

Comics Crash: Filipino Komiks and the Quest for Cultural Legitimacy

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The Illegitimate Medium

"It's great to be a comics fan these days!" This line is echoed in numerous conversations, whether verbal or online. These are the days of the major Hollywood "comic-book movies." Sony's *Spider-Man* has been called a phenomenon for breaking the 100 million-dollar mark in gross ticket sales on its first weekend of release. Other films such as *X-Men*, *Blade* and the Superman and Batman movies have also been very successful and more superhero films are on the way. American mainstream media is slowly changing its condescending perception of the comic book with the releases of non-superhero films such as *Ghost World*, *From Hell*, *Road to Perdition*, and the upcoming *American Splendor*. It is curious to note that the current popularity of comics (or graphic novels, if you will) as a mining ground for both blockbusters and independent films has given the medium, as well as its loyal fans, some form of mainstream acceptance or even respectability. As artist Randy Duburke has pointed out about Tim Burton's *Batman* movie, (qtd. in Bacon-Smith 112): "these people [fans] felt like film legitimizes the character—that if it was done on celluloid...you can say to your friends...who are telling you that comics are crap, 'well, see it can't be bad, it's up on film'." In a sense, the comics medium finds legitimacy in film. Indeed, for a medium that has been viewed as disposable reading for children or illiterates, it helps to be noticed by the creators of America's chief form of mass entertainment and the nation's "proudest and most exciting cultural export" (Stein 40).

As an American cultural export, comic books were introduced to the Philippines in World War II. While there were already comic strips

such as “Kenkoy” by Tony Velasquez, published in magazines like *Liwayway* during the late 1920s, the idea of comics in booklet form came from the comic books that the American G.I.s brought with them in the 1940s. Most American comic books featured one story or a number of stories with the same character, but the Filipino comic book took the form of an anthology and was thus called a “*komiks magasin*.” Even though the first comic book (or comic magazine) was a “funny book” called *Halakhak*, Filipino komiks would eventually be known for featuring melodramatic soap operas aimed not at children but at adult readers. This development presents a marked difference from the way American comics have been perceived (although this perception has changed since the mid-1980s). The komiks were intended for adults, but they were still viewed as a cheap and low form of literature. Indeed, creators such as Francisco Coching, Mars Ravelo, Alfredo Alcala and Nestor Redondo have yet to be recognized as “artists” by the mainstream critics.

While the booklet format is basically American in origin, the most visible art “style” found in current Filipino komiks, specifically *Culture Crash*, comes from Japan. Interestingly enough, the komiks influenced by the manga (Japanese comics) and anime (Japanese animation) are mostly being read by young people (teens and pre-teens) rather than adults. This shift in cultural influence has opened an interesting debate about Philippine culture as expressed in komiks. Borrowing the format seems to be less problematic than borrowing styles. Indeed, as Japanese comic art developed with few outside influences, the “manga style” is unique and immediately identifiable as Japanese as opposed to the supposedly “universal” American and European styles. The uniqueness of the Japanese manga look has caused a number of komiks readers and critics to go back to the question of cultural identity. What is Filipino about the new Japanese style? Why do we have to copy another country’s art style? Why can’t we have a distinctly Filipino style? These questions seemingly reveal a desire for cultural identity in terms of Filipino-ness and cultural legitimization of Filipino komiks.

But what form of legitimacy are we speaking of here? In examining the issues involving mass culture (where American comics originates and where Japanese comics eventually found itself in), Dominic Strinati points out particular aspects of this field of study: namely, the commercial and the ideological. The first aspect focuses on the marketability of a cultural artifact, of comics morphing into a cultural product. The second one

