

I. Introduction

It is generally agreed that the cartoon series *The Simpsons* is an often sarcastic, ironic and biting distorting mirror of contemporary Western society. Originally created in 1987 for a series of short films in the context of the Tracy-Ullmann-show by Matt Groening and then, in 1989, decisively developed as an autonomous 30 minutes show by Groening, James L. Brooks and Sam Simon, «America's most dysfunctional family» (as the Simpsons have been often hailed), takes up issues and topics not only related to current political and social discussions, but also to art, literature, music, theatre and popular culture. They have managed to be more than «simply a commentary on culture but an intervention into culture,» as John Alberti has put it.¹

As the highly self-referential title-sequence makes clear, the media, especially television itself, play a decisive role: the opening sequence culminates with an image of the entire family gathering before the television set. The importance of this moment is even enhanced by the fact that the whole sequence is built out of a mix of on the one hand each time recurring elements and of, on the other hand, new ones, changing almost every time. Thus, the succession of scenes depicting how the family members leave their different duties at school, at work or shopping, are interspersed in each and every episode with variations. These alterations to the main substance of the opening sequence include 1) the blackboard-lines of the son Bart Simpson, which always hint upon his offences, earning him this punishment, 2) daughter Lisa Simpson's saxophone solo, provoking her dismissal from the school orchestra and, 3) especially, the so-called «couch gag» which emphasizes the moment the family gathers in front of the TV set by presenting each time a variation on how and despite which obstacles the family manages to take their seat on the sofa.

Moreover, the suggestion is that the Simpsons apparently watch their own show since it is the title of the cartoon which appears on the screen of their TV: we not only watch *the Simpsons*, but that we actually watch *The Simpsons with the Simpsons* – a fact not only acknowledged e.g. by Jonathan Gray's study *Watching with the Simpsons*,² but also confirmed by the writer and producer Al Jean: «Some of the most creative stuff we write comes from just having the Simpsons watch TV.»³

In fact, very often the above mentioned themes and topics – such as politics and culture – are introduced via television or put into a more or less direct relation with it (for example when the question, if, despite its shocking nakedness, Michelangelo's *David* should be exhibited in the Springfield Art Museum, is discussed in a TV show).

But TV is not the only medium used by the *Simpsons* in order to create a distorting mirror of society – as we will especially see when talking about «Superheroes in *The Simpsons*,» movies also play an important role.

However, when it comes to the presence and the representation of superheroes, TV and movies are not the only means and media: In accordance with the history of the superhero-genre which started in comic strips and books and then spread towards cinema and TV, comic books are of an almost primary importance in *The Simpsons*. Given that *The Simpsons*, as seen above, is often dealing with its own genre (for example as a TV series referring to TV) and since the series, as a cartoon (and thus as animated drawings) is also showing a kinship towards comics, superheroes are thus in a certain way an almost over-determined genre for *The Simpsons* since they – just like the Simpsons – appear in comics, cartoons, films and TV.⁴

Finally, as in our society, the presence of superheroes is not only restricted to the media, but – incited and influenced by them – we by now also had and still have self-declared superheroes in everyday life, a phenomenon explored in Mark Millar's and John Romita Jr.'s 2008 comic book series *Kick-Ass*, followed by the 2010 cinematic adaptation directed by Matthew Vaughn.

Not only, as Angela Ndaliansis has stated, while reviewing a development, starting in the 30's of the 20th century and still ongoing, «the superhero has become part of the wider cultural consciousness,»⁵ but, as Jason Bainbridge has also argued, despite the fact that «superheroes have largely been excluded from academic study,» because they are mostly just «viewed as a kind of adolescent wish fulfilment,» it is rewarding to study them also exactly therefore: «Because they are a wish fulfilment, a study of superheroes is therefore also a study of the perceived deficiencies in society and what «being heroic» necessarily entails.»⁶

Although *The Simpsons* mainly deals with the American way of life, given the impact of American culture on Europe, Europeans recognize most of the issues taken up and mocked by the show,⁷ meaning that its distorting mirror helps us see also here in Europe more clearly why and how superheroes still respectively again matter – even after Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.⁸ In a similar way a caricature exaggerates the traits of a depicted person or situation in order to make it immediately recognizable while at the same time making fun of it (the term «caricature» originally comes from the Italian «caricare» = «to charge,» «to load up» and means a depiction which is overloaded with characteristic traits and features). Therefore, the distorted mirror of *The Simpsons* might also make evident characteristic traits of the contemporary superhero by exaggerating and mocking them.

II. A: Superheroes in the media

As already stated, *The Simpsons* often deal with the representation of superheroes in the media and here in comic books and in films.

Hereby, the series emphasizes in a certain way the predominance of the comic book over the film which mostly, when dealing with superheroes, draws upon comic books. Thus, the *Simpsons*-universe is populated with a plethora of superheroes in comic books while in film there seems to be only one recurrent superhero: *Radioactive Man*. In a certain way he also seems to stand at the beginning of the superhero-history in the *Simpsons*-world. As a discussion between



1 A look into the different superheroes, present in the Simpsons-universe: *The Simpsons*, from the episode *Radioactive Man* (1995)

Bart Simpson and his friend Milhouse Van Houten during the opening of the episode *Radioactive Man*, produced and first aired in 1995,⁹ makes clear, Bart loathes other – seemingly new – superheroes as weak imitations of *Radioactive Man* and he even points out their *raison d'être*: the greediness of the comic book industry which wants to cash in as much money as possible by creating a new superhero every week.

