to re-enact the action while drawing (Anning/Ring, 2004:40).

Smith's study revealed that the largest single category of school-age children's comic strips were variations of the superhero theme. One may assume that younger children also love to 'play superheroes' in their 'play art' or 'action drawing', exploring the powerful emotions and themes, the 'big ideas' associated with the genre[12] (Anning/Ring, 2004:26).

These findings make it clear that children's drawing activities have to be considered as

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[11] As Wilson noted, "More novel art may be motivated by the boredom of secondary school study halls than through the carefully orchestrated "motivations" of art teachers." (Wilson 1974:3)

[12] "It is clear that children use drawings as a tool for understanding and representing important aspects of their personal and live experiences of people, places and things. Beyond coming to terms with personal experiences, their representations serve the function of exploring 'big ideas' common to all our lives, like dependence and dominance, good and evil, danger and adventure. The power of visual narratives in communities for confronting these kinds of abstractions has been potent throughout history. Visual narratives exploring 'big ideas' have ranged from those produced in charcoal and soot on walls in cave art to the electronic, digital media of video art." (Anning/Ring, 2004:26)

complex forms of meaning-making, and as forms of representation, expression, communication, but also in terms of 'play'. Whether we call it 'play art' or 'action drawing', children use drawing in order to act out imaginative stories of action and adventure, deliberately integrating media elements and gradually learning to use visual signs. In drawing comic book characters, they continue to practice visual meaning-making; in drawing comic strips, they continue to develop visual narratives as a form of communication.

6.   Superheroes Supporting Multiple Literacies

Practitioners increasingly realize that the introduction of popular culture into the language and literacy curriculum may be "an important way of recognizing [that] the 'cultural capital' of children, particularly working class children" has "a positive effect on the motivation and engagement of children in learning" and "a positive impact on children's progress in speaking and listening and literacy" (Buckingham 2003:157; Marsh et al., 2005a, 2005b). There are many ways and methods of harnessing young children's fascination with superheroes through expanding dramatic play scripts in order to facilitate language and literacy development (Holland, 2003; Paley, 1984; Cupit, 1989; Hoffmann, 2004 and Dyson; 1997). Classroom literacy strategies may include the support of composition skills through storytelling, narration, dictation/transcription/ writing and subsequent enactment of stories; they may include writing captions to images and drawings, and drawing and writing comic strips, with the emphasis gradually shifting from images (with captions) to written text (with illustrations) (Kress, 1997; Holland, 2003; Anning/Ring, 2004; Dyson 1997).

However, incorporating superheroes into the school curriculum is not necessarily easy, because "as 'cultural capital' […] in the knowledge economy of school, this material is of low value." Superhero "material, so central to many children's social and imaginative lives, is ideologically unsettling to many adults. […] these stories contain much physical aggression, often embedded in gender-stereotyped plots. For adults concerned about a world on the brink of chaos, these stories hardly seem good child fare" (Dyson, 1997:3).

Dyson's (1997) ethnographic study on children from seven to nine years provides an insight into how a group of children successfully appropriates superhero stories both in their dramatic play and in their fiction writing in the classroom. However, other schools practice zero-tolerance policies on violence in students' writings, with consequences the

teachers seem to be unaware of, since these policies may result in alienating boys from school, as they "attempt to distance themselves from the "school" behaviours and language practices they perceive as threatening and feminine" (Kendrick/McKay, 2002: 46f). "The richness and complexity of children's expressions of multiple stances and positions will likely be missed or underestimated" and, as children are denied expression and performance of identity, "conflicts can arise between institutional middle class practices and the life world of working class students in particular" (Kendrick/McKay, 2002:54). Strict restrictions on writing themes may limit rather than extend children's identities and learning, and the worlds of home and school life become more disparate.

It is not surprising that children then seek to articulate themselves, also in the mode of writing, outside the context of formal learning and direct adult control. Jenkins (2006: 169-205) describes at length how children inspired by *Harry Potter* write their own fictional accounts of life at Hogwarts, organize themselves into fan communities and share their work online, as, for example, in the online publication *The Daily Prophet* (www.dprophet.com), which was set up by 14-year-old Heather Lawver.[13] As children take on fictional identities of Hogwarts students and staff, "the example of *The Daily Prophet* suggests yet another important cultural competency: role-playing both as a means of exploring a fictional realm and as a means of developing a richer understanding of yourself and the culture around you" (Jenkins, 2006: 176). In the case of *The Daily Prophet*, Heather Lawver and her friends even took up action situated very much in the real world, when they launched a children's campaign against Warner Bros. – which was threatening fan sites with legal actions – resulting in more collaborative policies in dealing with fans. (Jenkins, 2006: 187)

The children in online communities engage in a form of collaborative learning that schools are far from able to facilitate, as they comment and critique each others' work

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[13] "Lawver, by the way, is home schooled and hasn't set foot in a classroom since first grade. … From the start, Lawver framed her project with explicit pedagogical goals that she used to help parents understand their children's participation … Lawver is so good at mimicking teacherly language that one forgets that she has not yet reached adulthood." (Jenkins, 2006:172)

and provide support and advice for writing techniques in general. On websites such as www.fictionalley.com and *The Sugar Quill* (www. Sugarquill.net), the fan community "goes to extraordinary lengths to provide informal instruction to new writers" as every newly posted story goes through a peer reviewing process (Jenkins, 2006: 179). Readers, writers and editors share a deep emotional investment in the work, and are free to explore issues that they would feel uncomfortable discussing in school assignments. In fact, engagement in these fan communities is sometimes seen as a strategy "to survive high school", and some educators are concerned that children are actually being "deskilled as they enter the classroom" (Jenkins, 2006: 183).

On the whole, children in formal educational settings seem to enjoy more relative freedom of expression in their drawing than in other forms of meaning-making such as fantasy play or writing: in art they experience less interference, but also less guidance and support from adults. This may be to do with the fact that drawing is understood less as a form of communication, than as a form of 'expression' or simple stepping stone to 'higher' language-based forms of representation and communication (Kress, 1997: 9, 135). Curriculum requirements and traditional school settings stress the importance of language and literacy (in the form of reading and writing) over other modes of meaning-making, visual literacy, or media literacy.

However, children spontaneously use many representational and communicative modes in their meaning-making, moving effortlessly from one mode of communication or from one sign system to another (Kress, 1997). Kress and other practitioners therefore increasingly treat "all communicative modes as potentially equal in their contribution to learning", and argue for a "definition of literacy [that] goes beyond school-based literacies and incorporates the ability to use a variety of forms of representation, including visual images" (Kendrick/McKay, 2002:46f). Literacy is redefined to include visual literacy and multimedia literacy as equally important forms of communication (see Pailliotet et al., 1998; Kress, 2003). An understanding of children's multimodal forms of

meaning may support multiple paths not only to literacy but also to multiple literacies.[14] Engagement with superheroes, it seems, inspires children to learn, explore, express and communicate though various modes of media, very often only *outside* the school context, however. Opening a classroom to superheroes may open diverse paths to multiple literacies, in particular for boys.

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[14] As Kress states, "In a time when the landscape of communication is changing so decisively, we cannot in any case continue to ignore [children's] making of signs and messages in such a vast variety of modes, in two or three dimensions, spatially or temporally constructed. All of these will have an entirely new importance in the communicational world of the day after tomorrow, economically, culturally and personally. All of these offer different way for us humans with our physical, sensory bodies, to engage with the world; and all of them offer different ways not just of feeling, but of knowing; all offer different ways of cognition." (Kress, 1997: xix)

7.   A Matter of Taste

In a long history of moral panics, adults have been passing normative judgments on children's media culture by applying powerful aesthetic concepts, namely 'quality' and 'taste'. Children's apparent liking for superhero cartoons is often perceived as a problem: "It seems to be assumed that, if left to their own devices, children will choose to watch material that is not only morally damaging but also inherently lacking in cultural value. […] Children's 'natural' taste, it is argued, is for vulgarity and sensationalism, rather than restraint and subtlety; for simplistic stereotypes rather than complex, rounded characters; and it is led by the baser physical instincts rather than the higher sensibilities of the intellect. Children and 'good taste' are, it would seem, fundamentally incompatible" (Davies et al., 2000). Children seem to like exactly that which is considered bad taste, whether it be lavatory humour, or action, ritualized violence and spectacle.

The relationship between taste, aesthetics and class – aesthetic discrimination as a means of maintaining and increasing social differences and power relations – has been explored by a range of authors, notably by Bourdieu.[15] Distinctions of taste and aesthetic judgements are made by children too, as they grow older and learn to adopt higher-status adult opinions. While in practice most children seemed to be involved in some form superhero play at some time, Dyson (1997) noted that some, in particular white middle-class children, distanced themselves from their peers' superhero stories and tastes. Their views reflected dominant middle-class criticism of 'violence' on children's television and stereotypical class divisions in taste. Aesthetic judgement of media texts may not only support social class and gender distinctions, but may also serve both adults and children in constructing and maintaining a hierarchy of age distinctions, whereby

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[15] "As Bourdieu amply demonstrates, aesthetic judgements cannot be divorced from social relations: distinctions of taste are a means of displaying and sustaining distinctions of class and social power. The preferences and judgments of those who have the power to ascribe cultural value become the apotheosis of 'good taste'; and, in this way, the maintenance of aesthetic hierarchies becomes a means of perpetuating class differences and inequalities." (Davies et al., 2000)

categories such as childhood, youth or adulthood are open and subject to a constant process of negotiation (Davies et al., 2000).

Popular media texts are often dismissed for the following main reasons: firstly "their conventionality, their conforming to generic patterns and their conditions of mass production", secondly "criteria such as superficiality, sensationalism, obviousness and predictability" and thirdly their "easiness, their failure to offer any challenge" (Fiske, 1991: 218).

However, as John Fiske argues, in popular culture social relevance is more important than aesthetic appreciation. (Fiske, 1991: 216) Readers of popular culture engage with text in a different way from readers of highbrow culture. Rather than serving as a source of aesthetic appreciation and value, popular texts are polysemic, and can be subject to different and possibly divergent readings. Popular texts are available as cultural resources, serving a range of social functions.

> "The reader of the aesthetic text attempts to read it on *its* terms, to subjugate him- or herself to its aesthetic discipline. The reader reveres the text. The popular reader, on the other hand, holds no such reverence for the text but views it as a resource to be used at will. Aesthetic appreciation of a text requires the understanding of how its elements relate and contribute to its overall unity, and an appreciation of this final, completed unity is its ultimate goal. Popular readers on the other hand are concerned less with the final unity of a text than with the pleasures and meanings that its elements can provoke. They are undisciplined, dipping into and out of a text at will." (Fiske 1991:217)

This applies to children in particular, as they read media texts selectively: for example, they may follow only those storylines or focus only on those elements that are interesting and relevant to them at a given point in time. A younger child may not be able to grasp the 'final, overall unity' of a media text, for example, or understand or be able to remember the overall plot and character development in a movie. But this does not mean she will not derive pleasure from certain elements, make her own sense of certain themes or recall the 'best bits'. Furthermore, as we have seen, children are not only

'undisciplined, dipping into and out of a text at will', but also 'disrespectful' to authors, using and appropriating the given resources at will for their own pleasure and meaning-making.

