

Superheroes for Literacy - DRAFT

Sigrid Jones

My interest in superhero narratives reaches back many decades, to when I was reading Superman comic books as a child. Also since childhood, and later, when I was studying literature I found myself drawn to fairy tales and myth. And then, seeing my first Star Wars film was a turning point: I started looking for ways of finding an understanding for the connections between fairy tale and myth on one hand, and popular narratives on the other.

For the purposes of this research I understand superhero narratives in very broad terms, while drawing on the work of Carl G. Jung and Joseph Campbell. Campbell, building on concepts developed by Carl G. Jung, such as the notion of archetypes, studied the structures and recurring patterns in mythical narratives, which he called the ‘mono-myth’, however, it is commonly referred to as the ‘Hero’s Journey’. Campbell, in his “The Hero with a Thousand Faces” summarizes the dramatic arch of the hero’s journey in a nutshell: “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.” (Campbell 1949:30)

The Superhero Myth

The ‘superhero’s journey’ may be outlined as follows: in a story of action and adventure the protagonist uses forms of supernatural power or ‘super-technology’ in order to overcome one or several antagonists. Superhero stories are also filled with supporting characters, such as mentors, allies, and shape-shifters, which fulfil archetypal narrative functions, and support the plot. Essentially, the superhero story is built according to classical story structures, e.g. when it is told in time based media such as movies, the story arc is built following a three act structure, which in its development reaches back to ancient Greek drama. As with fairy tales, the superhero story usually is a battle between a clearly defined good and evil, and in Jungian terms about the striving for identity, and the realization of the self.

In contrast to fairy tales and myth superhero narratives are not situated in a mythical past, but in the present or future. Unlike with 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 The Lone Ranger (1933) Superman (1938) and Batman (1939), and have since inspired innumerable others. They feature ‘classic’ superheroes such as Superman, Batman and Spiderman (1962), but also more recent popular characters, such as Star War’s Luke Skywalker (1977), the Care Bears (1981), the Ninja Turtles (1984), Ash Ketchum from Pokémon (1995) and Harry Potter (1997). They also may be centred around females heroines such as the Power Puff Girls (1998) and Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997).

I would argue, that 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. However, as the prefix super- and the suffix -man (-or woman) cannot be copyrighted, an unlimited number of superheroes and heroines are possible. Legions of superheroes have not only been invented by media producers, but are being invented by children every day. As they have entered vernacular culture and practices, they have become property of the public domain just like Hercules, Robin Hood, Dracula, Cinderella and Snow White. Thus, superheroes as a whole have become generic.

Superhero narratives share many distinctive features with mythological stories and fairy tales. In both myth and superhero story the protagonist often is orphaned, and 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 only for himself but also for the world at large. Sometimes it is the survival of our world or humanity as a whole that is at stake. The obvious difference to fairy tales and classic epics, for example of Greek and Indian mythology, is that the protagonist’s gifts and powers 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 marks the antagonist. 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 both 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 often are spiritual and/or martial arts masters. Allies may be encountered along the way, be partners or 'buddies', or form part of a superhero team, which usually includes female superheroes. In recent years females also have increasingly become main protagonists (Baker, 2004).

Other distinctive elements of the superhero genre relate to 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 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 the love interest 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 of a given television series, 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 drawn to the themes of power and fear, 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.

Superheroes may be represented in many different modes, in films, animated series, and

comic books, in children's toys and video games. In fact, more often than not, popular superhero stories are told across several media platforms. These media texts also offer varying degrees of self-reflectiveness and intertextuality. Media producers have used the openness of the superhero 'myth' by 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. Many media products are based on genre mixes - integrating certain elements of the superhero genre with other genres. Like any other genre the superhero genre is flexible, open ended and ever changing.

Children's Culture

Now, how does this all relate to children's culture? In reviewing the literature about superheroes in general, and children's engagement with them in particular, (see Jones, 2006 for a detailed discussion) two things become apparent: Firstly, much research focuses on a singular aspect, or limited modes of engagement, for example, young children's pretend fighting, or pretend play, or play with branded toys, or children viewing television, or teenagers drawing cartoons.