It is interesting in this context to see which characteristics these superheroes have: in a for *The Simpsons* typically quick camera pan across the comic bookstore (the series invites its audience to view and review its episodes with the remote control in hand in order to stop at particular moments and discover all the seemingly unimportant details), we get a good overview of the comic books on sale. It hereby becomes obvious that the imagination of the comic book industry in creating new heroes is limited to the increasingly absurd variations on the combination of humans with the surrounding flora and fauna (ill. 1): *Birdguy*, *Catgirl*, *DogKid*, *Snakekid*, *The Human Bee*, *Treeman*, *Mr. Hop* and *Iguana Lady* clearly show that their creators are simply and in the most uninspired way only varying the model introduced in 1939 by Bob Kane and Bill Finger when presenting *Batman*, a superhero who dresses up in a bat-costume and, like its heraldic animal, only gets active in the night, as well as Stan Lee's and Steve Ditko's *Spiderman* from 1962, who in a certain way took Kane's and Finger's concept verbally and at the same further by presenting a hero who not only calls himself after an animal in order to hint upon certain of his characteristics in crime-fighting, but who actually – via a bite from a radioactive spider – got some of the capabilities and skills of a spider (such as great strength, climbing up walls etc.). The apex in this respect was certainly the introduction of the *Animal Man* in 1965, a superhero (created by author Dave Wood and artist Carmine Infantino) with the power to absorb the capabilities of every nearby animal,¹⁰ topped only by supervillain *The Animal-Vegetable-Mineral Man*, introduced already in 1964 by author Arnold Drake and artist Bruno Premiani, whose body could transform into any mismatched combination of elements.

Michael Chabon (a big admirer of *The Simpsons* who also appeared in the series as himself in 2006), in his Pulitzer Price winning novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, published five years after the *Radioactive Man*-episode in

2000, projects the strategy of the comic book producers, as mocked in *The Simpsons*, even back to the time when *Superman* was created: Chabon's protagonists – the Jewish partners illustrator Josef Kavalier and author Sammy «Clay» Klayman (obviously modelled upon the *Superman*-inventors Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster) – try to profit in the late 30's from the growing success of the superhero-genre in the comic-book-business and thus arrive at the conclusion:

If he's like a cat or a spider or a fucking wolverine, if he's huge, if he's tiny, if he can shoot flames or ice or death rays or Vat 69, if he turns into fire or water or stone or India Rubber. He could be a Martian, he could be a ghost, he could be a god or a demon or a wizard or a monster. Okay? It doesn't *matter*, because right now, see, at this very moment, we have a bandwagon rolling [...].¹¹

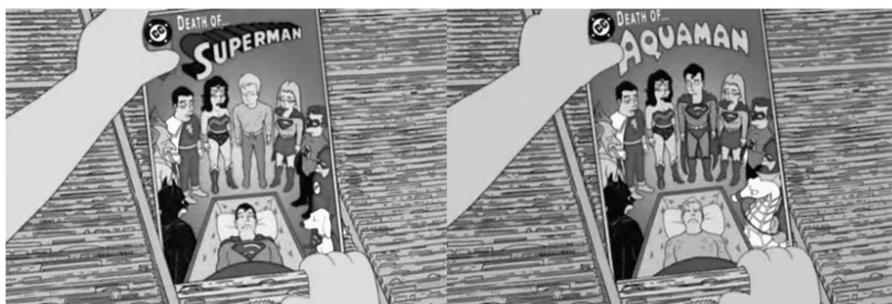
Thus, they arrive at the conclusion: «[...] forget animals. Everybody's going to be thinking of animals. In two months, I'm telling you, by the time our guy hits the stands, there's going to be guys running around dressed like every damn animal in the zoo. Birds, Bugs. Underwater guys.» «How? is not the question. «What? is not the question» [...]. «The question is *why*» [...]. «Why is he doing it?» And thus they come up with a totally different hero (*The Escapist*), a mix of (as they put it themselves) Houdini, Robin Hood – and Albert Schweitzer.¹²

That heroes like *Batman* are actually behind the unimaginative plagiarisms derided in the *Simpsons*-episode is emphasized by the fact that two of the books (ill. 1) actually star a *Batchick* (playing on the pun that «chick» can be an animal, but also a girl) and a *Batboy* (with «Bat» here, however, not referring to an animal, but to the baseball equipment).

That these «heroes» are just about throwing together seemingly contrasting elements (such as for example humans together with animals – and not considered by Chabon: – volcanic phenomena and plants: see the *Lava Lady* and *Tree Man*) and that in the end it doesn't matter out of which weird combination they were created, is made obvious with the covers from the comic books of the *Power-Person*¹³ and the *Manboy*.