Fiske argues that authenticity as a cultural value ties the unique text to its unique producer, but popular taste disregards the author, and rather focuses on generic conventions, as "genres are the result of a three way contract between audience, producer and text." "Generic readers know the conventions and are thus situated in a far more democratic relationship with the text than are the readers of highbrow literature, with its authoritative authors" (Fiske, 1991:218f). Children become familiar with generic conventions of media texts from an early age, adapting them to their fantasy play and showing a preference for domestic melodrama (girls) or for heroic action adventure (boys), genre preferences that later divide adult audiences in a similarly gendered fashion.

The accessibility of the popular texts stands in opposition to the 'difficulty' of the highbrow text, which serves as a measure of social exclusivity. The popular text offers easy access to the pleasures provided, and invites participation. It is the openness and apparent simplicity and 'easiness' of superhero narratives that makes them so ready for adaptation and appropriation by children of all ages and allows us to compare the cultural practice of 'superhero play' with folk culture practices.

8. Case study

a. War, Weapon and Superhero Play

Like many other educators of my generation, I used to hold vaguely pacifist and feminist ideas about violence and the manufactured nature of gender identities (Holland, 2003). That was until I had a child myself, who challenged my assumptions from very early on. I remember an incident that took place around Lukas's first birthday, when he was learning to walk. It was our first nature outing where Lukas climbed out of his pushchair and ran along the path by himself. He stopped and picked up a small stick, and holding it at one end started slashing it across the air, making swooshing sounds. I was stunned. I was sure it was impossible that he had ever seen fencing or sword fighting, unless he had observed other children – but here was my boy, still more a baby than a toddler, swinging a stick like a sword. Two years later, when he was a little over three years old and had not attended any preschool setting yet, we were walking along a forest path and Lukas was running ahead with a friend. He climbed on top of a mound of earth to the side of the road, stopped, and wagging a stick shouted triumphantly, "The power and the glory!" I was puzzled. Where did he get these *ideas* from? How did he know these *words*, and somehow understand their meaning? So from a very young age Lukas clearly set the agenda, and made me understand that he was determined to live and act out his very own private, and decidedly 'male', heroic fantasies.

In trying to teach my child that aggression was not acceptable social behaviour, I had to learn many lessons myself. The 'zero tolerance' approach to war, weapon and superhero games (Holland, 2003) was not a viable option, if I did not want to suppress what my child was so passionately interested in. When inevitably forced to confront the issue of toy weapons, I initially supported the idea of self-constructed weapons, for similar reasons to those outlined by Holland (2003). Constructing weapons was creative and instructive, and often more time was spent on construction than on actual weapon play. But, in observing Lukas, I also learned that carrying weapons was more related to

fantasy and dressing-up games than to fighting. Weapons were a prop, part of a costume, like masks, capes, crowns and cowboy hats. Running around wearing a plastic gun in one's belt meant being powerful and cool. I realized that, when it came to pretend fighting, plastic swords and arrows with plastic tips were a lot safer in the hands of five-year-olds than weapons constructed with sticks and wire. I eventually accepted that water-pistol fights on a hot summer day and water 'bombs' made with balloons are essentially harmless fun. Over the years, Lukas had to patiently keep reminding me about the difference between real and fantasy violence, a distinction *I* seemed to have trouble making: "But, mum, it's only 'pretend'/ a game/ a drawing/ a cartoon!"

Kendrick suggests a possible line of research, one that focuses on play narratives as autobiographical texts providing insights into children's constructions of self and story. "Systematic examinations of children's play narratives as both literary and social texts have the potential to contribute to current thought on literacy learning and self-construction in early childhood. The play texts are a kind of *Bildungsroman* […] – they are a story of children's 'becoming'" (Kendrick 2005: 24). Following this suggestion, this case study intends to provide a discussion of some of the many ways Lukas engaged in play narratives and meaning-making. His play was not recorded, but the marks and signs he left in the form of drawings and other artefacts interweaving fantasy, reality and identity provide a record that, in conjunction with my memories, can help to map out his particular story of 'becoming'. Children make sense of their world and engage in a multimodal meaning-making process while using, reusing and interpreting resources available to them in their specific socio-cultural environment (Kress, 1997; Anning/Ring, 2004). I shall describe the community of practices at home and in institutional settings, and media influences, and attempt to provide some insight into the complex interrelation of constructions of identity, media experiences, literacy learning and children's meaning-making.

Lukas grew up in a white, middle-class household as an only child, and enjoyed the use

of a range of toys and media that included 'educational toys', picture books, audio books and children's videos. Up until the age of five, he only watched selected children's videos and possibly some television at friends' houses; only later did cable television make its way into the family household. Early favourite toys were animal figures and Lego. Lukas's play and artwork from about the age of three started to revolve around fantasy figures and superhero narratives, parallel to other interests such as the play worlds of Lego knights, horses, sorcerers and pirates.

Researchers almost unanimously consider television to be the dominant medium in influencing children's role-play and meaning-making. The sources of many of Lukas's ideas were media images, but the origins of his enthusiasm for superheroes rather puzzled me at the time. Since his exposure to television only started at the age of five, I have to assume that the initial influence was indirect, mediated through other children's talk[16] and through action-toy figures, which he started to collect with the support of a sympathetic grandmother. At around the age of four, the superhero fantasies were definitely very important to him. He decided that he would only ever wear his socks pulled *over* his trousers – a self-created fashion he resolutely and stubbornly defended for over a year, because "that's how superheroes wear it".[17] Rather than having to *process overwhelming media influences* in his role-play and drawings as suggested by some researchers (Götz, 2006; Neuss, 1999), he was *stimulated* to *use* media characters and images in order to process his own feelings and fears, following his interests and preoccupations.

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[16] Similarly Kress (1997) writes: "Our then $2^1/_2$-year-old son was very interested in a character called 'Lean Tomato' before he had seen the Ninja Turtles on television, and then later met this character Leonardo for himself. He had however been integrated fully into the transformative action on this series by other children at the crèche."

[17] Luckily it was only many years later that he heard about the joke of superheroes wearing their *underpants* over their trousers.

b. The Sad Fate of Action Man

Television intensified his fascination with the superhero universe, as reflected in many activities such as his play and drawing. However, in the case of Lukas and his friends, I would suggest that, while television certainly created their interest in certain toys, it did not manage to control or dictate the meaning the boys made of them.

The following incident will illustrate this point. Television advertising for *Action Man* – an overpriced and oversized play doll complete with war paraphernalia marketed to boys – on children's channels had mobilized so much 'pester power' in my son that, reluctantly, and feeling slightly like a victim of powerful media and toy corporations, I surrendered to his wishes and bought him an *Action Man* set. His best friend owned one too. However, the pleasure did not last long, and soon after the purchase Lukas complained that playing with *Action Man* was not "as much fun as on television", and the doll disappeared. Some time later, upon enquiry and to my surprise, I found out that Lukas and his friend had decided to take 'action' on *Action Man*. Their report, at first hesitant, as if they were anticipating some punishment, but eventually accompanied by much laughter, revealed the following: they had 'tortured' Action Man by hanging him upside down from a tree; several days later they had buried him in the garden, and then 'peed on his grave'. On the one hand I was shocked that my rather shy little boy was able to commit such atrocious acts, on the other hand I could not help smiling. The story and fate of *Action Man* had provided a valuable lesson for the boys, in which they had learned a great deal about advertising, the kind of worlds it represents and the claims it makes, and how to make modality judgements. It also provides a textbook example of an 'audience negotiating meaning', and children constructing their own reading of a media text. Television portraying *Action Man* as a hero had not stopped the boys from subverting the meanings encoded in the text, by making him a 'baddie', who deserved to 'die', expressing their disappointment by taking 'revenge' on him in their fantasy play, and

transgressing what they very well knew to be the boundaries of acceptable behaviour in the real world.

Watching movies and television provided plenty of source material for Lukas's extended play activities, discussion and talk, expanded his knowledge and interest in superheroes, and undoubtedly helped in constructing social identities among his peers, as described by Buckingham (1993). Years later, coincidentally, the animated series *Dragon Ball Z* led me to understand the social and communicative implications of watching and talking about television, and to reach similar conclusions to Götz (2003a). Lukas, aged eleven, started watching *Dragon Ball Z*, frequently referring to the programme as 'stupid', claiming that it was 'badly made' and that he did not like it. However, he still insisted on watching some of the episodes, something I initially could not understand, until he explained. His best friend and some of his classmates were fans of *Dragon Ball Z*, so he needed to watch the programmes in order to be able to 'talk television': he needed to know the programme, even if it was only to find flaws with it and its characters, dialogue and plot. As a fan of the superhero genre, he was well equipped both to make aesthetic judgements and to understand the social relevance of the popular text, and he knew how to use it to define his own identity and position among his peers (Fiske, 1991).

c. Superheroes Cast in Action

Lukas's growing collection of action figures (most of them popular male superheroes) served as actors in ever-expanding play scripts. Other figures, such as promotional toys representing female characters from Disney films and plastic animals, extended the cast. I discussed the issue of action-figure play with Lukas, now aged fifteen, and the 'ritualized nature of superhero play scripts' (Kline, 1995), a notion that he fiercely refuted. He stated that play would always include new elements, inspired by new characters, or new plot ideas, such as 'anything cool from a movie or television.'

Television writer and producer Joss Whedon[18] observed in an interview that movies provide a statement, a finite answer, while television series pose questions. It is the question of "what if?" applied again and again to new situations, from episode to episode. Similarly, this applies to comic-book narratives, and to action-figure play. While the main cast may stay the same, new characters and situations are introduced in order to explore new possibilities. What happens if *Spiderman* is captured by a giant dinosaur? What if *Blue Power Ranger* meets *Cinderella* on the kitchen table? Can *Batman* save *Pocahontas* from the clutches of the waste paper basket?

Basic story traits may stay the same, 'goodies' may always win over 'baddies', but new ideas are integrated into the continuous narrative. Lukas was engaged in extended superhero play, chase games and pretend fighting when playing with friends outdoors, and played superheroes indoors with the aid of toys and action figures. Action-figure play included travel, adventure, fights, battles and heroic rescues, and provided ongoing opportunities for social learning, building friendships and exploring a wide range of feelings and issues such as power and subordinance, violence and fear.

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[18] Producer and writer of *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*

Gunther Kress's work is based on the thesis, that children are fundamentally dispositioned towards multi-modal forms of meaning-making. In using their bodies, in creating objects, in their play children reshape semiotic resources within and across modes (Kress, 1997). Lukas was interested in exploring and expressing feelings and ideas through superhero narratives moving effortlessly across various representational modes: role-play, toy play, drawing and writing. In all these activities, playing with other children was of prime importance; only when alone did he start to draw, write and create artefacts.

Dyson's account of children *Writing Superheroes* (1997) is set in a nursery/primary school, and therefore in a setting where, as she describes, social relations are woven into the imaginary text. The children talk about each other's stories and pictures, and also begin to communicate through their work. In contrast to that, Lukas's images were usually produced when he was alone, at home with me. He did not seem to be concerned about my reactions to his drawings, but quite satisfied with the process of creation itself. I gave him feedback and expressed my enthusiasm for some of his work. He must have felt genuine appreciation, as I used some drawings to decorate rooms in our house along with other works of art. At some point he possibly became aware of the fact that I was collecting his drawings. However, he did not seek attention for, or communication about his artwork[19], just as he would not have expected praise for playing with action figures, or playing knights with plastic swords.