Secondly, it became apparent that children's engagement with superheroes is often seen in a negative light. It is considered as cause for concern and this concern very often makes the starting point for further investigations or research. For example: at the most basic level there is concern about physical violence, and disruption, especially with younger children 'playing superheroes' (e.g. little boys wrestling, shooting and fighting karate and generally running wild). Sometimes concerns about superheroes are situated within more general discourses, for example about media effects, about media violence, about war play, play with war toys, or branded toys, about gendered representations and gendered play. Concerns about superheroes may be regarding the ideologies mediated through superhero stories, general worries about increasing consumerism and the commercial exploitation of children; they may revolve around a perceived lack of creativity or imply particular judgements of taste. (Holland 2003, Seiter 1999, Hoffman 2004, Cupit 1989, Kline 1995, 2002, Paley 1984, Jones 2002, Dyson 1997, Wells 2002, Davies et al. 2000) These concerns, in effect, in many places have led to a ban of superheroes in educational, especially in preschool settings. (Paley 1984, Boyd 1997, Holland 2003)

As a consequence there is a number of, in particular, more recent papers and books,

which discuss these concerns and contest these assertions providing reasons and ideas, why and how superheroes (along with popular culture in general) should be invited into educational settings. To provide a few examples: while many practitioners feel concern about disruptive rough-and tumble play, especially of boys, and general concerns about violence, some authors argue that this kind of play is important for the physical, social, emotional and cognitive development of children: physical exuberance is important for the physical development and motor control, it helps to release anxieties and tensions and to build friendships and social groups. 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, 1995). Superhero play also leads towards certain forms of multimodal expression, such as role-play, which may be channelled into drama and writing activities in the classroom. (Cupid 1989, Boyd 1997, Holland 2003; Jones 2002, Paley 1984, Dyson 1997, Seiter 1999, Hoffman 2004) Other discourses revolve around the perceived lack of value of imitative behaviours, such as drawing cartoons. Long standing positions in art education have considered this kind of activity as stifling creativity, while in more recent years it has been argued that these activities are never just imitation, but an appropriation and reworking of semiotic resources, where learning does take place. (Wilson 1974, Wilson & Wilson 1977, Robertson 1987, Smith 1985, Roland 2005, Kress 1997, Anning & Ring 2004, Mathews 1999) Similar arguments have also been made concerning toy play (Kline 2002) or creative writing, where influences of popular culture are seen as corrupting. Others argue that interest in popular culture may be harnessed to teach multimodal literacy as well as literacy in the traditional sense in the classroom. (Dyson 1997, Marsh 2005, Burn & Durran 2007)

There is a popular South Asian parable, which tells of several blind people studying an elephant, who all are touching different parts - the leg, the tail, the trunk. Similarly, I found that academic discourses concerned with superheroes present a view of children's activities from an adult perspective, in line with certain research interests or educational perspectives, which is fragmented - everybody is studying only particular parts of the elephant. What I was interested in was to arrive at a more ecological perspective. From a child's position or point of view, interest or passion for superheroes, or anything else for that matter, is the driving force

which motivates such varied activities such as reading, writing, watching, playing, dressing up, performing, talking and drawing. It is this “motivated interest” in the words of Gunther Kress (1997), which structures the attention, the interpretation, the engagement with media and across media and this interest also drives children’s multimodal meaning making.

The superhero genre no doubt makes an important part of children’s media environments and contemporary children’s culture, in particular for boys. The superhero narratives are mediated, packaged and sold across many media platforms, such as television cartoons, comic books, movie franchises, digital games and many related merchandising products, such as action figure toys. It is easy to be cynical about all that. One rightfully may construct this cross media promotion and distribution and media convergence as an indication of the rising commercial exploitation of children, or rather their parents, which is very successful indeed.