But the critique of the arbitrariness of many representatives of the comic book genre is not just limited to their heroes, but also stretches to the narrative plotting of the comic books. For example, at the beginning of the 2007 episode *Husbands and Knives*,¹⁴ Bart pulls out several comics and discovers that they present either just silly variations of already known heroes (such as Batman's sidekick Robin who here appears first as «Stone-age Robin,» then as «Black Robin» and finally as a proselytized «Christian Robin»), or that they all seem to contain more or less the same pseudo-spectacular storyline, dealing with the death of the title hero, be it Superman, Aquaman or the friendly Ghost Casper (all of whom merely swap places with one another during the dead hero's funeral, depicted on the cover: ill. 2).¹⁵

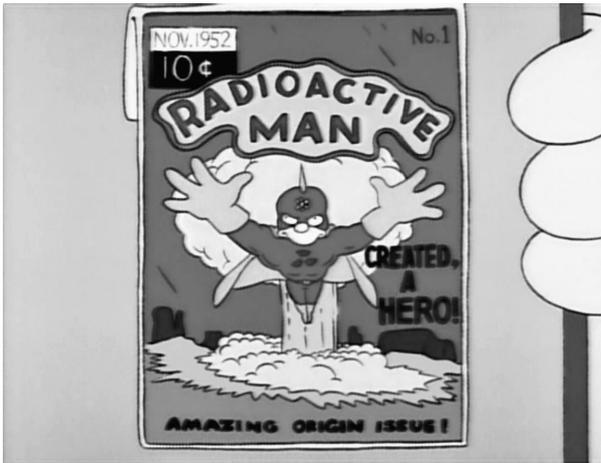
But at the same time, *The Simpsons* hints at the fact that a multitude of superheroes might also mirror the different wishes of the audience who reads comics in order to, as Milhouse puts it, «escape from their troubles.»¹⁶ Thus, in the 1991 episode *Three Men and a Comic Book*¹⁷ the school bus driver Otto presents his own superhero-creation at a convention: a man who by day humbly drives a bus, but «by night fight vampires in a postapocalyptic war zone» – his name: *Busman*.¹⁸ Likewise, in the 2001 episode *Worst Episode Ever*,¹⁹ Bart's friend Milhouse, while tending the comic book store, falls for a new superhero, *Biclops*, whose main fea-



2 The dramatic means used by the comic book industry in order to attract customers neutralizes itself: *The Simpsons*, from the episode *Husbands and Knives* (2007)

ture is that he wears – just like Milhouse – thick glasses, thus presenting a variation of the Marvel superhero *Cyclops*²⁰ who has to wear a visor with a lens that runs from side-to-side in order to shield and control the constant optic blast emanating from his eyes (thus giving him a one eyed appearance – hence his namesake «Cyclops»). Whereas Cyclops' lens also functions as a device for the use of his superpowers, in Biclops' case the glasses have no other function than to make the hero appeal to the wearer of glasses and to make them feel a bit like a superhero too. This detail doesn't come as a surprise if one knows that the hero turns out to have been invented by the LensCrafters, an international retailer of prescription eyewear and sunglasses, founded in 1983 in the United States, and famous for its attention attracting TV commercials. Hence, the many copies of the comic book Milhouse orders fail to sell. Even birds, as Bart explains «won't [...] use them in their nests» (a statement, immediately confirmed by a frustrated bird which shreds a copy of the book into pieces in front of the two boys).²¹ At the same time this is a clear reference to the earlier episode *Three Men and a Comic Book* from ten years earlier in which Bart, Milhouse and Martin Prince purchase the first issue of *Radioactive Man* for the sum of 100 Dollars, but then get suspicious at each other when it comes to decide who should keep and hold it safe. In the end, while fighting about its safekeeping, the book is accidentally destroyed during a thunderstorm, and the remaining shreds are then used by a bird in its nest (that *Worst Episode Ever* pays homage to the *Three Men*-episode is even further stressed by the fact that even Martin Prince has an indirect appearance in the former and that *Worst Episode Ever* opens with the presentation of issue No. 1000 of *Radioactive Man*).

In the *Three Men*-episode we also learn about the genesis of *Radioactive Man*: After having gotten caught in an atomic explosion in a nuclear testing zone, Claude Kane (the name is given in homage to *Batman*-inventor Bob Kane) realizes that he has become radioactive and thus decides to call himself «Radioactive Man» from now on. However, it is not clear which superpowers he actually has (besides being radioactive) since he never shows them. Thus, although his genesis recalls superheroes like *The Atomic Thunderbolt*,²² *Atom*²³ or *Captain Atom*²⁴ who have superhuman abilities related to nuclear power, *Radioactive Man* more closely resembles *Batman*. In fact, *Radioactive Man* and *Batman* share multiple features: Beginning with the fact that he – apparently – has no real superpowers to his secret identity in everyday life where he (just like *Batman*'s Bruce Wayne) appears to be just a playboy millionaire to his sidekick (*Robin* in