Once in a while I asked him to speak about his pictures, which he did, sometimes willingly and sometimes rather reluctantly. He was clearly embarrassed to talk about an elaborate picture featuring "Superboy" drawn when he was under four, as if this would reveal too much information about a private fantasy that he had harboured. The drawings were a continuation and extension of the fantasy role-play and play with action figures he was engaged in, using a different mode of representation. He used pen and

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[19] as in, "Look what I have done, Mummy!"

paper to act out continuing narratives, and these narratives often revolved around superheroes.

In hindsight I now understand more fully that he did, albeit unconsciously, also use his artwork to communicate, in particular with *me.* Reading his images, for me, was a way of reading his emotions, and to 'tune into' his state of mind[20] (Anning/Ring, 2004). This was particularly interesting when reading the artwork he produced in nursery and primary school[21]. I know little about the kind of instruction he received in institutional settings, apart from the evidence of work he brought home. What is most striking is the fact that the work created in these settings was markedly different from what he created at home. Most of the work produced in these settings lacked the ease and confidence of his other work, and to me seemed to express a lack of creativity, and constraint, if not downright unhappiness.

His artwork, however, showed that he was also 'tuning into' my mind. Among my collection of 300+ drawings, there are only a very few that portray real people; among these are four portraits of 'Mummy'. One, which he made at the age of three, shows 'Mummy crying'; another one made several years later shows 'Mummy shouting at Lukas'. I remember my surprise when he made the first picture, on a day when I indeed had been extremely unhappy (but not crying), clearly using the drawing as a way to communicate his concern. The other one was made at a time when I was under a lot of stress, and it made me laugh, as I really had had little patience and had been shouting at him too much. Without making it explicit, my continued 'reading' of his pictures opened avenues of communication about what was happening in our lives, about our feelings, which would have not been possible otherwise.

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[20] "Adults must be able to 'tune into' young children's drawing behaviours and listen to the meanings of their early action drawings, rather than push them into the status symbolic representation of visual realism too soon. Above all children should not be made to feel that drawing is only a 'temporary' holding form of symbolic representation leading to mastery of the 'higher' level' ability to form letters and numbers. The importance of drawing in its own right should be acknowledged and conveyed to children" (Anning/Ring, 2004)

[21] Lukas attended two nursery schools and four primary and secondary schools in different countries.

I collected the drawings produced by Lukas for personal reasons: firstly, as souvenirs documenting his childhood in a similar way to family photographs, secondly, because I was from the outset struck by the artistic qualities and expressiveness of his work.[22] Before Lukas was able to write himself, I sometimes made notes of his comments about a picture at the bottom or on the back of the paper, but not in a systematic way. I was not interested in his drawing in terms of *development*, whether artistic or cognitive, nor in any form of progression towards literacy. Of course, in hindsight, the body of his artwork can be considered in a series of stages or phases, and sorted into categories, just like an adult artist's work. Looking at a body of work spanning about ten years in total, one can discern emerging patterns and the 'grand narratives' that seem to have occupied his work and imagination over many years.

Lukas's artwork in the course of his childhood years essentially revolved around the representation of fictional characters and narratives, inspired by books and stories, film, television, toys and the 'grand themes' of superhero narratives, as outlined in earlier chapters. The drawings include images of a wide range of fictional characters such as: knights, pirates, cowboys, Indians (the latter two, however, as entirely separate narratives) *Gulliver*, *Zorro*, *Wallace & Grommit*, *Batman*, *Spiderman*, *Catwoman*, *The Biker Mice of Mars*, the *Power Rangers*, *Pokémon*, dinosaurs, and fantasy creatures such as dragons, monsters, aliens and robots. He was never much interested in the representation of real people and objects, although a few such drawings have remained. Most of these show his real friends, as agents integrated into fantastic visual adventures (Fig.s 21, 25).

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[22] I collected Lukas' drawings for private reasons, not for research. I collected them and kept them in a somewhat chronological order, but this is by no means an accurate record of events. I have a rough idea of when the drawings were produced, and can put an approximate date on them, based on recollections of when and where these drawings were made. But when I put an age to a drawing, this is an approximation only. However, the exact age is actually of very little concern for my argument. Another problem is that the circumstances of how the drawings were made, and the conversations we had about them, were mostly not recorded, and I therefore have to rely on my memory, which might be selective. I discussed some of the pictures with Lukas, now 15, in order to help me to understand the context and meanings, as he remembers them now. The lack of research intent, however, can also be seen as an advantage because there is little reason to think that the research situation in any way altered the work Lukas was producing: there was no way he could try and please me as a researcher, simply because there was no research interest. I merely collected the work which he produced as he grew older, driven by his changing interests and abilities.

I suppose that his interest in these narratives led to some extent to his choice of materials and technique. Comic-book stories about superheroes are usually line drawings, later inked with colour. While the line drawings provide the main focus and narrative, the colours add mood and textures; however, they are not essential. The technique of line drawing provides an appropriate mode for representing superhero stories, and from the very beginning Lukas was mainly interested in that. It was fascinating to see how he and his best friend and play companion around the age of three would work side by side. While she was indulging in the sensual pleasures of colour, especially watercolour, creating wonderfully cheerful abstract paintings with fingers or paintbrushes, he was not interested in colour at all. He preferred to work with pencils, pens or markers, usually using only one or two colours, creating sparse line drawings – a striking contrast to the exuberance of his friend's paintings. While I tried to prompt him to use colour at the time, most of the time he refused. He was never much interested in painting with colours. However, he knew how to use colour as a sign, as evident in his use of blue and red for *Spiderman,* the character's trademark colours, and black for *Catwoman*.

In the literature available on children's drawings, I found few answers to what motivates children, in very similar circumstances but outside any school context, to express such different interests and approaches to art. Why does one child want to paint with colour, while another prefers to draw with pen or pencil? Why do they have such different interests, and how do the individual interests of a child affect both his or her work and learning? Kress writes, "It seems to be the case that, as biological beings, we have different dispositions towards the world, differential preferences in relation to our senses. One child might prefer physical three-dimensional representation, another the distanced representation of drawing or writing. Another child might prefer to express herself or himself though the body, in dance or gesture […]" (Kress, 1997: 109f) In Kress' view, we ultimately know "very little" about the "affective disposition towards modes of representation and communication" (Kress, 1997: 109f). It is evident that from a very

young age Lukas was emotionally invested in the heroic stories and subject matters provided by popular superheroes. In the case of his drawing preferences, the affordances of line drawings were sufficient for what he was interested in exploring and expressing.

I tried to support his interest and enthusiasm by making sure he had art materials, pens and paper available, but otherwise there was little influence from my part as to what he should do, or how he should do it. What struck me about his artwork was its aesthetic qualities and expressiveness. I was also taken by the confidence and decisiveness with which he went about his business. He never asked any questions about art, or drawing techniques, but he often asked for specific materials. Although only the drawings have survived in the form of a collection, Lukas engaged in many different forms of meaning-making – constructions of Lego and of found materials such as cardboard, paper, wire, string, tin, stones, shells, sticks, wood, stickers, glitter & glue. As Kress describes, the process of construction was never copying, never arbitrary and rarely accidental, "always producing forms which reveal and bear the logic and interest of their sign-makers' cognitive actions, and affective interests" (Kress 1997:33). Kress introduces the concept of *design* to draw attention to the child's sense of a whole, "as a kind of Gestalt" (Kress 1997:128). I remember the construction of weapons, shields, masks, helmets, usually used as props for his fantasy play. Lukas's meaning-making was clearly driven by intention. Similarly to Kress, I was "astonished by the degree of planning, the precision of the staging, by the very fact of *design*" (Kress 1997:34).

d. The 'Power' of the Symbol

I do not recall any 'scribbling' phase as described by practitioners; instead I recall being rather surprised that his very first drawings around the age of three were deliberate representations, tadpole figures of 'Mummy' and 'Daddy' respectively. Not too long after that he produced what I presume to be a self-portrait, as *Superboy* – the distinctive feature, which distinguishes a portrait of a normal boy from *Superboy,* being the emblem on his chest. (Fig. 1) Children from a very young age on, long before alphabetic writing, are able to read signs, such corporate logos, and are equally able to understand the meaning of the logo of a particular superhero brand[23]. Similarly, Seiter's example of a child's drawing shows a symbol on the superhero's chest (Fig. 2, Seiter, 1999). I assume that Lukas picked up the notion of '*super*' from other children he was playing with, or maybe caught a glimpse of a superhero representation in a friend's house[24].

Fig.1 „Superboy" - one of Lukas' earliest drawings at the age of three

Fig. 2 from Seiter, 1999

The *super symbol* within superhero narratives often serves several functions – it points to the mythic origin of the hero and the source of his powers, and it is sometimes also imbued with a special kind of power itself[25]. The *super symbols* also serve as the

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[23] According to Dr. Robert Reiher, co-author of "Kidnapped: How Irresponsible Marketers are Stealing the Minds of Your Children," the average US child views as many as 40,000 commercials a year, while the average three-year-old recognizes 100 different brand logos. Source:
http://www.delawareonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20051127/PARENT/511270319/-1/NEWS01
[24] Around the same time he also declared that he preferred '*super music'*, by which he meant pop music, over other, for example classical, music.

[25] The spider points to the radioactive spider that bit *Spiderman*, and subsequently gave him his special powers. The *Superman* symbol originates from his home planet, as it was found on the cloth that arrived together with the orphaned infant on earth. The *Bat-Signal* is projected with laser light against the night sky, alerting both criminals and allies to *Batman's* presence, *Batman* as millionaire and entrepreneur seeming to be well aware of the power of his brand 'to strike fear and terror into the hearts of his adversaries'. The *Care Bears'* symbols are themselves the source of their particular magic power.

trademark logo of the particular superhero brand, used by the corporations to promote their media products and by fans, worn on T-shirts, for example, as a sign of their fandom.

Lukas's drawings make it clear that he was able to deliberately cast himself as a fictional character in a drawing, and had the cognitive ability to understand and use abstract systems of high complexity. He knew how to read, select and use a sign, in order to give a specific meaning to the image. Using the symbol on the chest is an apt and effective way of expressing the meaning he wanted to convey and communicating it to others, employing a motivated sign as metaphor (Kress, 1997:93). In summary, from a very early age onward, he was able to 'consciously choose symbols and modes of representation' that helped him to 'organize and articulate his inner thoughts' (Dyson; 1997:5).

Drawing as another form of play was becoming one of his favourite occupations, when not with other children; superheroes and their antagonists provided the themes and *play art* was the result (Wilson, 1974). Trademarks and symbols started to play an important role. From the age of three, he showed a marked enthusiasm for wearing clothes with representations of superheroes (and other powerful figures such as Disney's *Lion King*) or their logos on his chest, for example a *Power Ranger* T-shirt, or *Superman* and *Batman* pyjamas. The trademarked images on his clothes gave him a sense of power and confidence, making it possible to move in and out of playing the part of a superhero at any time during the day, and providing a sense of protection at night.