deals with the ideas and concepts espoused, reinforced or subverted by the cultural artifact (3). In both cases, various questions about komiks emerge. Within the commercial arena, can the publication of Filipino komiks be profitable in a local market flooded with foreign comics? Does it have commercial viability in the international market? In the ideological ring, the concept of identity stands in the forefront of this examination. Do Filipino komiks represent Filipino-ness, whether in a pure, hybrid, or mutated form? Do Filipino komiks involve postmodern pastiche or are they mere fanboy rip-offs? Do they represent the dreams and desires of the so-called Filipino masses or the diluted angst of contemporary cyber-savvy youth? While this examination cannot ignore the commercial origins of the komiks, intrinsically, the medium does reflect, whether in format or content, the Filipino experience from the re-imagined past (Francisco Coching's "Hagibis" and "Lapu Lapu," for example) to the extrapolated future (Arnold Arre's *Trip to Tagaytay*). Thus, komiks is a cultural mass-produced product that was once commercially successful and can be viewed now as a medium for communication, entertainment and even study, all these within the context of Philippine culture. The widespread acceptance of komiks as a distinct medium of Philippine culture signals its legitimacy.

One agent of legitimization that American comics creator and theorist Scott McCloud mentions is the academe. While movies may give comics mass commercial acceptance and visibility, the actual study of the medium, it seems, can lead to more respectability. However, it seems that McCloud would rather look at the "intrinsic worth" and vision of comics rather than view them as cultural artifacts (*Reinventing Comics* 94). For the purposes of this paper, however, it is the cultural aspect of the comics and manga-influenced komiks that will be examined. Using Simon During's description of what cultural studies does, this discussion will focus on how a group "with least power" (Filipinos in relation to Americans and Japanese comic producers) creates or develops its own use for "cultural products—in fun, in resistance, or to articulate their own identity" (7).

The Irony of Manga

American manga critic Frederik Schodt seems to take pride in the assertion that manga artists have diverse art styles as opposed to the ideal Grecian images that proliferate in Western comics (26). This statement is fully supported by the wide range of styles employed by Japanese creators from Katsuhiro Otomo's intricate cyberpunk worlds to Murasaki Yamada's

minimalist “home” themed comics (Schodt 156-157). Scott McCloud also comments on how different the paneling techniques in manga are, suggesting a Zen-like mysticism in the Japanese comic medium (*Understanding Comics* 80-81). Indeed, manga as it is currently perceived, basically stands for “Japanese comics” rather than simply “comics.” The Japanese use the term to differentiate their comics from those of the rest of the world. However manga is perceived, it is first and foremost a medium for communication and entertainment. Manga artists employ a variety of art techniques and styles that make manga look different from their Western counterparts. It is curious to note then that manga is now presented and copied as a “style.” There are now books, released by both Japanese and American publishers, that show would-be creators how to draw in the manga way. American comics publisher Marvel has released titles set in the “Mangaverse” featuring characters and themes done in the “manga style.” This style apparently involves big eyes, wild multi-colored hair, and hyperkinetic speed lines—features of the style developed by the “god of manga” Osamu Tezuka.

While admittedly, a number of manga works seem to have the style that Tezuka employed (which ironically, was heavily influenced by Walt Disney, the American animator), it is unfortunate that the medium with a multitude of unique artistic expressions has crystallized into one particular look. Artist Kia Asamiya, who is currently the artist for the very popular American comic book *Uncanny X-Men*, expressed this concern in an American magazine for comics; “I’m afraid fans will look at my initial work in X-Men and give it that blanket ‘manga’ tag... Americans tend to think [all] manga has the same style when nothing can be further from the truth. That’s like saying all American comics look the same” (qtd. in Cotton 34). Apparently, it is not only Americans that have this perception of manga.

Pinoy Komiks, Meet Pinoy Manga

In the Philippines, possibly the most popular komiks magasin these days would be *Culture Crash*, an anthology in booklet form that has manga as its primary influence. Japanese comics are also anthologies that come out weekly in thick, phone book-sized, black and white (with gray tones) volumes. The popular titles are then collected in pocket-sized books. *Culture Crash* is different in the sense that the comic books are printed in full

color, are booklet-sized and do not come out weekly (the schedule is highly erratic in fact).