However, and this is one of the central arguments of this paper, children engage with superhero narratives because they are appealing. And they are appealing for good reasons: Firstly, because superhero stories are modern, contemporary version of older culturally mediated story forms such as myth and fairy tales, and thus may serve similar psychological, social, and cultural functions. Secondly, as Kress has argued extensively, children are fundamentally dispositioned towards multimodal forms of meaning making. (Kress 1997)

Superhero narratives offer a wide range of opportunities for children to use media text, as in reading comic books, watching cartoons, but also, more importantly, they offer opportunities for engagement through activities such as playing computer games, collecting, trading and playing with cards, playing with toys and action figures. They also offer themes for playground games and make-believe play, for story telling, drawing and writing independent from the use commercial products. What happens in these practices, is not simply a kind of copying, a reproduction of popular culture, but a transformation, an active interpretation, reflection, expansion and comment of media text. Children as storytellers, players and artists draw upon familiar elements from popular narratives to create their own meaning, driven by their own interests and preoccupations, which of course may vary.

Thus, the phenomenal success of cross-media narratives such as superhero stories may also be understood in terms of children’s ability or disposition to move across media platforms and across modes of meaning making with particular ease. That is, these cross media narratives appeal to children, precisely because they offer such varied forms of engagement. To

exaggerate the point: While adults are happy to read a good book or watch a film, and then possibly talk about it, children, want to play the story, they want to dress up as the characters, rework and remix ideas, appropriate certain story elements and use them for their own multimodal meaning making.

Case Study

Following this general outline of the relevance of superhero narrative in contemporary children's culture, I would like to present a case study: a longitudinal study concerned with one boy's engagement with superheroes and his multimodal meaning-making from the age of 3 to 11 - which I believe, in many ways, is similar to other children's, in particular boys' participation with popular culture. This child concerned is my son Lukas. The study was undertaken after the event, post hoc. That is, I started writing about the subject of superheroes around the time he was eleven, and that was when he stopped being interested in them, possibly but not necessarily, as a reaction to my own sudden interest in matters, that previously belonged entirely to him.

Lukas engaged in many multimodal activities – such as playing with action figures and Lego, pretend fighting, fantasy play, drawing and writing; he liked wearing his Power Ranger T-shirt during the day and his Batman pyjama at night. As I had extensive insight into this child's life, this enabled me to draw connections between these diverse activities.

The material data for this case study is made of a collection of more than 300 of Lukas' drawings, which may be sorted into a range of categories, just like any adult artist's work, with particular prominent themes emerging. Studying Lukas' body of work spanning about eight years in total, one can discern certain patterns, or 'grand narratives,' which occupied his imagination over many years. Lukas' work for the largest part is made of drawings, featuring representation of fictional characters and narratives, inspired by books and stories, films, television, and toys (including knights, pirates, cowboys, Indians, 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. He also was never much interested in colour and painting.

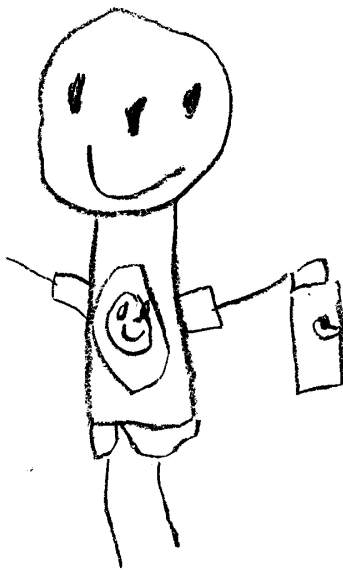
All the drawings were made in an out of school context, entirely on Lukas' own accord. It is worth emphasizing, that the work created at home was very different from that which was

created in educational settings. Most of the work produced in nursery and primary school lacked the ease and confidence of his other work; in my view, it expresses a lack of creativity and constraint, if not downright unhappiness. So, the focus here is on a selection of work created at home, revolving around the 'grand theme' of superheroes.

The body of work shows that Lukas drew on knowledge from all sorts of varied semiotic resources. He appropriated and re-contextualized information picked up from friends and family, environmental print, signs, symbols and narratives from popular culture, but also genres and modes of representation usually found in educational contexts. Lukas used different modes of representation, such as drawing and writing, maps and diagrams, and he sometimes created collages and other artefacts. Thus, this case study provides an insight into how a child's informal and formal literacies are interlinked, how things learned at home, at school, at the playground and from popular media are integrated and help in shaping the child's identity.