At around the age of four, Lukas started to design geometric patterns, usually of circular shapes symmetrically arranged around a centre – drawings based on a variety of materials and collages of found materials and objects (Fig.s 3-8). They are experiments in how to integrate a variety of geometrical shapes and graphic forms, such as lines, triangles, circles, crosses and arrows, into a symmetrical or circular design. In a Jungian

sense, these drawings were mandalas, which are symbols of wholeness, completion and integration. Lukas claimed that they held 'magic' or 'power'. He created one (now lost) that he demanded I should put over our marital bed, because it would 'protect' us – which of course I did. At some point he started to make connections between these power symbols and superheroes, and upon closer inspection one can find many forms of *super symbols* integrated in his superhero drawings, either on superheroes' chests or as part of the scene (Fig.s 15, 16, 18, 19, 26, 27, 30-32).

The drawing in Fig. 3 is one of a series of attempts to rework the logo of *The Biker Mice from Mars*. This drawing is a simplified version of earlier versions of the Biker Mice logo, but it introduces a new element, a Pog, at the centre of the drawing. Pogs were small collectible disks, originally milk caps, used to play a game that was particularly popular among children in the early-to-mid-1990s, when hundreds of different Pogs were manufactured. In a similar way to collectible cards, Pogs were collected, traded and used to gamble in order to establish 'playground rank' in terms of who held more Pogs. Lukas here used the highly desirable Pog to give his picture a particular meaning, the power of the logo being enhanced by the perceived value of the Pog. The drawing also includes several wavy scribbles, representing alphabetic writing, and two letters, and is a typical example of children's emergent writing, which may feature combinations of the following elements: drawing, wavy scribbles, letter-like scribbles, random letters and patterned letters (Sulzby, 1988). While it cannot be determined for certain which particular meaning Lukas intended to give to this writing, it is possibly an attempt to represent the words included in the original *Biker Mice* logo, as displayed in the opening credits of the television series, from memory. The series of drawings of the *Biker Mice* Logo shows his continued fascination and the patience employed in reconstructing and coming to terms with this particularly complex logo, while this specific one shows his attempt to expand the meaning of the original by multiplying the 'cool' factor of the logo with the 'cool' factor of the Pog.

Lukas's *super-symbol* drawings and collages were not representations of superheroes or their actions, but, through cutting out and including glued-on found parts, they often became three-dimensional objects that offered opportunities of entering *into action*, namely to be used as magic shields, or as tokens of power in fantasy play. Lukas's drawing engaged in two kinds of imaginative worlds: one where he entered the fantasy world on the two-dimensional page, and another where the object imagined on paper is brought back into the three-dimensional world (Kress, 1997). In magical thinking, the symbol is not only used for representation, but it is believed that reality itself can be directly manipulated by manipulating the symbol. Lukas created magical symbols, a sign of magical thinking typical of his age, and used these objects for his imaginative play. He included objects in his collages that enhanced the meaning of his signs; at the same time he was also exploring and negotiating the meaning of trademarks and brands. His drawings are not just a copy or translation of the original text, but he recontextualised its meaning. Over time his meaning-making provided him with a deeper understanding of the nature of fantasy and reality, and their interplay.

Power Symbols

Fig 3. Biker Mice Logo with Pog
and emergent writing
Biker Mice of Mars Logo

Fig.4 Collage with integrated Pog

Fig. 5 Watercolor paintings
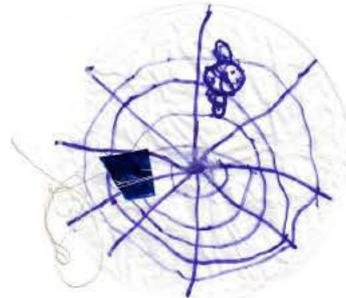
Fig. 6 Spiderman/Spiderweb
Collage with transparent paper and string
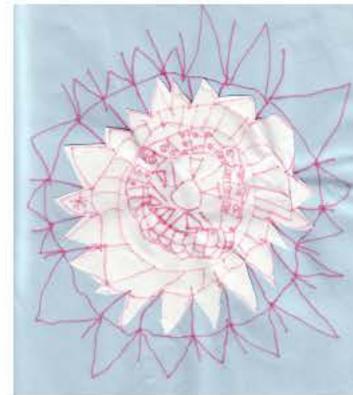
Fig. 7 Collage with blue and white paper
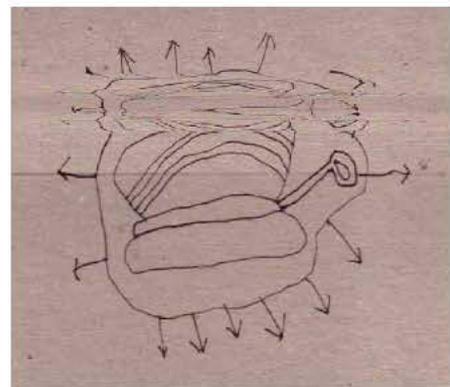
Fig. 8 Rollerball drawing on cardboard

e. Protagonists and Antagonists

From a young age, Lukas showed a strong fascination with animals of all kinds, and many of his early drawings can be understood as attempts at the realistic representation of animals, as he saw them in the zoo, in books, or on video. However, in retrospect, it seems that he was not so much interested in animals as such, but in the notions of power and fear. The animals he preferred to draw, with very few exceptions, were animals of prey: tigers, sharks, piranhas, crocodiles, scorpions, bats and spiders, often featuring sharp and dangerous teeth (Fig. 10). At around the age of five he then moved on to drawing dinosaurs and dragons (Fig. 11); between the age of six and seven he created various series of fantastic monsters and aliens. Among the images preserved, there are also some 'monster masks', which again could be used as three-dimensional objects, to be worn in fantasy play (Fig.s 9, 12, 13). By the age of eight, the monsters had transformed into fantastic machines and robots (Fig. 14). While the heroes in his drawings were media based, the villains seemed to be very much creatures of his own imagination. In the course of four years, he had moved from animals of prey to mythic creatures of the past, and after that to mythic creatures of the future; he had created a wide range of fantastic and evil-looking characters, all of them worthy opponents for a true superhero.

Fig. 9 Monster and monster mask

Monsters
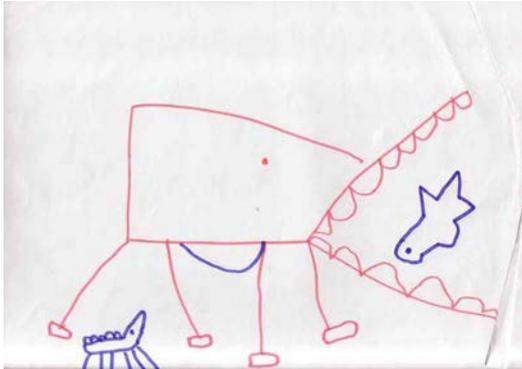
Fig. 10 crocodile - 4 years

Fig. 11 dinosaur/dragon - 5 years
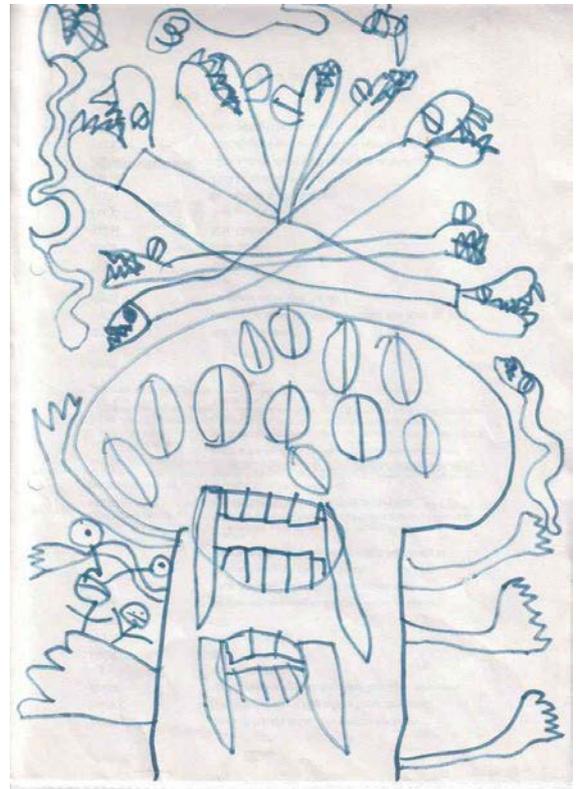
Fig.12 monster - 6 years

Fig. 13 aliens - 7 years
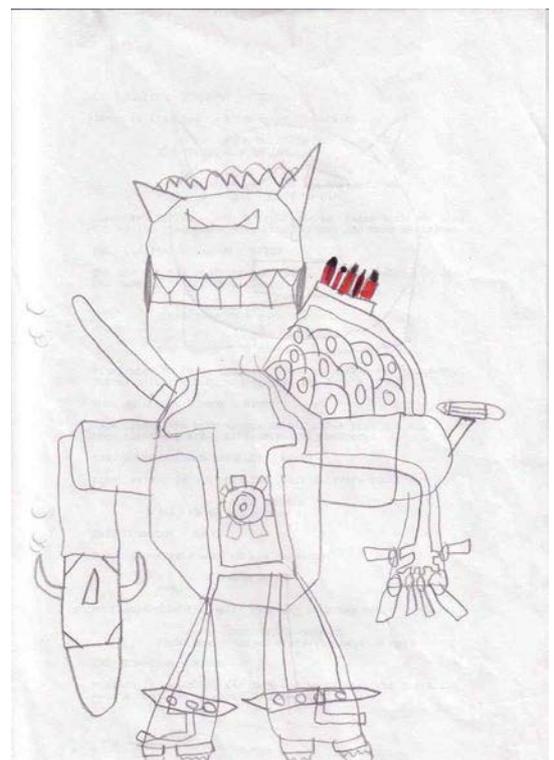
Fig. 14 robot - 8 years

Monsters, aliens and cyborgs are typical antagonists in superhero narratives, threatening the natural, moral or social order and goading the hero into action. In ancient and Eastern mythologies, monsters are seen as the enemies of the gods. Monsters are associated with untamed nature, the unknown, or the other. In the Jungian sense they represent the Shadow, which is an unconscious, often repressed aspect of the self, the dark side of the psyche, which may be visible to others but not to oneself.

> "The archetype known as the Shadow represents the energy of the dark side, the unexpressed, unrealized, or rejected aspects of something. […] Shadows can be all the things we don't like about ourselves, all the dark secrets we can't admit, even to ourselves. […] The negative face of the Shadow in stories is projected onto characters called villains, antagonists or enemies." (Vogler, 1998:71)

The Shadow may represent our most hidden desires, greatest fears and phobias, but also untapped resources and qualities not yet realized. In superhero narratives the monster is usually the antagonist, but need not always be the enemy; sometimes it may even be used as an ally. The Japanese, in particular, have developed increasingly sympathetic and even lovable monsters, from Godzilla to the fictional species of the *Pokémon* universe, which have to be tamed. In this sense the child's monster drawings may reflect powerful feelings, such as anger, wilfulness and destructive feelings that the young child has yet to learn to master and control. In Lukas's early drawings, the preoccupation with animals of prey undoubtedly reflects some primal fears but also fascination with the strength and power these animals exert. They may be scary, but they may also be there to protect. Similarly to the shaman and his power animal, the superhero may harness the qualities of an animal, such as the bat, the spider or the cat: all animals that feature in Lukas's drawings accompanying *Batman, Spiderman*, and *Catwoman* respectively (Fig.s 15, 26, 27, 31, 32),

As Lukas grew older and his knowledge of science gradually increased, science itself became the place of enchantment. In the science fiction and superhero narratives the mystery of fairy tale and myth is replaced by the mystery of science, mythical monsters are replaced by aliens taking on the task of representing the unknown, the other. Robots

and cyborgs are materializations of rational thought, but also of fears of the power of technology unleashed.