3 Radioactive Man, the «Golden Age»-superhero: *The Simpsons*, from the episode *Three Men and a Comic Book* (1991)

Batman's case, Fallout Boy [Rod Runtledge] in *Radioactive Man's* case) up to finally his battle cry «Up and Atom!» which on the hand hints upon his similarity to Captain Atom and comparable heroes,²⁵ but which on the other is nothing else than a pun on Batman's slogan «Up and at them!» (a difference, the Austrian actor Rainier Wolfcastle, modelled upon Arnold Schwarzenegger, doesn't get when interpreting the part of Radioactive Man in a film: he instead stubbornly repeats the Batman- instead of the Radioactive Man's «Atom»-slogan).²⁶

As scholars such as Bill Boichel have shown, Batman's introduction as «the world's second superhero» in 1939 was already a reaction to the «first superhero», Superman, «created by two Jewish high-school buddies», Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, from Cleveland, Ohio, one year before as, as Boichel puts it, «a calculated response to the Nazi concept of the *Übermen[s]ch*: an ideal, superior man who would lead the masses to victory.»²⁷ Batman is thus more or less the dark twin of Superman: where the latter has superhuman powers and comes from a distant planet, living in the bright and modern city of Metropolis where he fights crime almost exclusively during the day, Batman is just human, living in the Gothic and dark Gotham City where he comes out of his Bat-cave only at night in order to fight evil.

In *The Simpsons* we still have traces of an awareness of the circumstances under which the first superhero was created because we have repeatedly hints upon superheroes fighting for example against Adolf Hitler (such as the *Plastic Man*, introduced in 1941, an actually existing superhero²⁸ whose adventures were especially known for their quirky, offbeat structure and surreal slapstick humour).

At the same time, we also have an awareness of the historicity of the superheroes in *The Simpsons*, that characters who, as members of the comic book genre, had their different «Ages» (such as the «Golden Age» [from 1938 to 1956], the «Silver Age» [up to 1970], the «Bronze Age» [up to the mid 1980's] and the «Modern Age»),²⁹ but who also had their own different incarnations and versions.

Thus, *Radioactive Man* clearly is a product of the ending «Golden Age» inasmuch as he sums up all the ambivalent feeling towards the possible effects of nu-

clear power, being considered as a blessing as well as a threatening curse. Hence, the date of his first appearance – November 1952 (ill. 3) i.e. the month the United States successfully detonated the first hydrogen bomb, codenamed «Mike», at Eniwetok island in the Bikini atoll in the Pacific Ocean – clearly refers to the era of the Cold War and its nuclear armament which gave rise to typical films of Jack Arnold such as *Formicula* (1954), *Tarantula* (1955) and *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957) where radiation was shown as responsible for increasing or shrinking living beings such as animals and humans.

In the late 50's of the *Simpsons*-world *Radioactive Man*, not unlike *Superman* with the black and white serial of 1951–1958, got his own film. Here,³⁰ however, the creators of *The Simpsons* clearly hint upon the fact that the origin of the comic books was mainly commercial in the first place: newspaper comic strips had already appeared in the last decade of the 19th century, but by the beginning of the 20th century they already had gained such a popularity that reprint collections of the newspaper strips began – for commercial and promotional reasons. Thus, Procter and Gamble for example used comic strips to give away premiums and for advertisement.³¹ In the 50's film dedicated to *Radioactive Man*, we have more than delicate traces of this heritage when the hero praises the quality of the «Laramie cigarettes,» giving him «the steady nerves [...] to combat evil» – just before a rocket hits the planet Earth and a dramatic voice poses the cliffhanger-question «Will Radioactive Man act in time to save the Earth?,» a question answered by the words «Tune in next week» over an image of the «Laramie» signet.

We then see *Radioactive Man* in another filmic incarnation, this time in the 70's³² in a series which is clearly modelled upon the notorious *Batman*-TV-series of 1966–1968, starring Adam West and Burt Ward as the superhero and his sidekick Robin. Being considered today positively as a trivial pop-re-interpretation of the *Batman*-myth and negatively as helplessly camp and silly,³³ it is this latter way the series is understood in *The Simpsons* by a film producer who now (i.e. in the middle of the 90's) wants to make a new updated and «serious» interpretation of the superhero Radioactive Man and his sidekick, Fallout Boy.

Instead of the goofy, lettered sound effects, interspersing the badly choreographed fights and the ensuing silly dancing (an element, not in this way present in the original *Batman*-series, but referring to the «Batus», the dance invented by Arthur Murray for the *Batman*-TV-series and featured in other contexts at least twice in episodes), he decides to use real X-rays and even real sulphuric acid, obviously in order to make things appear more real and serious on the big screen.

That the re-interpretations of *Radioactive Man* won't stop with this (in the end failing) endeavour is hinted upon with a scene in the above mentioned episode *Husbands and Knives* where the renowned author Alan Moore (who, with the graphic novel *Watchmen* has written a sort of a critical meta-referential history of the superhero-genre) talks about the way he has re-interpreted the myth of Radioactive Man, grounding him into «reality» by making him a heroin-addicted jazz-critique who even isn't radioactive.