Super Symbol

At first, I would like to discuss some images of protagonists and antagonist, heroes and villains, without which there would be no superhero stories. Lukas very first drawings around the age of three were pictures of 'mummy' and 'daddy' respectively. And shortly after



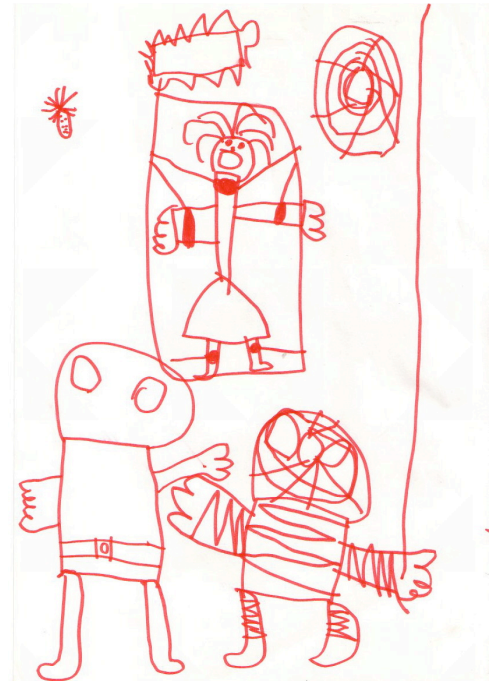
this he created a self-portrait as Superboy (Fig.1.). The mark, which distinguishes a portrait of a normal boy from Superboy, is the emblem on his chest. Children from a very young age, long before alphabetic writing, are able to read signs, such corporate logos, and so it is not surprising that Lukas would have picked up the meaning of the logo of a particular superhero brand. The super symbol is not just an add-on, but makes an essential part of the iconography and narrative of superhero stories. It serves several functions: it points to the mythic origin of the hero and the source of his powers. Sometimes it is endowed with a special kind of power itself. Super symbols also serve as the trademark logo of the

superhero brand, used by media corporations to promote their products. They are used by fans, e.g. worn on T-shirts, as signs of their fandom. Super symbols thus serve diegetic as

well as extra-diegetic functions; they are salient story elements, which connect media producers, products and their audiences.

Repeatedly, Lukas inserted super symbols on his character's costumes, and often he integrated them also part of the setting to emphasize the meaning. Fig 2. shows a spider web on the right and a tiny spider on the left of the central figure of Spiderman. Fig 3. features Batman, with bats both on the costume and flying in the air, while Fig 4. represents Catwoman accompanied by two cats.

Lukas' work makes 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 signs. 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 to communicate to others. 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).



He made these drawings for one main purpose: to amuse himself, when he was alone with no other children to play with. These kinds of drawing may therefore be considered as another form of play or ‘play art’ (Wilson 1974), a continuation of themes played out in fantasy role-play and play with toys. In

drawing these images he was telling stories. Over ten years later, as a teenager Lukas commented, that they were drawings of the images, which he saw “like movies in the head”.

Superhero Action

Representations of superheroes in the form of portraits were accompanied by images of superheroes in action, of increasing complexity. The Spiderman drawing in Fig. 5 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. Small stick people are standing on the rooftops, possibly trying to hunt him down, or perhaps admiring him.

One may assume that the two blue 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 hanging 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 image presents him in a frontal view, directly facing the audience and in terms of Kress & Van Leeuwen's "Grammar of Visual Design" (1996) placing a 'demand' on the viewer.

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) noted that children's drawings do not usually 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 effective use of design elements and spatial arrangement, the image could just as well be a movie poster.



Some of Lukas' drawings represent a complex mise-en-scène, such as Fig.6 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. 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".

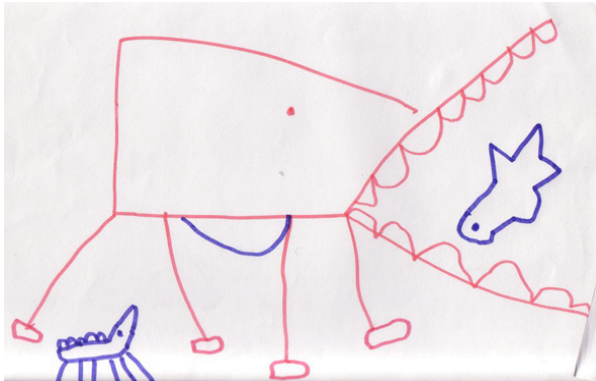
The child, along with the captured astronaut, is to some extent excluded from the party, his separation emphasized by the cage of the astronaut dividing the image. The loneliness and sadness of the figure is in contrast to the jolly party going on, which even the captured astronaut seems to enjoy. It 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.