Representations of superhero in the form of portraits were followed by images of superheroes in action, of increasing complexity (Fig.s 17-19). The *Spiderman* drawing (Fig. 18) shows a sophisticated use of foreground and background. In the centre of the picture, outlined in his trademark colours of blue and red, *Spiderman* is swinging on his rope above an urban skyline. People are standing on the rooftops, possibly trying to hunt him down, or perhaps admiring him. One may assume that the two blue stick figures are his antagonists (one holds a gun in his hand), while the red figures are supporters, or vice versa. Three birds flying next to Spiderman in the sky indicate the great height from which he is dangling, thereby stressing the danger he is in. In the top left-hand corner is a small drawing of a figure dangling from a very long rope above a curly line possibly mirroring the same skyline, or alternatively intending to represent 'alphabetic writing'. This figure in the background poses some questions: is it another person, or is it *Spiderman* on his approach to the scene? If so, why has it been included? One explanation is that the small image provides the opportunity to emphasize the full length of the rope, while at the same time showing Spiderman in profile, during the action of swinging, while the larger one presents him in a frontal view, directly facing the audience. Thus every single element included in the drawing is used to represent *Spiderman* in the course of the dangerous action of swinging from rooftop to rooftop; nothing is superfluous. It also shows him as the triumphant hero who has successfully managed to escape. Both Kress (1997) and Dyson (1997) note that children's drawings usually are not usually used to represent 'action', as the mode of writing is more suitable for presenting movements in time; however, here the child managed to design an image that shows 'action' and also addresses the audience directly, both in an effective way. Obviously, from the point of view of technical execution, the image is a child's drawing; however in terms of its effective use of design elements and spatial arrangement, the image could just as well be a movie poster.

Superheroes

Fig. 15 Batman
Notice the symbol on Batman's chest

Fig. 16 PowerRangers or unknown superheroes
with symbols on their chest

Fig. 17 Bikermice on their bikes, swinging nets as
lassos

Fig. 18 Spiderman over rooftops
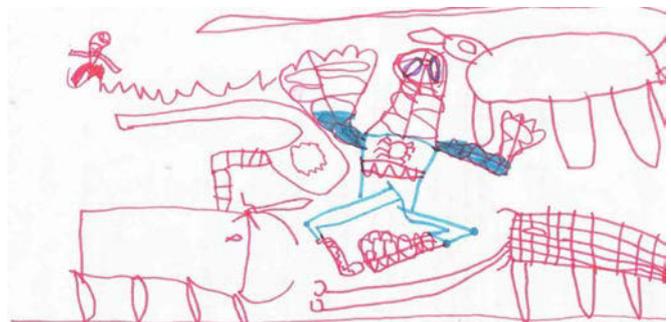
Fig. 19 Spiderman about to be caught by wild animals

Several other drawings also explore the tensions of extreme heights: an early drawing shows a tiny stick figure perched at the edge of a diving board of exaggerated height, the large empty space at the centre of the image effectively emphasizing the tension between the small brave figure at the top and the surface of the water at the bottom of the page – visual tensions that in our culture are usually explored *horizontally* in the wide screen of Cinemascope (Fig. 20). Another drawing shows small stick figures (Lukas and his friends), surrounded by predator fish, about to be swallowed by high tsunami-like waves; a third one shows very tall dinosaurs and the steep slopes of a volcano, and small figures caught between being swallowed by either the dinosaurs or the volcano (Fig.21).

Some of the drawings represent a complex mise-en-scène, such as one drawing featuring an astronaut captured in a cage, while a group of many-eyed aliens is celebrating a lively birthday party, with a feast of food and cakes in the foreground, and 'alien' balloons dangling from the ceiling (Fig.37). When I asked Lukas, fifteen, about the meaning of the small alien figure on the left-hand side of the picture, sitting at a separate table, he said, "That is me at the children's table". The child, along with the captured astronaut, is to some extent excluded from the party, his separation emphasized by the cage of the astronaut dividing the image. It expresses the frustration of being small and powerless, and possibly feeling excluded and alien as an only child in the world of adults, but also shows him as an alert observer of this strange world.

Quite a large number of drawings feature 'captures': protagonists or antagonists being caught between sharp predator teeth, entangled by spider webs or lassoes, tied to the floor, or caught in cages (Fig.s 22, 23, 26-28, 30, 32, 37). These images reflect a preoccupation with the abstract themes of openness and enclosure, as described by Matthews (2003). The moments of capture also echo the dramatic play script of superhero play as a chasing game that essentially is structured around chase, capture and release.

The drawings also represent a record of the play as the imagined drama unfolded on paper; the act of drawing ropes, or lassos encircling the captured victim is analogous to the act of capturing itself – literally using the power of the pen to 'capture' an image.

One picture shows *Spiderman* about to be caught between several fantastic and ferocious creatures, the line signifying the ground and a casual double line across the top expressively emphasizing the closed-in nature of the space, with no room for escape. While the use of lines to denote the ground and the sky is often seen in children's drawings, Lukas uses these sparingly, but in this instance to good effect (Fig. 19). Another drawing, though, shows *Spiderman* surrounded by villains and monsters, each and every one 'captured' by *Spiderman's* thread, encircled by long strokes of the pen (Fig. 27). In films and comic books, *Spiderman* uses biological or mechanical ropes fired by the web-shooters as 'super weapons'. One can imagine the prolonged play/drawing activity as more and more foes appear on the page and are subsequently 'eliminated' with the stroke of the pen. The uses of *Spiderman's* spider silk were also explored in Lukas's play with action figures, where rolls of string and thread were used as props to create webs and ropes to swing from, or to catch and tie foes. Thread was also included in a collage representing *Spiderman*'s web (Fig. 6). The child moved effortlessly between different modes of representation, between the dramatic play and two- and three-dimensional meaning-making, all employed to tell dramatic superhero stories across several media.

The images of 'captures' are representations of high drama, of climactic events. In the dramatic arc of the screenplay, they represent high points, the moment that many screenwriters refer to as the moment of "All is Lost", which occurs when the protagonist is in greatest peril, usually around the middle or just before the end of the second act and second turning point that then leads to act three. Campbell and Vogler refer to this moment as the 'Ordeal' (Vogler, 1998: 159ff). It is the moment of central crisis and "a watershed in the hero's journey" (Vogler, 1998: 163). The Ordeal is the moment when

the protagonist has to face his greatest fears, failure or possible death, to pass the test of being a hero and then be symbolically reborn. Mythical moments like this have been depicted in art since antiquity, for example *Laokoon and his Sons* struggling with serpents, the Greek statue, often replicated, that has been at the centre of scholarly debate about aesthetics for centuries.

Tensions, Captures and Confrontations

Fig. 20 Diving board

Fig. 23 "Join the dots" - Volcano and dinosaurs -
teradactyl, triceratops, tranosauros rex, stegasauros

Fig. 21 Waves, piranhas, octopus
Lukas and two friends
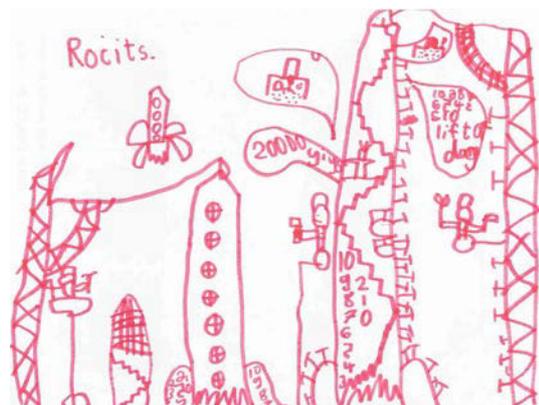
Fig. 24 Rockets countdown

Fig. 22 Caught between two
dinosaurs

Fig. 25 "Dragon is blowing Luv and he is getting burned"
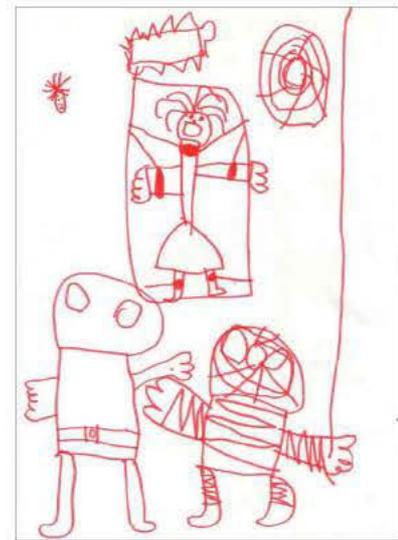
Fig. 26 Superboy und Spiderman are saving a captured girl + spider and spider web
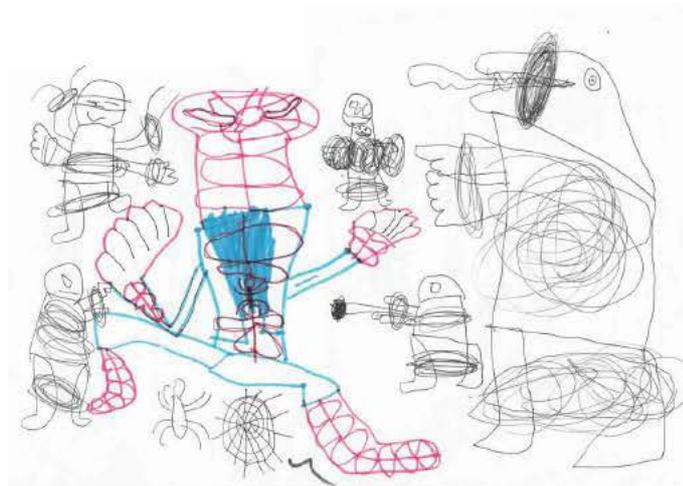

Fig. 27 Spiderman catching and tying foes
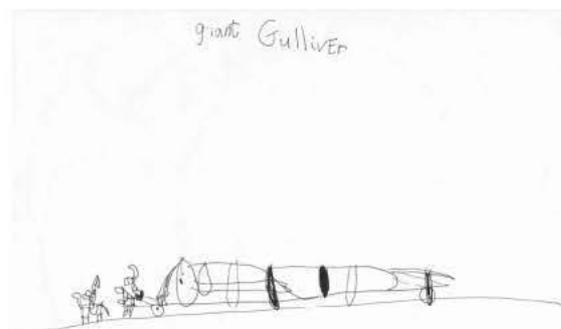
Fig. 28 Giant Gulliver tied to the ground

Females
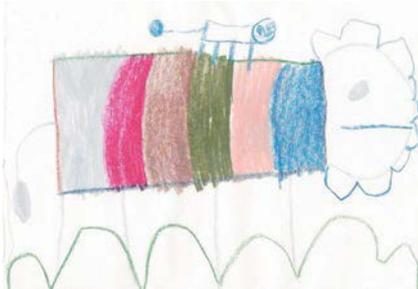
Fig. 29 Tigress with cub

Fig. 31 "Double Cat Woman" – "she listens
to what the other one says"
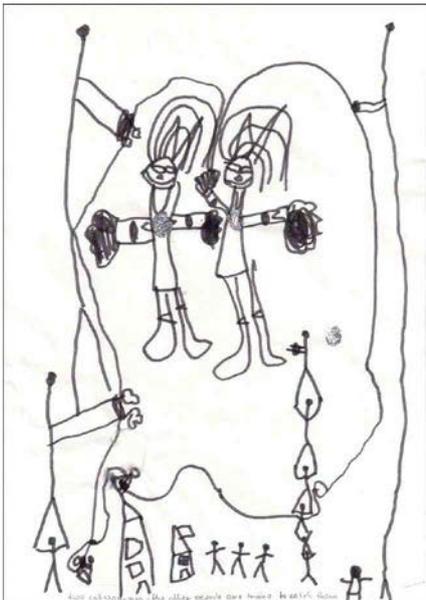
Fig. 30 People are trying to capture two
Catwomen

Fig. 32 Girl abducted by aliens and bats
dangling from the tree branch

f. The Double Nature of Females

Few of Lukas's drawings feature females. At around the age of three or four, however, when he was interested in drawing animals, he drew several images of a tigress with her cub, fascinated by the ability of the tigress to ferociously defend her young (Fig. 29). In his later superhero images, females are stereotypically being captured or rescued by heroes (Fig.s 26, 32). He worked, albeit unknowingly, in the 'grand tradition' of images depicting the mythic Abduction of Persephone, Europa and Helena. By the time Lukas was in primary school, he started to develop the stereotypical views about girls commonly held by boys of that age. However, he had no objections to watching female superheroes on television. He watched the *Power Puff Girls* and later *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch* with the same passion that he watched *Buffy the Vampire* Slayer when he grew older.