Culture Crash includes game, music and technology reviews in each issue. Its forerunners, the earlier komiks such as *Pilipino*, *Hiwaga* and *Superstar*, also included articles on different topics. *Superstar* (named after Nora Aunor) focused on movie celebrities. Thus, in format, *Culture Crash* firmly fits in with the Filipino komiks magasin tradition. The reasons for the popularity of the magasin format may be due to economic realities. Filipinos want more for their money. It can also be due to the Filipinos' penchant for variety, which is evident in the noontime television shows and the "chop suey" comedy-musical films. It should be noted that this format is not uniquely Filipino as other countries like the United States, France, Italy and Malaysia have comic magazines in one form or another. In the Philippines, however, the anthology is the primary format for comics.

In content, though, *Culture Crash* deviates from the Philippine komiks tradition. One deviation lies in its use of language. The comics sections are in Filipino while the articles are written in English. Filipino is used for light topics that can be expressed at the conversational or colloquial level while English is used for discursive material. In one of the stories called "Solstice Butterfly," the technical language or "tech speak" is in English. Perhaps this shows that the creators have not yet intellectualized Filipino. Interestingly enough, the use of Filipino is one of the qualities that make the comics uniquely Filipino. This is not an indictment of *Culture Crash*, but it does demonstrate the language issues that are still present in Philippine society. Indeed, has Filipino been intellectualized? Intellectualized, in this case, means going beyond the colloquial and into more academic discourse. While the articles in *Culture Crash* are not academic in nature, English is still used to convey expository information and critical reviews.

The more striking point of departure of *Culture Crash* from the komiks tradition is the art. The illustrators employ the "manga style." Whereas the past komiks have been influenced by Western artists, *Culture Crash* takes its cue from the Japanese artists, or rather the popularized form of manga art. "Popularized" seems to be the key word here. In an article found in the fifth issue, the publisher states that the creators' "preferred art style" is the "popularized art style of the Japanese" and that this adaptation has made the artists "much easier to be singled out as copycats" (Palabay

55). It is this use of the Japanese art style that has led to the current debate about Filipino culture and art styles in komiks.

On one hand, the use of the Japanese art style can be viewed merely as a manifestation of the hybridity of Filipino culture. The title of the comic book itself, *Culture Crash*, implies a fusion of cultures. The art style is Japanese, the coloring technique is American, and the language is Filipino. The creators also claim that it is not only the language that is Filipino but various aspects like the use of Pasig as the setting for a futuristic cyberpunk type of world in "Pasig" and the use of the diwata in "One Day, Isang Diwa." However, one can argue that these manifestations of Filipino culture are merely superficial. The Pasig in "Pasig" can be any futuristic city in decay and the diwata curiously looks like a Western elf found in fantasy anime. The comic does have a uniquely Filipino mascot called Tammy Tamaraw, based on the water buffalo that is found only in the Philippines. In terms of language, if the comics were translated into English what would identify *Culture Crash* as Filipino? But should it even be identifiable as Filipino? Why not simply view it as manga made in the Philippines?

Manga, or rather its popularized form, is quickly identifiable as Japanese because of its unique illustrations even when the manga comics are translated or when the manga style is employed by artists of other nationalities. Visually, however, it can be argued that the manga characters do not look Japanese at all with their multi-colored hair and eyes and tiny mouths that warp into huge craters of teeth. It can also be argued that the art style merely represents reality without necessarily creating a photorealistic copy of it. French film director Christophe Gans has observed that manga is the visual language of today's youth and thus, it can be said that manga now transcends national borders. Thus, there are numerous comics around the world that employ the popular manga visual art style such as *W.I.T.C.H.* from Italy, the aforementioned Marvel "Mangaverse" titles from the United States and the various manhwa (Chinese comics) series such as *The Adventures of Wisely* written by Chinese Hong Kong-based writer Ni Kuang and drawn by Singaporean artist Wee Tian Beng.