The drawing is also interesting for other reasons: This image of the alien birthday party features a series of numbers from 1 to 8. In the child's mind this an important use of numbers: to count the sequence of years - or rather

birthdays. Both their age and the ways birthdays are celebrated form an important part of children's – or in any case Lukas' – identity. One may assume that he was eight years old, when he made this drawing. This as well as many other images show how he re-contextualized things learned at school, and put them to creative use in order to serve narrative purposes. Lukas made good use of what he had learned, not to please a teacher, or any adult, but in order to tell stories, which mattered to him - like this one, a story full of dramatic tension, conflicting emotions, about danger and alienation.

Superhero's Nemesis



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, animals featuring sharp and dangerous teeth, horns or stings. At around the age of five he then moved on to drawing dinosaurs and dragons; between the age of six and seven he created various series of fantastic monsters and aliens. By the age of eight monsters were replaced by images of fantastic machines and robots. (Fig.7-11)

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 appear as an ally. In this sense the child's monster drawings may reflect powerful emotions, such as anger and 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, a superhero may tame and harnesses the qualities of an animal, such as the bat, the spider or the cat: as we have seen these creatures accompany Batman, Spiderman, and Catwoman in Lukas' drawings.

As Lukas grew older and his knowledge of science increased, science and technology became new subjects of fascination, and provided new places of enchantment. In science fiction and

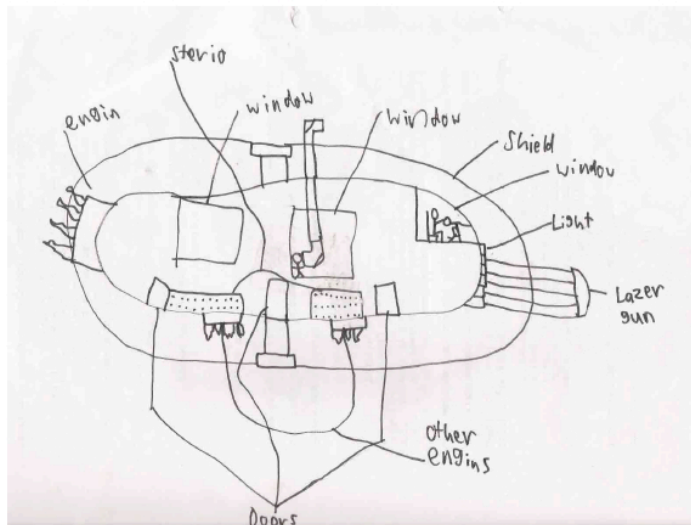


superhero narratives magic of fairy tale is replaced by the mystery of science, aliens take on the task of representing the unknown, the other. Robots and cyborgs may be understood materializations of rational thought, but also of fears of the power of technology unleashed. (see Rushing & Frentz 1995)

While the heroes in Lukas' 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. Lukas used drawings to process complex feelings