He created several drawings of *Catwoman,* a character from the *Batman* series. Lukas's dictated notes about these reveal that *Catwoman* was 'the most powerful and most magic' of all, even 'mightier than Batman'. Curiously Lukas's drawings feature *Double Catwoman*, such as two *Catwomen* side by side (Fig. 30). I am not sure about the origins of this idea, whether he was inspired by a particular television episode of *Batman*[26], and Lukas does not remember either today. There are two other pieces that feature *Catwoman* mirrored on the two sides of one sheet of paper, identical but reversed, in the sense that the second *Catwoman* was traced on the back of the original drawing (Fig. 31). The word 'cat' to the left of *Catwoman*, however, is not traced, but repeated, twice, on the left side. Lukas must have been confused about the direction of the letters, as, in the first attempt to copy the word 'cat', the letters are reversed. He then obviously realized his mistake, and repeated the word 'cat'. The caption says, "double mask cat woman – she listens to what the other one says."

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[26] I found no references to a Double Catwoman on Google.

The paper presents an interesting exploration of the notion of 'double', as an identical replication or 'clone' of *Catwoman* on the back of the same sheet of paper, and an unusual use of the two-dimensional versus three-dimensional affordances of paper. How can one two-dimensional *Catwoman* 'listen to the other one' on a different two-dimensional plane of the three-dimensional piece of paper – are the two *Catwomen* tied together through the back of the paper, like Siamese twins? Through the exploration of *Double Catwoman*, Lukas not only creatively transcended the 'normal' logic of two-dimensional representations on paper, he also learned a valuable lesson about copying and the directionality of alphabetic writing: most letters cannot be mirrored. In the words of Kress, quoted from a passage about 'drawing letters' in 'Making Paths into Writing': "The actions, the processes, the cognitive and affective work done here are deeply transformative, and creative. It represents each individual's own path into the convention-laden system of lettered representation, shaped by the individual's work with the already culturally formed stuff around them" (Kress, 1997: 72). Lukas was learning words and drawing letters, but was also trying to make sense of complex cultural concepts of the feminine – helpless victims, protective mothers and *femmes fatales,* the 'most powerful of all'.

g. Art

Lukas not only engaged with branded superheroes, he also understood that he could create his own. On one of the rare occasions when I managed to convince him to use watercolours, he produced a series of hybrid creatures, crosses between human and animal, something he had not done before, and never did again (Fig.s 33-35). Even though I was trying to prompt him to experiment with a different medium other than his usual pens, I do not recall ever giving him suggestions as to the subject of his paintings. I was surprised by the aesthetic quality of the paintings, the confident use of space and colour and the imaginative choice of subjects. He worked with clear and focussed attention. Unlike most of his work, this was not *play art*, which he created for his own pleasures, driven by his personal preoccupations. This was *art,* and he created it for an audience, *his mother*. These were not characters that featured in ongoing narratives; these were unique one-offs, to be displayed and admired. Of course, this was not the result of conscious reasoning, but intuitively he had well understood how to use the mode of painting in order to serve a specific purpose, a communicative and social function: these paintings were created to please an art lover and collector: *me.*

Fig. 33 Wasp Man

Fig. 34 Crocodile Man

Fig. 35 Crab Man

h. Action Drawing and Many Ways of Learning

Meanwhile, in Lukas's *play art*, more of his drawings turned into pure *action drawing,* drawing activities that, according to Anning/Ring, may include other modes of representation such as physical gestures, speech and sound (Anning/Ring, 2004). The following drawings are all examples *of action drawings* of high-energy battles, acted out with pen on paper, accompanied by speech and sound effects. A collage that includes small cut-out images of *Power Rangers* stuck on with Bluetack, and lightly raised from the surface, giving the whole a slightly three-dimensional feel, maps out a complex spatial arrangement of protagonists and antagonists engaging in combat, and connected by lines and dotted lines that turn the drawing into an abstract composition. Analogously to the complex choreography of martial-arts action scenes in movies and the preferred fighting mode of the *Power Rangers*, Lukas translates the movements into lines revealing the peculiar aesthetics of war (Fig. 40). Another drawing, showing a starship suspended in space, under siege and surrounded by smaller spacecrafts, traces the trajectories of various projectiles and small rockets, in a web of lines and spirals (Fig. 39). A similar drawing shows various unidentified objects, strange machines, and something that looks like a robot, engaged in combat and counter-combat, tracing the trajectories of bullets with lines to form an intricate pattern (Fig. 41). Susan Sonntag noted that one of the unique strengths of science fiction film is "the immediate representation of the extraordinary: physical deformity and mutation, missile and rocket combat, toppling skyscrapers", and the satisfaction provided through the imagination of disaster (Sonntag, 1965). "Science fiction films are not about science. They are about disaster, which is one of the oldest subjects of art. […] Thus the science fiction film […] is concerned with the aesthetics of destruction, with the peculiar beauties to be found in wreaking havoc, making a mess." The imagination of destruction also lies at the core of these *action drawings*, allowing the creator to "participate in the fantasy of living through one's own death".

In addition to that, some of these *action drawings* pose another challenge, by asking the reader to solve a riddle (Fig.s 39, 41): "Can you find all the stars, write the answer here ………." and "Can you find all these signs – how many x are there." The confusing array of lines is used to hide clues; the visual puzzle is either an emulation or a parody of educational texts, demanding the solution to similar problems. Once the *action drawing*, and thus the enactment of destruction, is completed, the image is turned into something else, placing a demand on the reader to take up the challenge and participate.

A picture entitled "target, systems, down" shows several robotic machines on mechanical legs in confrontation, and at the same time offers a view of a spaceship through a gunsight. The image is a combination of both the cross lines in an optical focussing system and the geographic system of compass directions (N – S – E – W), both visual systems of orientation. This picture illustrates how the child's meaning-making draws from elements found in the media such as a video game, but also processes what is being learned at school (Fig. 40). Other images also show how information obtained in school is put to creative use and processed in order to serve the purposes that are important and relevant to *him*. The image of the alien birthday party features a series of numbers from 1 to 8, because in the child's mind this an important use of numbers: to count the sequence of years, and more importantly birthdays (Fig. 37). Both their age and the ways birthdays are celebrated form an important part of children's – or in any case Lukas's – identity. In "Rockets", the numbers from 10 to 1 serve to illustrate the countdown before the launch of the rocket (Fig. 24). The picture of a volcano displays a series of dots and the numbers from 1 to 10 along the slope of the mountain; the caption says "join the dots", reflecting the 'educational' purpose of worksheets designed for children's activity books, but the numbers possibly also reflect the beginnings of a notion of numbers as a means of measuring, in this instance to measure the height of the mountain (Fig. 23). The image entitled "Sheriff" incorporates a series of geometrical shapes: squares, circles, triangles, and, as the most complex one, a star that becomes

the Sheriff's star (Fig. 36). These basic geometrical shapes, taught in the pre-school curriculum, almost look as if they have been designed with the help of stencils, and form the houses, windows and rooftops of a 'Western Town'. A rubber-stamp imprint of a tiger, carefully placed at the edge of the drawing, indicates that this town is under threat, but stick-cowboys with guns guarding every house are here to protect. Again the child has made good use of what he has learned at school, not to please a teacher, but in order to tell a story of danger and protection that matters to *him*.

And there is more. Treasure maps and labyrinths are indications of a hero's quest, but also reveal an increasing understanding of geographical maps. The labyrinth drawing is an unusual representation of a typical labyrinth often found in 'activity books' for literacy learning that is meant to be traced with a pencil (Fig.s 44, 45). However, some of the winding paths end as scary snakeheads, a visual expression of the 'dead end' represented. As with an optical illusion, the lines can be read in two ways, as positive or negative, either as paths of a labyrinth or as an array of slithering snakes. The drawing is strangely reminiscent of the hero's quest in Greek mythology: the labyrinth of Minotauros and the snake-head of Medusa, both stories that lead to the destruction of the monster. Lukas needed to tell fantastic stories of heroic adventure in his meaning-making to be able to process the abstract information that he had learnt in school in a meaningful way, by putting it in an exciting and emotionally relevant context.

Alien Birthday Party and Western Town
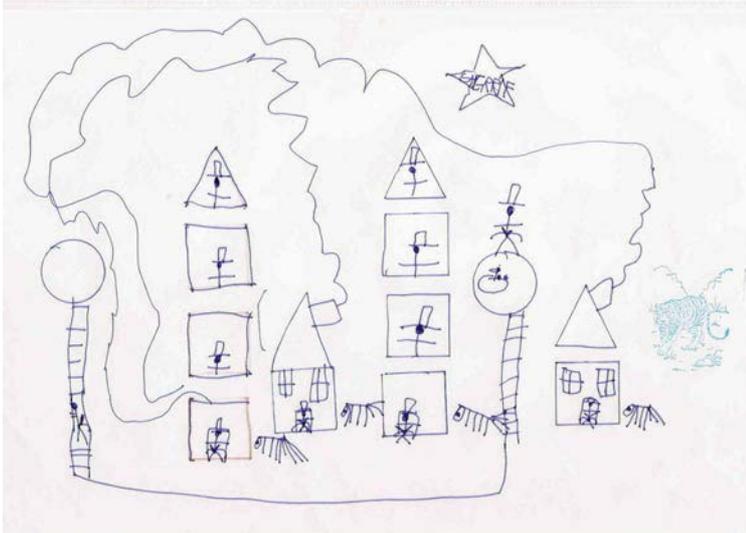
Fig. 36 Western town with watchtowers and cowboys guarding the houses