Culture Crash is by no means the only Filipino publication influenced by the manga style. The anime magazine *Questor* has included a Pinoy manga section and so has *CHIPS*, a series recently released. Both look even more Japanese than *Culture Crash*. The *Questor* manga, for example, features girls who wear school uniforms with short skirts. While

school uniforms are basically Western, the short skirts are common in Japan, but not in the Philippines. Komiks magasin titles for children such as *Jolly Kid* and *Funny Komiks* have also “turned manga.” It is quite obvious that the publishers of *Funny Komiks*, which began in the early 1980s with stories featuring the unique artwork of Larry Alcala, Tenny Henson and Ronie Santiago, have observed that the Japanese look is now popular with the kids, and thus changed *Funny’s* overall design and artwork. The stories in *Funny Komiks* thus became generically Japanese in appearance.

Filipino creators are merely one of many creators from different countries that utilize this style. Perhaps “utilize” is a key word in this debate. Is the style merely a tool to express ideas and tell stories? If so, the utilization of any style should still express the cultural background of the creator. Ironically, it is the popularized form of manga that makes its utilization troublesome for a number of critics. It is distinctly Japanese and yet applicable to any country because of its representational or iconic quality. Also, perhaps it is not the use of the style that is put into question, but the blatant use of it. When is one merely influenced by a particular style and when is one totally “ripping off” a style? In my perception, when the individual creator, and his culture disappear into the foreign style, then the creator has not just ripped off the style; one has also been ripped into unseen pieces.

By a curious twist, Taga-ilog, a reviewer from *Culture Crash* (5:26) states that the artwork of Yukinobu Hoshino’s *2001 Nights: Children of Earth Manga* “at first glance ... looked like something by traditional Pinoy comic book artists!” At least one of the creators of *Culture Crash* then is aware of the traditional komiks art style. The question that comes to mind is, if a Japanese manga artist can draw in a style that is similar to the so-called traditional Pinoy style, then why can’t Pinoy artists today do the same? Is the manga style (which now, because of the reviewer’s question, becomes a misnomer), the “new” way of drawing as opposed to the traditional Pinoy style? Now, the whole idea of the manga style and its application in Filipino komiks becomes even more intriguing.

The Western Pinoy Style

The traditional Pinoy style finds its origins in the West, particularly the United States. According to Frederik Schodt, there are “two predominant and most distinctive forms of comics...those from America

and Japan; minor variations on both are found in Europe, Latin America, and Asia” (22). In contrast to China, Korea, and other Asian countries, the Philippines adopted the Japanese form only recently. It can even be asserted that the rise in popularity of anime worldwide (even in the United States) was the cause of this adoption. Before manga and anime came into the scene, however, it was the American form that was dominant.

As was mentioned earlier, the Americans brought the comic book form itself in the 1940s. With the adoption of the format came the adoption of the art style. American comics artists such as Alex Raymond, Al Capp, Alex Toth, among others, influenced local komiks creators. Because of the American influence, the characters in Filipino komiks have Western features like fair skin and high-bridged noses. The Filipino superheroes are based on their American counterparts. Mars Ravelo’s characters Darna and Captain Barbell were based on Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel, respectively. While the characters may look American, the stories are definitely Filipino. The superheroes are Filipino not just in nationality but also in terms of origin. Darna, Captain Barbell, and Panday all belong to the working class and receive their powers from magical objects handed down to them because of their humility and purity of heart. American heroes either inherently possess their skills and powers such as Superman, Wonder Woman or even Batman; or get their powers through scientific means such as the Flash, Spider-Man and the Hulk. This difference in origin can be linked to American individualism and pragmatism and to Filipino fatalism.

The Filipino superhero stories resembled their American counterparts; however, it was the melodrama rather than superhero stories that proved to be the popular genre in komiks. Komiks also had a wide range of themes, many of them based on Philippine history (“Lapu Lapu”), folklore (“Pedro Penduko”), and social issues (“God...Save Me”).