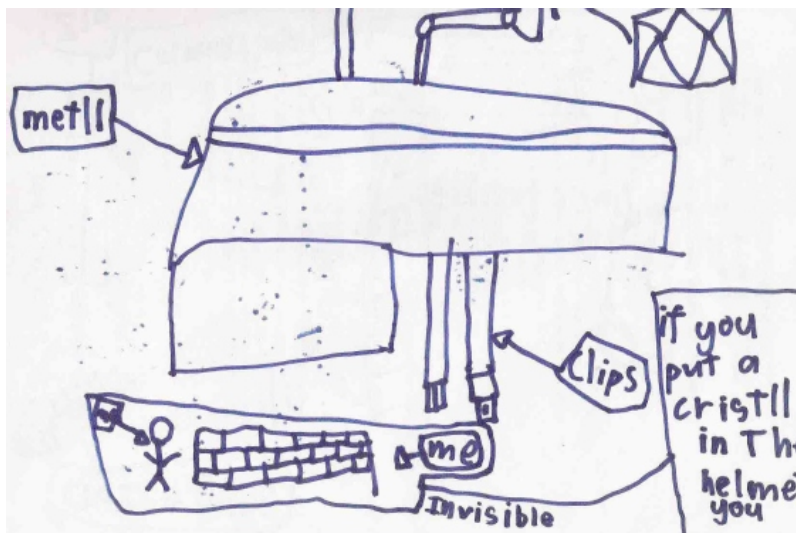
about power, violence, fear, life and death, good and evil, to satisfy his desire for meaning making, and this became a part of shaping his identity.

Lukas enjoyed science classes in primary school, where he had an imaginative teacher, who introduced methods of observation



and the drawing of charts, diagrams and maps. He started to utilize these new skills learned at school and from books, for his own narrative purposes: for example, he drew all kinds of maps: treasure maps, maps of underground secret passages and laboratories, tree houses, maps of labyrinths, a floor plan of a submarine (Fig.12), cross sections of rockets. These maps reveal an increasing understanding of geographical maps diagrams, but here they serve only one purpose: to support narratives of a hero's quest.

A reader familiar with superhero narratives may remember that prominent superheroes have secret laboratories. (e.g. Superman and Batman keep their own secret laboratories, where new super-technology is developed, and which serve as a secret hiding place and retreat while Spiderman acquired his powers through an accident in a science lab.)



In superhero narratives technology is often empowered by some kind of extra-terrestrial 'magic', or the fantastic is given a pseudo-scientific explanation. Science and technology play an important part in the construction of 'male' identities, and technology is

often connected with typically ‘male’ activities and interests. (Götz et al. 2006) Boys tend to use technology in the form of tools, weapons, machines and vehicles as accessories to male representations in their meaning making.

Lukas cast himself in the role of the brilliant scientist who designs techno-magical gadgets - as can be seen with the image Fig. 13 of the “helmet that makes invisible” and other fantastic machinery. He drew cross sections of machines, robots, spacecrafts and rockets, outlining the spatial relationship between objects and their parts, with vital elements carefully labeled. Lukas was designing multi-modal texts, where each mode, the verbal and the visual, are given a defined and equal role to play. He used rational, technical modes of representation such as diagrams and maps, however he used both language and image for creative purposes. The themes of the texts created at home remained firmly grounded in the world of fantasy and imagination.

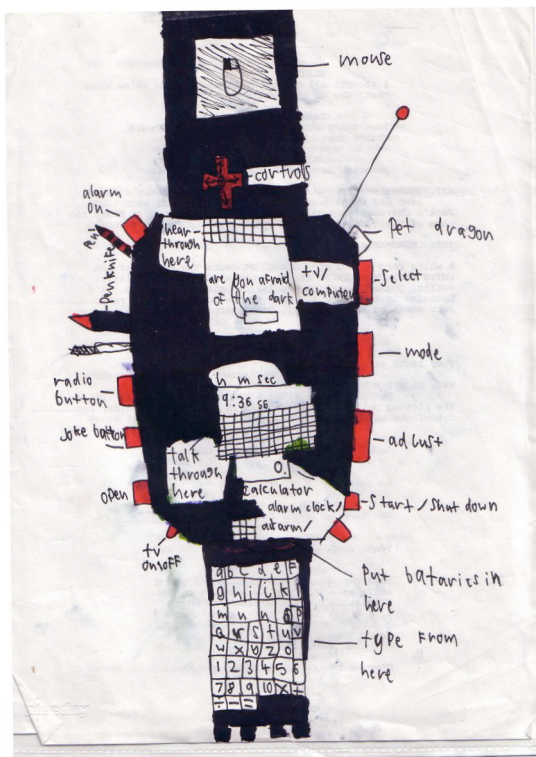


Fig. 14 presents a final example of this kind of drawing, of a multi-purpose watch including computer keyboard, game controls, a radio, an alarm - all things which today are normal parts of mobile phone technology. This drawing was made around 1998 or 1999, before mobile phones became a normal part of the average Western (including Lukas’) household. However, I do not stress this because I think he was some kind of technical visionary, but because it includes a small button, labeled ‘pet dragon’. This and many other of Lukas’ drawings may be called ‘maps of play’ (Barrs 1988), because they serve a specific and new kind of purpose, as blueprint for fantasy talk and play with friends.