While the *Radioactive Man*-episode deals with the different historic layers of each superhero, another episode titled *Homer the Whopper* tackles the differences that ensue when a comic book is interpreted for the cinema. The episode concerns a new superhero, created by the Comic Book Guy, who gives the superhero the telling name of «Everyman», which can have multiple meanings. On the one

hand it refers to the fact that Everyman acquires the superpowers of every superhero whose comic book he is touching (thus clearly – and also physically – mirroring his inventor, who is surrounded by comics all day, the same way *Busman* was mirroring bus-driver Otto's existence);³⁴ on the other hand it obviously refers to the fact that the hero – apart from his costume, clearly indebted to *Captain America*³⁵ – does not feature the typical looks of a superhero, but rather presents himself with even less than average physique, as his creator describes him: «a dumpy, unappealing loser: an everyman.»³⁶

This is also why no-one other than Homer Simpson is chosen by the Comic Book Guy when an actor is sought to play Everyman in a film. But the film crew has its own ideas about the appearance of Everyman and tries to turn him into his exact opposite when telling Homer: «We need you to slim down, muscle up and become the Everyman people want to be instead of the one they actually are.»

Thus the episode also criticises the tendency of films to smooth and straighten subversive elements of the comic books they are interpreting – seen in this context it is no coincidence that at the beginning of the episode, when the Comic Book Guy desperately tries to explain to Bart and Milhouse that films on superheroes are mostly based on an original comic book, a poster is hanging in the background, advertising a movie version of Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, but turning them into *Swatchmen*, thus ironizing the commercial exploitation of the movie version from 2009 (directed by Zack Snyder) which presented exactly the above mentioned smoothing and straightening of the much more demanding graphic novel.³⁷

III. B: Superheroes in «reality»

Finally, we also have superheroes appearing in the reality of *The Simpsons* (as opposed to «in the media»), as seen in those rare occasions where the protagonists of the series themselves become superheroes. In the Halloween-episode from 1999 *Desperately Seeking Xena*³⁸ (the emphasis on the «x» is due to the fact that this was the tenth Halloween-special, that an x-ray machine plays a decisive role and that the actress Lucy Lawless appears in the episode in the guise of her fictional character, the ancient warrior princess «Xena»), Bart and Lisa are mutated into superheroes with special powers by an exploding x-ray-machine, transforming them into *Stretch Dude* (a parody of the before mentioned *Plastic Man*) and *Clubber Girl* (a send-up of *Supergirl*: her mother, Marge Simpson, actually warns them at one point that they are «vulnerable to Kryptonite,» just as *Superman* and *Supergirl*). As the fake episode trailer shows, *Stretch Dude* and *Clubber Girl* fight villains, among them not only Saddam Hussein, but also – anachronistically – like the foes of the earlier superheroes of the Golden Age – Nazis.

The whole episode is conceived as a satire on the excesses and extremes of fandom and collecting, as well as the general commercialism of TV – given that it is a Halloween episode, it is, however, thought to present a sort of «apocryphal» plot which means that the events have to be considered as pure fantasy or rather (as the own and individual trailer for *Stretch Dude and Clubber Girl* hints upon) as an episode within an episode.

Things are different, however, in the case of the episode *Simple Simpson*³⁹ where Homer turns into a real-life-superhero: appalled by the humiliating treatment endured by his daughter Lisa while participating at a «Place setting Compe-



4 «Superbarrio» Gómez, the Mexican real life-superhero

tion» during a fun fair, he spontaneously grabs more or less at random paraphernalia at the fair's stalls, and disguises himself as a – yet nameless – avenger who punishes the cruel judge by throwing a pie into his face. Homer here appears as a super-man in two senses: first, because he dresses in the typical costume of a superhero (complete with mask and cape) and, thus without being recognized, takes revenge on the oppressors of defense- and helpless people; but also secondly in the sense that the voracious and egoistic Homer normally would rather selfishly eat up a pie instead of wasting it by – «needlessly»– helping others⁴⁰ and thus, when becoming «Simple Simon» (as he ultimately calls himself with reference to the famous old *Mother Goose* nursery rhyme) or rather «Pie-man»,⁴¹ he shows a super-human effort by not succumbing to his usual greed (thus, committing an act of «anti-consumption» which can be opposed to the consumerism as criticized in the case of the above discussed *Desperately Xeeeking Xena*-episode).⁴²

However, Homer's initially successful and glorious career as an avenging superhero takes a bad turn when he is confronted with the for superheroes (stereo) typical conflict between heroic existence and secret identity. The idea of Homer turning into a flabby caped crusader in tights is clearly derived from real-life superheroes such as «Superbarrio» Gómez (ill. 4), a Mexican «real-life superhero», who after the earthquake in 1985, when he and his neighbours were evicted from their housing in downtown Mexico, began to roam the streets of Mexico City.⁴³ In this context, he functioned primarily symbolically as the protector of low-income neighbourhoods, but also as a representative of the «Asamblea