While American comics visually influenced the komiks in art style, a distinctive Filipino style emerged. Artists such as Francisco Coching (“Lapu Lapu,” “Pedro Penduko,” “Hagibis”), Nestor Redondo (“Darna”) and Alfredo Alcala (“Voltar”) developed unique and yet similar styles. Unlike the European “clean line” style, the Filipino komiks artists used thick ink strokes to create very ornate images and landscapes. The style has been described as baroque, which can be found in numerous Filipino cultural creations from paintings to jeepneys. The style was distinct so that even if

the story's setting and characters were foreign such as Alcalá's Viking epic "Volta," the look and feel of the piece was still Filipino. Thus visually and textually (the language used has always been Filipino), the komiks were indeed Filipino. Even when Filipino artists such as Alex Niño, Sonny Trinidad, and Danny Bulanadi work on American titles, their Filipino style is apparent. Thus, despite the strong American influence, the Filipino creators managed to appropriate the comics medium and make it their own.

With the popularity of Whilce Portacio on *Uncanny X-men* and the speculator boom in comics, a new wave of American-influenced komiks emerged in the 1990s. By this time, the Filipino traditional komiks magasin had lost much of its artistic merit. Over the years, the komiks became more disposable in production and content. Overtly American-looking titles such as *Flashpoint*, *Exodus*, and *Memento Mori* were published. In format and art style, these titles were definitely more comics (in the American sense) than komiks. Even the language was American as the titles were in English with very few Filipino phrases included, usually reserved for expressions. During this time, there were some voices that lamented the lack of Filipino-ness in the Filipino comics of the nineties. *Memento Mori*, while keeping to the anthology format, featured stories set in Paris and New York with no Filipino character in sight. While the artwork was hailed as "avant garde," the works looked suspiciously similar to the Vertigo Comics look and feel popularized in comics such as *Sandman* and *Hellblazer*. *Flashpoint* to its credit featured Filipino superheroes albeit with an American look. The storyline also tackled distinctly Filipino issues involving religion and the cult of celebrity. *Exodus* involved numerous regional heroes (all looking especially tough and angry) demonstrating the diversity of Filipino culture even if they were drawn in the American "combat" look popularized by the Image Comics publications. The book though was too cluttered with heroes to make any narrative sense. Thus, to a certain degree, a few comics komiks of the nineties still displayed aspects of Philippine culture.

In recent years, various Filipino graphic novels have been published. Taking their cue from the Americans who in turn, took the format from the European graphic album, the Filipino graphic novels were individualistic in art style, borrowing from diverse cultures such as those of Japan, Europe and the United States. While the styles may be a mix of various comic forms, the settings and content are distinctly Filipino. Arnold Arre's

Trip to Tagaytay, popular cartoonist PeI Medina's *Pirata* and Gil D. Paguio's *Hinagap* all feature settings, characters, and concepts grounded in Philippine culture. *Hinagap* is a feminist story of revenge and honor set in a mythical pre-Hispanic Philippines. *Pirata* is a serious story featuring the popular *Pugad Baboy* characters; it captures the feel of a Filipino action film where justice is not necessarily found within the system. *Trip to Tagaytay* is a story of hope set in a dystopic future. It is interesting to note that these three examples of Filipino graphic novels are set in the past, present and future, respectively. Thus, on the bases of influence, format, and art styles, Filipino comics history can be divided into three periods: the komiks magasin, comics komiks, and manga komiks.

But what does the future hold for Filipino komiks? Legitimacy in the local and international cultural scenes perhaps?