They are concept maps to communicate play scripts with others, to outline ideas, which then could be discussed, expanded and acted out. One can only imagine what will happen, once the button labeled “pet dragon” is pushed, but it is definitely part of an exciting story.

Conclusion

Many people have asked me, whether Lukas has become an artist. I have to say no. In fact, he solidly refused to do any drawing for about five years, and only very recently he started drawing again. He wants to become a writer, which at first I found surprising as both mother and educator, because he is not a keen reader of books. However, these more recent developments rather support a key conclusion of this case study conducted several years previously: that the drawing and multimodal meaning making Lukas engaged with for some many years, was driven by his interest for narrative and dramatic story.

It has been argued by Jerome Bruner that "that we organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative," and that the shape and form of these narratives is based on "conventional forms", which are "transmitted culturally." (Bruner 1991:4) Relating this thought to children's engagement with superheroes, I conclude: Cultural forms, such as the superhero myth shape most children's media experiences today. They may constitute an important part of a child's particular media biography, shaping his understanding about the culture he or she grows up in. They shape his or her view on the world as it is culturally transmitted, and at the same time are used as tools for organizing the structure of feelings and experiences.

The in depth analysis of Lukas's play, drawings and writings demonstrates how children are not only active readers of media and popular culture but also creative participants as they engage in diverse multimodal practices - reflecting, expanding and commenting on media texts and incorporating a wide range of semiotic resources. The child as storyteller, player and artists drew from popular resources such as core elements of the superhero myths (heroes and villains, victims and allies, machines and monsters, symbols of power, scenarios of destruction) and their 'big themes' of power and fear, life and death, but also incorporated 'things learned at school': numeracy, literacy and science practices weaving them into his ever changing fictional narratives, to create his own meanings, to map his experiences, to shape his identity and view of the world.

References

- Anning, Angela & Ring, Kathy (2004) *Making sense of children's drawings*. Maidenhead: Mc Graw Hill Education - Open University Press
- Baker, Kaysee (2004) *Who Saves the Animated World? The Sex-Role Stereotyping of Superheroes and Superheroines in Children's Animated Programs* The Florida State University College of Communication, Dissertation 2004
- Barrs, Myra (1988) *Maps of Play*. In Meek, Margaret *Language and Literacy in the Primary School*. Falmer Press
- Bettelheim, Bruno (1975) *The Uses of Enchantment. The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. London: Thames and Hudson
- Brooker, Will (2000) *Batman Unmasked. Analyzing a Cultural Icon*. New York, London: Continuum
- Bruner, Jerome (1991) "The Narrative Construction of Reality" *Critical inquiry*, Vol.18, No.1. (Autumn 1991) pp 1-21
- Boyd, Brenda J (1997) *Superhero Play in the Early Childhood Classroom: issues in Banning Play from the Classroom*
http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3614/is_199710/ai_n8770056/pg_1
- Burn, Andrew, Durran, James (2007) *Media Literacy in Schools: Practice, Production and Progression*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing
- Campbell, Joseph (1993/1949) *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. London: Fontana Press
- Cupit, C. Glenn (1989) *Socializing Superheroes*. Australian Early Childhood Resources Booklet. Warson: Australian Early Childhood Association
- Davies, Hannah/ Buckingham, David / Kelley, Peter (2000) *In the worst possible taste*. Children, television and cultural value. In *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 3(1), 5- 25, 2000
- Dyson, Anne Haas (1997) *Writing Superheroes. Contemporary Childhood, Popular Culture, and Classroom Literacy*. Teachers College: Columbia University
- Götz, Maya et.al. (2006) *Mit Pokemon in Harry Potters Welt. Medien in den Fantasien von Kindern*. München: kopaed
- Hoff, Gary R. (1982) *The Visual Narrative: Kids, Comic Books, and Creativity*. *Art Education*. Vol. 35, No. 2 (Mar., 1982), pp. 20-23
- Hoffman, Eric (2004) *Magic Capes, Amazing Powers. Transforming Superhero Play in the Classroom*. St.Paul, MN: Redleaf Press
- Holland, Penny (2003) *We don't play with guns here. War, weapon and superhero play in the early years*. Maidenhead and Philadelphia: Open University Press
- Jones, Gerard (2002) *Killing Monsters: Why Children Need Fantasy, Super Heroes and Make-believe Violence*. New York: Basic Books
- Jones, Sigrid (2006) *Superheroes and Children's Culture*. Dissertation submitted in part fulfillment of the requirements of the MA Media, Culture and Communication Degree of the Institute of Education, University of London
- Marsh, Jackie (ed) (2005) *Popular Culture, New Media and Digital Literacy in Early*
- Sigrid Jones: Superheroes for Literacy (draft paper 6.8.2008) – Contact: sigrid.jones@univie.ac.at