5 Homer and Bart Simpson as The Pieman and Cupcake Kid: *The Simpsons*, from the episode *Simple Simpson* (2004)

de Barrios» (Mexico City's Neighbourhood Assembly), a grassroots organization concerned with the egalitarian acquisition and distribution of decent housing for the poor; «Superbarrio» Gómez here led protest rallies, filed petitions and challenged court decisions.⁴⁴ But the plot of the episode *Simple Simpson* about a superhero, struggling between his life as a public superhero and his private everyday existence, is, however, following a typical motif in superhero-comic books. In order to emphasize this, the episode references Peter Parker, another superhero who in combination with his alter ego Spiderman is most associated with such a struggle between the extremes. The episode therefore quotes the 2002 film version of *Spiderman* when Homer creates his costume the same way Peter Parker does in the film, or when he kisses his wife Marge the same upside-down style Spiderman does it in a by now classic scene in the film.⁴⁵ «Superbarrio» has been admittedly invented by Marco Rascón Córdova who also organizes the «Superbarrio»-events, having, however, someone else acting in the suit whose real identity he keeps a closely guarded secret. In *Simple Simpson* Pieman's real identity is instead discovered, first by his daughter Lisa who then begs him not to put himself into danger anymore, but then, when he doesn't listen to her, his identity is also discovered by his cruel boss, Montgomery Burns, owner of Springfield's nuclear power plant where Homer works as a safety inspector. He blackmails Homer with his knowledge and forces him to change sides and to humiliate from now on the innocent such as a scout girl selling cookies at Burns' door. But when he tries to force Homer to «pie» the Dalai Lama, Homer refuses and instead decides to unmask himself publicly. But as the final scene shows, he

returns as Pieman, now accompanied by his son Bart in the guise of «Cupcake Kid» (thus mimicking Batman and his sidekick Robin: ill. 5) – but when posing impressively in their costumes on the roof of their house by night at the end of the episode, they get immediately «grounded» back into reality when Marge asks them to pick out the leaves out of the gutter, given that they are already on the roof.

IV. Conclusion

Summing up, one can state that *The Simpsons* criticizes contemporary culture by using the motif of the superheroes: superheroes are used for cash, especially from children whom the superheroes are offered as a means to escape from reality.⁴⁶ At the same time, superheroes are used in order to show the quality gap between the comic book (where by now also superheroes with a rather unconventional look – such as the Everyman – are possible) and the film industry for which they first have to «streamlined» and adapted to the conventional Hollywood aesthetics.

Finally, superheroes are also used in order to show what happens when this phenomenon leaves its usual fantastic existence in the media and enters our reality – with rather sad consequences for the superhero as well for the way our reality is perceived and depicted. This is a narrative device also used by comic book author Grant Morrison who, in 1990, made his superhero, the above mentioned *Animal-Man*, meet his author, that is: Morrison himself. As they exchange their experiences in their individual realities, Animal-Man comes to the conclusion: «Your world must be terrible. It seems so [...] grey and bleak. How can you possibly live in a world without superheroes?» To which Morrison humbly replies: «We get by.»⁴⁷

Anmerkungen

1 John Alberti, «Introduction,» in: *Leaving Springfield: The Simpsons and the Possibility of Oppositional Culture*, ed. by John Alberti, Detroit, MI 2004, p. xi–xxxii, here p. xxix. I am gratefully indebted to Anthony Metivier (Berlin) for checking and correcting my English text.

2 Jonathan Gray, *Watching with The Simpsons*. New York 2006.

3 Douglas Rushkoff, «Bart Simpson: Prince of the Irreverence,» in: Alberti 2004 (as note 1), p. 292–301. For the metareferential implications of this see Henry Keazor, «The Stuff You May Have Missed.» Art, Film and Metareference in *The Simpsons*,» in: *The Metareferential Turn in Contemporary Arts and Media: Forms, Functions, Attempts at Explanation* (Studies in Intermediality 5), ed. by Werner Wolf, Katharina Bantleon and Jeff Thoss, Amsterdam/New York 2011 (in print).

4 For an example where in *The Simpsons* the boundaries between comic and animated cartoon are blurred and transgressed see here note 21.

5 Angela Ndaliansis, «Comic Book Superheroes: An Introduction,» in: *The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero*, ed. by Angela Ndaliansis, London/New York 2009, p. 3–15, here p. 4.

6 Jason Bainbridge, «Worlds Within Worlds»: The Role of Superheroes in the Marvel and DC Universes,» in: Ndaliansis 2009 (as note 5), p. 64–85, here p. 64. Bainbridge's analysis might appear puzzling in the American context where superheroes have been studied in academia by now for decades, but it certainly applies to the German situation. Moreover, Bainbridge specifies that «most studies that do exist are more concerned with the comic book as an art form [...] than as a social commentary.»

7 See for this also Duncan Stuart Beard, «Local Satire with a Global Reach: Ethnic Stereotyping and Cross-Cultural Conflicts in *The Simpsons*,» in: Alberti 2004 (as note 1), p. 273–291.

8 See Hegel who in his *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik*, given the «gegenwärtigen prosaischen Zustände», claims: «Die Zufälligkeit des äußerlichen Daseins hat sich verwandelt in eine feste, sichere Ordnung der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft und des Staates, so daß jetzt Polizei, Gerichte, das Heer, die Staatsregierung an die Stelle der chimärischen Zwecke treten, die der Ritter sich machte. Dadurch verändert sich auch die Ritterlichkeit der in neuen Romanen agierenden Helden. Sie stehen als Individuen mit ihren subjektiven Zwecken der Liebe, Ehre, Ehrsucht oder mit ihren Idealen der Weltverbesserung dieser bestehenden Ordnung und Prosa der Wirklichkeit gegenüber, die ihnen von allen Seiten Schwierigkeiten in den Weg legt. [...] Mag einer

sich auch noch soviel mit der Welt herumgezankt haben, umhergeschoben sein – zuletzt bekommt er meistens doch sein Mädchen und irgendeine Stellung, heiratet und wird ein Philister, so gut wie die anderen auch [...]» See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen zur Ästhetik*, ed. by Friedrich Bassenge, Vol. 1, Frankfurt/M. 1965, p. 567.