Fig. 37 Alien birthday party

Action Drawing and Picture Puzzle
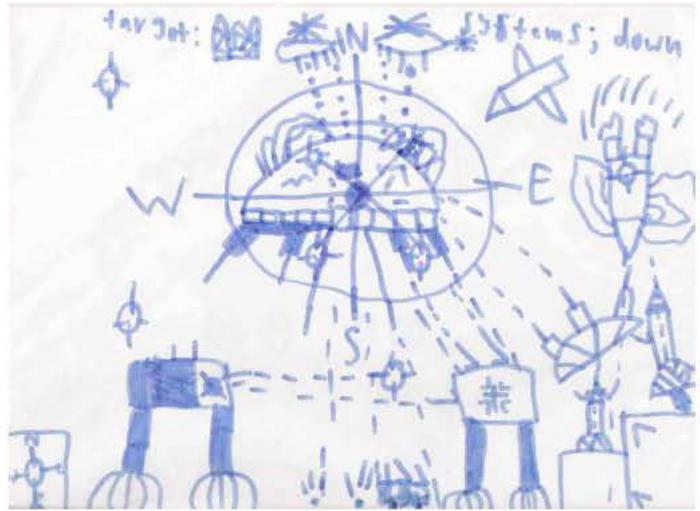
Fig. 38 "target: systems; down"
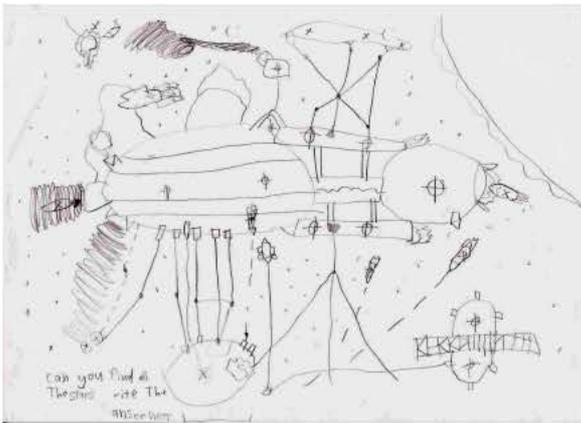
Fig. 39 Starship Battle - "can you find all the stars –
write the answer here"
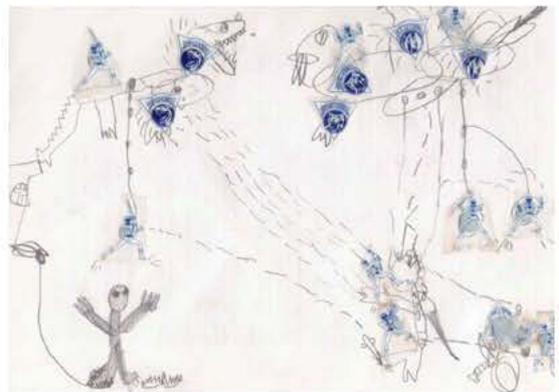
Fig. 40 Power Ranger Combat - Collage
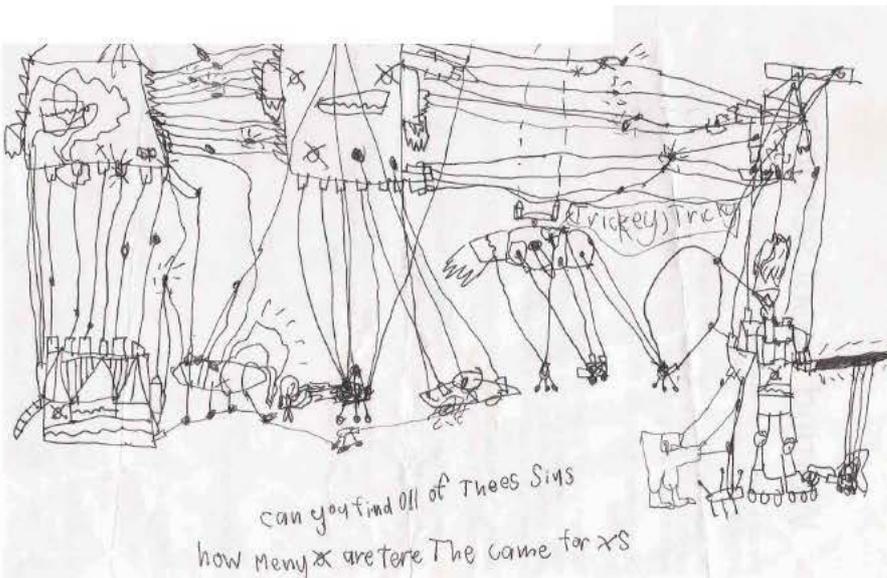
Fig. 41 War of the Machines "Trickey tricky - can you find all of the signs – how
many are there …"

i. Science Fiction

Lukas enjoyed science classes in primary school, especially in grade two, where he had an imaginative teacher who introduced the children to methods of observation and analysis and to drawing charts, diagrams and maps. One memorable project involved cutting a sports trainer in half and investigating and drawing the cross-section of all the layers of materials the shoe was made of. The children also carried out nature studies: Lukas drew images of snails in their habitat, an early attempt at drawing naturalistic representation. I do not know whether the teacher regarded these drawings as exercises in science, or regarded the design aspects of the work as art, or both. In any case, Lukas started to extend his schoolwork by utilizing his new skills in his fantasy meaning-making at home. He was also expanding his vocabulary and improving his spelling, as evident from two drawings. One drawing featuring a huge telescope shows the captions "The Micrascop That Looks up in spas" "Magnafinglasis" and "Mira" (the microscope that looks up in space, magnifying glass, and mirror). In a later drawing he had learned the appropriate term, "Telescope", but added private notes such as "my bedroom window" and "This window is where the telescope will be put" providing the very personal context of fantasy and wish fulfilment.

Science and technology play an important part in the construction of 'male' identities, and technology is used to support typically 'male' activities (Götz et al, 2006:207). Boys like to use technology in the form of tools, weapons, machines and vehicles as accessories to male representations in their meaning-making. As Lukas grew older and his knowledge of science increased, science and technology became new places of enchantment. He used rational and scientific modes of representation such as diagrams and maps, but the themes of the images created at home remained firmly grounded in the world of fantasy and imagination as he started drawing diagrams and cross sections of fantastic machinery, robots, spacecrafts and rockets, with their parts carefully labeled. Lukas cast himself in the role of the brilliant scientist who designs techno-magical

gadgets including a helmet which 'makes invisible', multipurpose watches and others (Fig.s 46-7), and a range of fantastic machines including "the Gold maker" (Fig. 43), the "machine that makes you have the powers of a army", a "remote control arm does everything for you", a robotic machine called "protector from thieves and robbers" and the rather surreal "eye changer". Maps and diagrams explain the design of submarines (Fig. 42) and rockets, and reveal the location of a 'secret laboratory', and a cross section of a 'secret underground passage'.

Meanwhile, in their fantasy play, Lukas and his friends turned the garage into a 'secret laboratory'. The garage-laboratory became their favourite room to play in, even though the 'conversion' of the garage never was completed to its 'full potential' (with underground levels and trap doors). At the same time his imagination was fed by the television series *Dexter's Laboratory*. On the surface, these games have little in common with the superhero play of earlier years. However, the fascination with technology empowered by 'magic' is a common feature of superhero narratives, where the fantastic is often given a pseudo-scientific explanation. Both *Superman* and *Batman* keep their own secret laboratories, where new super-technology is developed, and which serve as a secret hiding place and retreat.

Science textbooks today communicate both through text and through the visualization of ideas, with the visual often being the more efficient mode to transport meaning (Kress, 2003). Lukas learned from science classes, and used diagrams and maps to communicate his fantastic ideas, still embedded within the superhero narrative, with friends. He transformed his ideas into representations aptly consisting of images and words to convey the central information – diagrams outlining the spatial relationship between objects and their parts, and vectors connecting labels with the respective element of the design. These drawings are not picture stories: they do not tell of events; they are *maps of play* to communicate and share play scripts (Barrs, 1988).

The mode of speech was used, then, primarily to invent, discuss and act out stories. These actions and movements have to be made in temporal chronology, following the logic of cause and effect. They are hinted at in the written instructions, in a list for construction materials, for example: "what you need: metal, glass, a chair, table legs, tubes, red glass", and in the directions: "if you pull or push this goes on" and "you put this on your body then you get strong". The diagrams serve as concept maps of ideas related to possible stories: one can only imagine what will happen when a button on a multi-purpose watch labelled "pet dragon" is pushed, but it will definitely be part of an exciting story (Fig. 46).

In his meaning-making, Lukas was learning to combine visual and verbal communication structures, and learning more about the grammar of visual design. He used the resources of language and image creatively, or, to use another quote by Kress: "It is clear, we hope, that children actively experiment with the representation resources of word and image, and with the ways in which they can be combined. Their drawings […] are part of a 'multi-modally' conceived text, a semiotic interplay in which each mode, the verbal and the visual, is given a defined and equal role to play" (Kress, 1996).

Maps & Diagrams
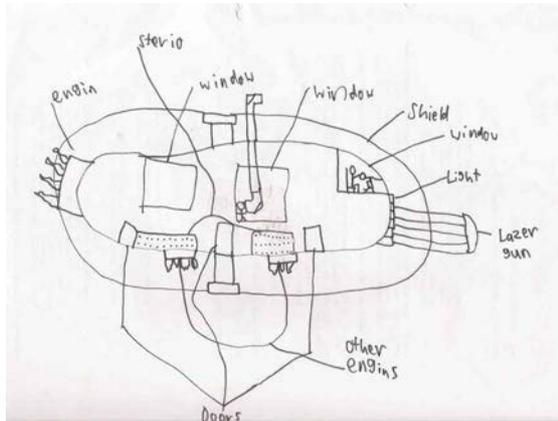
Fig. 42 Submarine
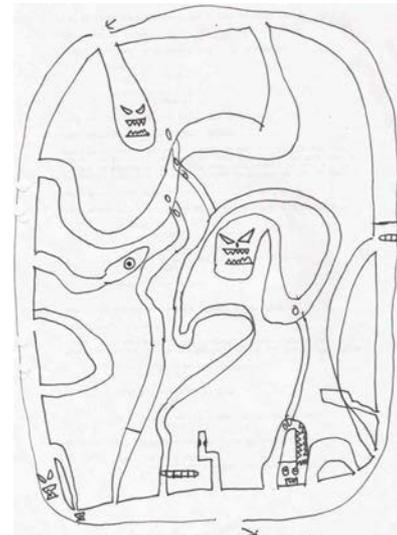
Fig. 45 Labyrinth