Childhood. London and New York: Routledge

Kline, Stephen (2002) Toys as Media: The Role of Toy Design, Promotional TV and Mother's Reinforcement in the Young Males (3-6) Acquisition of Pro-social Play Scripts for Rescue Hero Action Toys. Simon Fraser University <http://www.sfu.ca/medialab/research/Sweden3.html> [6/12/2002]

Kress, Gunther (1997) *Before Writing: Rethinking the Paths to Literacy* London: Routledge

Kress, Gunther/ Van Leeuwen, Theo (1996) *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge

Marsh, Jackie ed. (2005a) *Popular Culture, New Media and Digital Literacy in Early Childhood*. London and New York: Routledge

Matthews, John. (2003) *Drawing and painting: children and visual representation* London: Paul Chapman Publishing. Sage Publications

Paley, Vivian Gussin (1984) *Boys & Girls. Superheroes in the Doll Corner*. University of Chicago Press
Pearson Roberta E. / Uricchio William (ed.) (1991) *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and his Media*. New York: Routledge,

Robertson, Angela (1987) *Borrowing and Artistic Behavior: A Case-Study of the Development of Bruce's Spontaneous Drawings from Six to Sixteen*. In *Studies in Art Education* Vol. 29, No. 1 (Autumn, 1987), pp. 37-51

Roland, Craig (2005) *The @rt Room* (12.12.2005) School of Art and Art History, University of Florida http://www.arts.ufl.edu/art/rt_room/index.html

Rushing, Janice Hocker & Thomas S. Frenz (1995) *Projecting the Shadow. The Cyborg Hero in American Film*. Chicago. University of Chicago Press

Smith, Nancy (1985) *Copying and Artistic Behaviors: Children and Comic Strips Studies*. In *Art Education*. Vol. 26, No. 3 (Spring, 1985), pp. 147-156

Seiter, Ellen (1999) *Power Rangers at Playschool: Negotiating Media in Child Care Settings*, p. 239-61 in Kinder, Marhsa (ed) *Kid's Media Culture*. Duke University Press

Urwin, Cathy (1995) *Turtle Power. Illusion and Imagination in Children's Play* in Cary Bazalgette and David Buckingham, eds. *In Front of the Children*, London: BFI

Vogler, Christopher (1998) *The Writer's Journey. Mythic Structure for Writers*. 2nd Edition. Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Production

Wells, Paul (2002) "Tell Me about Your Id, When You Was a Kid, Yah!" *Animation and Children's Television Culture*. In Buckingham, David, ed. *Small Screens. Television for Children*. London and New York: Leicester University Press.

Wilson, Brent (1974) *The Superheroes of J. C. Holz: Plus an Outline of a Theory of Child Art*. *Art Education*, Vol. 27, No. 8 (Nov., 1974), pp. 2-9

Wilson, Brent; Marjorie Wilson (1977) *An Iconoclastic View of the Imagery Sources in the Drawings of Young People*. *Art Education*, Vol. 30, No. 1. (Jan., 1977), pp. 4-12.