9 Second episode of the seventh season. It originally aired on the Fox network in the United States on September 24, 1995.

10 See also note 47

11 Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, London 2000, p. 94.

12 Chabon 2000 (as note 14), p. 93 and 94. In 2004 Chabon teamed up with America's largest independent comic book and Manga publisher, *The Dark Horse*, in order to launch the series, described in the novel. Under the title *Michael Chabon Presents the Amazing Adventures of the Escapist* several issues of the comic have been published until now which are all written and drawn in older or simpler styles in order to simulate the fact that *The Escapist* (as described in Chabon's novel) has its origins in the «Golden Age» and looks back at a by now decades-long publishing history.

13 This is obviously a parody of the really existing superhero *Power Man* – see on him Greg M. Smith, «The Superhero as Labor,» in: Ndaliansis 2009 (as note 5), 126–43, here p. 136.

14 The 7th episode of the 19th season, first broadcast on November 18, 2007.

15 In the later 2001 episode *Worst Episode Ever* (see below) when buying a comic book of the (existing) series *Sad Sack* whose cover claims that the story deals with «The Dead of Sad Sack» (hence its title-character), Nelson warns the seller: «This better not be another fake-out.»

16 In the episode *Homer The Whopper*, the first episode of the 21st season; it originally aired on September 27, 2009. Milhouse there continues after having stopped reading a comic concerning his troubles: «Now they're back in spades». That comic-books can provide the reader with fake, unreal friends is mocked in the 2001 episode *Worst Episode Ever* (see below, note 19) where a doctor asks the Comic Book Guy: «You do have friends, don't you?» To which the Comic Book Guy replies: «Well, the Super Friends.» The doctor then goes on: «Well, you should get some friends who aren't printed on paper,» to which the Comic Book Guy replies: «What, you mean action figures?»

17 The 21st episode of the 2nd season which aired on May 9, 1991.

18 This fits well with Bart's own creation, *Bartman*, who simply represents himself in a costume.

19 The 11th episode of the 12th season which aired on February 4, 2001.

20 Created by writer Stan Lee and artist/co-writer Jack Kirby, he first appeared in *The X-Men* #1 September 1963.

21 When Bart and Milhouse then start a fight, the boundaries between animated cartoon and comic book are blurred and transgressed since the movement of two boys is put to an halt in a freeze frame, they suddenly feature muscular bodies and they are surrounded by the typical comic «gutters», framing each image, as well as accompanied by speech balloons.

22 Created in 1946 by writer Larry Morton and the artists Robert Peterson and Art Helfant.

23 Created in 1946 by Jerry Robinson.

24 Created by writer Joe Gill and artist/co-writer Steve Ditko in 1960.

25 *The Marvelman*, created in 1954 out of a transformation of the former Captain Marvel, always had to utter the word «Kimota» («atomic» in reverse) in order to make the shift from human to superhero – see: Paul Atkinson, «The Time of the Heroes. Narrative, Progress, and Eternity in *Miracleman*,» in: Ndaliniis 2009 (as note 5), p. 44–63, here 48.

26 Thus, *Radioactive Man* actually represents a mixture of the typical features of the two main comic-book-publishers, D.C. Comics and Marvel: While D.C. mostly stars god-like, born superheroes such as Superman and Wonder Woman, or humans who (like Batman) willingly decided to become superheroes, Marvel rather presents superheroes who owe their superpowers to scientific or technical accidents – since Radioactive Man got his supposed powers due to an atomic explosion (just like a Marvel superhero), but then appears to be rather a superhero like D.C.'s Batman, he represents an overlap of both publishers. See for the typical D.C. and the Marvel features Saige Walton, «Baroque Mutants in the 21st Century?: Rethinking Genre Through the Superhero,» in: Ndaliniis 2009 (as note 5), p. 86–106, here p. 98.

27 Bill Boichel, «Batman: Commodity as Myth,» in: *The Many Lives of the Batman. Critical Approaches to a Superhero and his Media*, ed. by Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio, London/New York 1991, p. 4–17, here p. 4.

28 Created by writer-artist Jack Cole in 1941.

29 As comics historian and movie producer Michael Uslan writes in an article, published in *Alter Ego* (Vol. 3, No. 54, November 2005, p. 79), an American magazine devoted to comic books and comic-book creators from the 30's to the late 60's, the historic distinction between the different «Ages» (clearly modeled upon the hierarchy of Olympic medals) was introduced in a letter, published in the letters column of the comic book *Justice League of America* in February 1966, and immediately was taken up and used as a sort of «vernacular», replacing earlier no-

tions such as «Second Heroic Age of Comics» or «The Modern Age of Comics».