Fig. 43 Gold Maker
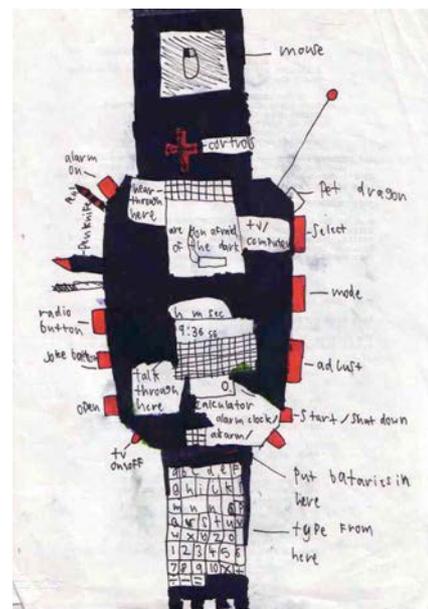
Fig. 46 Multipurpose watch with "pet dragon" button
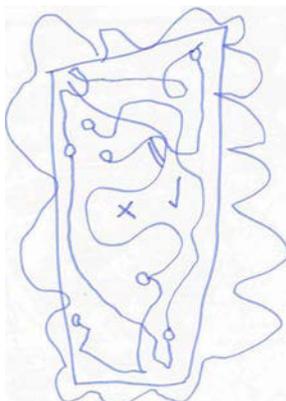
Fig. 44 Treasure Map
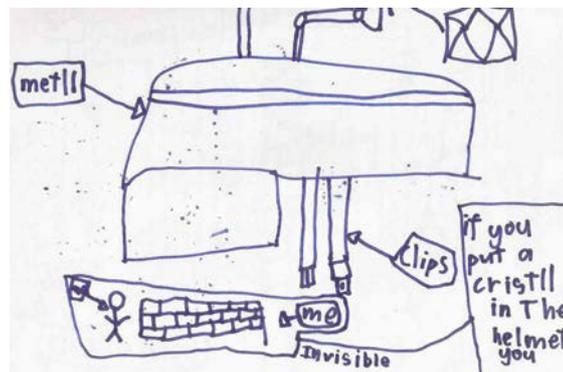
Fig. 47 Helmet, that makes invisible "if you put a crystal in the helmet"

j. Reading and Writing

At the same time, of course, Lukas was acquiring alphabetic literacy skills, struggling with reading and writing like many other boys in primary school. Lukas is a member of a generation of children, particularly boys, who are increasingly alienated from the literacy teaching provided at school. During his primary years, Lukas spurned most literature, particularly the texts provided at school such as the *Oxford Learning Tree Books*, and he had his own way of 'reading' these texts, and of subverting their meaning. I remember his homework in second grade, where his subversive way of dealing with the task was to write parodies of the *Oxford Learning Tree* stories he read. He developed a sense of irony and parody in writing that he used to mock 'stuff learned at school' – the superhero narratives, however, remained a serious matter to him.

At the age of seven or eight, Lukas had made up his mind and categorically declared that all books were boring, and television was not. Having been an avid reader as a child myself, I was disappointed about the fact that Lukas did not want to read any books. I tried to convince him otherwise, by reading books to *him*, to no avail, as non of them came up to his critical standards. Finally, a superhero came to the rescue: the advent of *Harry Potter* changed everything. Lukas read his first 'proper' books, and as early as the age of nine engaged in his own fan writing. He wrote several chapters of his own volume 'Harry Potter and the Creature in the Grass', with a friend and his parents as the only readers, in which he reflected some of his own home and school experiences, but never completed it. Possibly, had he discovered the *Harry Potter* fan fiction sites as described by Jenkins (2006) at this age, he would have carried on beyond that. Like thousands of other children worldwide, his emotional engagement with Harry Potter made him not only read, but also write of his own accord.

Lukas kept pursuing his own personal interests in drawing and writing. Since he was a

shorter and smaller child than most of his peers, school bullying became an issue. His interest in themes of violence, power and control, good and evil, also became a strategy of coping with the pressures present at school. At the point when children become interested in naturalistic representation, he became increasingly frustrated with his own drawing, as they 'did not look right', but he was not adequately supported neither at home or at school in learning to draw three-dimensional shapes based on the laws of perspective. Lukas's interest shifted instead to a seemingly much simpler form of graphic representation – the stick man.

Both Kress (1997) and Dyson (1997) stress that the mode of image lends itself to representing spatial relationships, while the verbal (or written) narrative lends itself to representing sequences in time, and cause and effect. However, neither author takes into account the fact that images can also represent sequences in time, as they have done in the form of picture stories ever since antiquity, and, more importantly, in the form of comic strips and the moving images of animation and film.

At around the age of ten, Lukas started drawing stick-figure cartoons. It is apparent that he was not exploring drawing as representation, but as a form of language in which to tell stories, with a clearly defined plot. The comic strips showed a talent for storytelling, for creating suspense and surprising twists. I bought a basic animation software application and taught him how to use it, so that he could transfer his comic strips into animations. Soon he had reached the limits of what could be done with the software, and subsequently taught himself how to use the professional computer animation software *Adobe Flash*. He extended the range of his stick animations, learning to import images, add music and sound effects, speech and writing, and, once he had access to broadband Internet, began to submit his animations to animation sites, where they were peer reviewed and ranked according to popularity. The violent content of the stick animations, which belonged to the *Stickdeath* genre, shocked most adults who saw his work. Nevertheless, they amused his friends, and brought him respect and fame among his

peers in the new school he attended, and most of his work was rated 10/10 for 'originality' on the *Stickdeath* websites. *Stickdeath* animations, strictly viewed, do not belong to the superhero genre. However, they do represent an area of culture in which, with the help of new digital media, animation software and the Internet, children, generally boys, created a children's culture and sites of communication, expression and learning all of their own, which most adults were neither aware nor would have approved of. They belong to the controversial field of fantasy violence, which seems to be even more contentious when the content is created by children themselves. Lukas used animations to process complex feelings about violence, to satisfy his desire for meaning-making, and to shape his identity among his peers.

The schools Lukas attended failed to recognize this potential for learning and the child's keen ambition, which could have been supported and developed. Around the time of Lukas's *Stickdeath* productions, his class teacher actually consulted with the school psychologist because she was dismayed about the violent content of some of his artwork. (The psychologist saw nothing wrong with it.) Several years later, at the age of fourteen, and two years after he had left animation-making behind, his secondary school offered courses in ICT. Here he was confronted with a kind of learning that rated the creation of Excel spreadsheets as the highest achievement – no wonder that the child that had explored fantastic narratives across many modes of representation – drawing, writing, acting and animation-making – was utterly bored and has since refused to take any more ICT classes.

Art educators already noticed a rapid decline in children's art production in pre-adolescence a century ago, and the challenge for art educators still lies in the question of how to prolong children's interest in art into and beyond puberty. The picture-story becomes an increasingly important art form for children at the beginning of pre-adolescence, at the age of about ten or eleven. Hoff understands the use of picture stories as the need to make meaning visually because of a lack of verbal skills, and

especially in the case of adolescents as "a kind of compensation for social and verbal awkwardness" (Hoff, 1982). According to his findings, the use of visual narratives could help to sustain children's interest in art well into adolescence. Supporting children's interest in comic-book narratives and the active production of comic strips and animation might help children to make that difficult transition into puberty. But most curricula have yet to include multi-modal meaning-making; most literacy teaching seems intent to make children forget that they ever had the ability to tell a story visually.

Practitioners state that both children's own fascination and interest in media and the adult support available, from either parents or schools, are fundamental to the progress children make in meaning-making through the graphic form and in writing (Kress, 1997; Anning/Ring 2004, Dyson, 1997). For some children, the learning environment is rich at home, with adults providing encouragement, support and resources, and limited at school; for others it is the other way around. Some adults try to steer children's development in certain directions "from exuberant action drawings towards 'visual realism'" or away from drawing towards the practice of writing (Anning/Ring, 2004:105). Different children experience very different balances of freedom and direction in their home and school environments (Anning/Ring, 2004). In the case of Lukas, I presume, the home environment was stimulating and provided freedom to explore, while his school experiences were mixed. However, Lukas lost interest in both drawing and animation-making around the age of thirteen. The necessary guidance and instruction that could have helped him to sustain and develop visual literacy, for example in the difficult transition towards realism with the use of perspective, or the extended use of animation, was not provided, neither at home nor at school. Lukas's case story shows that it is possible to develop both visual literacy and creative writing skills, but his story also demonstrates that this development in visual meaning-making may stop if not adequately supported.

In most ways Lukas grew up like millions of other children of his generation – playing

with *Star Wars* Lego, practicing *Power Ranger* kicks, watching *Batman* and *Buffy* on television and Disney films at the cinema, collecting action figures and *Pokémon* cards, playing electronic games – immersed in popular culture. He made sense of what he experienced and learned at home and at school and, inspired by popular media narratives, engaged his own multi-modal meaning-making. He engaged in various forms of cultural practices of superhero play. And he left behind some records, which inspired this *Bildungsroman.*

Appendix: Superheroes in the Classroom

This summary provides an overview over various concerns about children's engagement with superheroes and the range of opportunities offered through integrating superheroes in the classroom.

Concerns about superhero narratives and play in preschool and primary school	Opportunities offered by integrating superheroes in the classroom
Superhero play is noisy and disruptive as high levels of activity disturb other children's more peaceful activities	Superhero play is another from of role-play, involving higher levels of physical activity. Playing superheroes can help to release tensions and anxieties.
Concerns about physical violence and dangers as risk of accidents increase.	Superhero play can be channelled into physical activities and exercises valuable for children's physical and motor development
Concerns about obsessive play, imitation, adherence to rigid play scripts and limitations to creativity	Superhero stories can cater for most children's fantasies: experiencing thrill, being special, being connected, protecting and being protected and acting independently. Superhero narratives (and other media content) inspire children, making their way into fantasies, role-play and other forms of meaning making. Children spontaneously adopt and adapt media content to create something of their own. Rigid play scripts can be expanded with the help of parents, practitioners or sympathetic teachers. Fantasies and play scripts can extended and expanded to other meaning making activities, including drawing and writing
Concerns about stereotyping in particular with regard to gender, emphasizing male dominance and strength	Banning, disapproving and discouraging superhero play and superhero narratives excludes boys on the basis of their gender related interests, not conforming to expectations of (mostly female) educators. Media education in preschool and school can address issues of stereotyping.
Concerns about stereotyping about race	Superheroes stories may fulfil universal psychological functions similar to fairy tales, regardless of ethnicity. As common play scripts they serve organizing tools of shared play in heterogeneous groups of children and can actively be integrated to foster understanding in multilingual/multicultural classrooms.
Concerns about aggression, violence and war and the effects of media violence	Superhero play may provide the opportunity to re-enact, process and discuss media experiences as well as real events and experiences (of violence)

	Media education in preschool and primary school can help to process, reflect and evaluate positive and negative media experiences Through superhero narratives and play children reflect on "big questions" and issues such as power and domination, fear and protection, loss and death, often excluded from children's literature.
Concerns about how and whether toys (action figures, toy weapons) help legitimize a culture of violence	Children, especially boys tend to engage in pretend fighting and play involving conflict and confrontation, regardless of whether they have access to toy weapons or action toys. Construction of toy weapons can focus children's interest and promote skills in technology. In superhero narratives an emphasis lies on the master-disciple relationship, and the mastery and control over one's own emotions and actions.
Concerns about imitative behaviour, the lack of ability to distinguish between "fantasy" and reality	Fascination or engagement with certain media genres does not mean children are not able to pass critical judgement about characters, plots and about modality, or to keep emotional or ironic distance.
Concerns about power, some children establishing dominance over some and excluding others, using threatening and abusive language	Superhero play as rough and tumble play may serve important developmental functions, may help to develop and maintain friendships, and may help develop social skills. Superhero play with its easy to follow play scripts may help to integrate marginalized children. Superhero narratives help negotiate identities.
General concerns about the influence of popular media and values, in particular television and the globalisation of children's culture	Superhero narratives provide a common play script for children from diverse cultures within a multicultural/multilingual classroom, thus they can help integration.
Concerns about consumerism Over-commercialization of childhood	Media education in preschool and primary school is vital for critical analysis and understanding the key concepts of "Institution" "Audience" and "Language" "Production" including the circles of production, promotion and consumption

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