30 For example in the episode *Three Men and a Comic Book*.

31 See for example Boichel 1991 (as note 27), p. 5.

32 In the episode *Radioactive Man*.

33 See for example Boichel 1991 (as note 27), p. 15 and Matthew Henry, «Looking for Amanda Hugginkiss: Gay Life on «The Simpsons,»» in: Alberti 2004 (as note 1), p. 223–243, here p. 231.

34 The way Everyman gains his powers is moreover a clear reference to Peter Petrelli, a character from the TV-series *Heroes*, created by Tim Kring and aired in America between 2006 and 2010. In *The Simpsons*-episode Peter's ability is, however, mediated in a for the series typical way: while Peter has to touch other superheroes themselves in order to gain their powers, for Everyman it is enough to touch their comic book adventures.

35 See the dialogue in the episode: «Everyman: Thank Captain America, for giving me the patriotism to want to save the president. And thank Wonderwoman for giving me the boobs to distract the guards.»

36 The name thus also adopts and interprets in a very misanthropic way the meaning of the late 15th-century English morality play's title *Everyman* (*The Somonyng of Everyman*) to which the superhero's name also refers – for the morality play see the introduction by Arthur C. Cawley (also ed.), *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays*, London 1967.

37 Watches play an important role in Moore's graphic novel, but the double meaning of the notion «Watchmen» (as referring to «watchers» or to «watches») is here of course flattened down to an advertisement when re-naming the movie after the Swiss watches «Swatch». Concerning the critics accusing director Snyder of flattening down and smoothening out Moore's novel see for example the review by Noah Berlatsky in *The Chicago Reader* from the 12th March 2009 where he stresses the fact that the original comic book «Watchmen can't be a simple exercise in 80s nostalgia, no matter how hard Zack Snyder tries to turn it into one».

38 The 4th episode of the 11th season, aired on October 31st 1999.

39 The 19th episode of the 15th season, aired on May 2, 2004.

40 See for this also Apu's comment towards the end when Homer unmasks himself: «Homer Simpson the Pieman? Impossible! He has never thrown away a pastry in his life.»

41 The nursery rhyme begins with the words «Simple Simon met a pieman».

42 See for this in general: Sam Tingleff, «The Simpsons as a Critique of Consumer Culture,» 1998, in: *The Simpsons Archive* (<http://>

www.snpp.com/other/papers/st.paper.html
[last accessed 19.12.2010].

43 See for this and the following *De Superman a Superbarrios. Comunicación masiva y cultura popular en los procesos sociales de América Latina*, ed. by Hans Roeder, Panama 1990.

44 For another example of such «real life superheroes» see the project of the Mexican photographer Dulce Pinzon who in his *Superhero*-series from 2004 casts the Mexican migrant workers of New York City as superheroes by showing them in superhero-costumes which match their jobs – for example a window cleaner, working in great heights, is therefore photographed in a Spiderman-costume (Thorsten Wübbena [Frankfurt am Main] kindly made me aware of these photos: <http://www.wired.com/rawfile/2010/09/dulce-pinzon?pid=179> [last accessed: 19.12.2010]). «Superbarrio» Gómez, however, has made in the meantime the passage from «real life superhero» to «comic book hero» inasmuch as he, in 1998, has made his appearance in the two issues «Crisis» #7 and #8 of the British comic book series *2000 AD Presents*. He there features as an activist trying to prevent multi-national corporations from taking advantage of Latin American Third World nations in the *Third World War* storyline by Pat Mills and Carlos Ezquerro, the co-creator of *Judge Dredd*.

45 See also short film, edited by a fan and uploaded on YouTube in October 2009 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UIA4R5xSFmI> [last accessed 19.12.2010] which combines the soundtrack song *Hero* from the 2002 film *Spiderman* (performed by the band Nickelback) and scenes from *Simple Simpson*.

46 Of course, one could accuse *The Simpsons* of likewise using superheroes in order to attract viewers, moreover hypocritically disguising their own commercial attitude in a seemingly critical vest – but as Gray 2006 (as note 2), p. 163–164 has rightly stressed: «Textually, *The Simpsons* is boldly parodic, but as political-economic unit, it is a flagship not only for the world's largest media corporations, but also for licensing, merchandising and, hence, hyper-commercialism in general. As such, draped in its fool's court-costume, it offers nothing close to pure rebellion. To some commentators, therefore, it will be seen as a failure, or worse yet a ruse, for there are some who see anything but pure rebellion and radicalism as a let-down and a sign of yet more cooption into the hegemonic capitalist-corporate fold. However, such an attitude is, paradoxically, at once too optimistic and too pessimistic. The optimism lies in its belief that revolution with a substantial audience is possible on prime time, mainstream television, whereas the pessimism lies in the complete inability to see what substantial

gains are made nevertheless. The notion is thus riddled with tragic flaws [...]. So the program [...] by keeping its messages light, [...] avoids the entertainment Scylla and Charybdis of patronizing hypocrisy and of simply not entertaining anyone, while simultaneously offering a degree of transparency in its self-parody.»

47 Grant Morrison (author), Chas Truog and Mark Farmer (artists), *Animal Man, No. 26: Deus ex Machina*, August 1990.