Particularity, Universality and Legitimacy

The publisher of *Culture Crash*, James Palabay, states "Every artist starts out by emulating someone else's style. Slowly but surely the artist comes to his/her own" (55). It can be said then that everyone, no matter what cultural background, is influenced by someone else. And although one wants or needs to be viewed as unique, there is also a need or desire to be recognized and accepted by others. It is in this dynamic that Georg Hegel's ideas on particularity and universality can be applied. Particularity according to Hegel "refers to the individual agent" while universality "refers to the social aspect of [human] existence" and that "it is in and by the universal recognition of human particularity that individuality realizes and manifests itself" (cited in Sarup 190-191). Thus, in terms of comics art styles, an artist is initially influenced by his or her culture and then by particular artists. Through the course of artistic development, ideally a particular style emerges. Then, when this particular style is recognized, the artist achieves some form of acceptance and legitimacy. As other individuals influence individuals, cultures influence other cultures. Both American and Japanese cultures have influenced Filipino komiks, and within the American comics form, Filipinos, as a group and as individuals, have been able to form their own variation of the comics medium in format and graphics. Perhaps in time, the Japanese-influenced creators will do so as well. Hopefully, they will be able to transcend the narrow view of manga and demonstrate more diversity as the manga artists have.

In terms of the legitimacy of the medium, comics have been recognized and accepted in most parts of Europe and Asia, most notably Japan and China, as simply another means of communication and entertainment that can either be considered trash or art. In the United States, which is the originator of the modern comics form, the medium is slowly gaining acceptance, mostly, as noted earlier, through the translation of comics into film. In the Philippines, komiks has been known as the cheapest form of entertainment and is thus well-accepted. Numerous films have been based on komiks stories since the 1950s. In the art scene, an exhibit of the works of Francisco Coching was held at the Cultural Center of the Philippines. However, since the medium failed to develop and evolve (some say it has devolved since the days of Coching), the komiks eventually began to be perceived as cheap in the derogatory way. Aside from Coching, creators such as Alfredo Alcala and Nestor Redondo are hardly recognized. Ironically, it was the Americans who paid tribute to Alcala and Redondo when the two passed away. Currently, the komiks seems to be losing to the pocket romance books in terms of sales.

There have been some small comics conventions in the Philippines but these were mostly collectors' conventions that focus on comics' monetary value and collectivity. Recently, the creators of *Culture Crash* held the First Philippine Comic Book and Anime Convention. While it was a good venue for various comics creators to gather and present their work, the convention was more of an anime show where virtually no Filipino creators were involved (unless one counts the animators who work on Japanese animation). While it may be argued that anime is part of Philippine popular culture, it was quite sad to see creators and creations of traditional komiks get virtually ignored amidst the din of cosplay (costume play) and J-pop (Japanese pop).

In the academe, the emergence of Popular Culture studies has brought comics into the classrooms as cultural artifacts. However, the content of comics as art or literature deserves to be studied as well. *Maus* has been taken up in an ethics class and *La Pacifica* has been studied in a postmodern literature class. In the United States, I have used *Arkham Asylum* as part of my body of discourse for an English composition class focusing on the journey theme in literature. In the Philippines, I have taught the Creative Writing for Comics class for a number of years. The course focuses on the technical aspects of writing a comic book. In the process of learning comic book writing, the students become exposed to

the unique qualities of the medium. In the basic College English class, I have used the popularity of comics and anime, to discuss cultural differences enroute to making the students more aware of the Philippines' rich culture. Komiks becomes an integral part of this discussion.

In today's international comics scene, Filipino komiks have remained invisible. However, the individual artists have become famous for their work in American comics. From Nestor Redondo in the 70s to current stars like Leinil Yu, the Philippines has been a rich source for artistic talent for American publishers. With this set-up, current Filipino readers get to chuckle at minor inside jokes that the Filipino artists would insert in their work like the use of the word "Makulit" in *X-Men* or using the facade of the University of Santo Tomas as a background in *Battle of the Planets*. Hardly a grand presentation of Filipino culture. Indeed, as artist Gerry Alanguilan laments, the American publishers could not care less about Filipino komiks. Just as in different areas of the capitalist world, the Philippines merely provides the talent or the workforce for foreign companies.

This bleak situation has not stopped Filipino creators from trying to break into the international market. In the past, Alfredo Alcalá's *Voltar* was published internationally to great acclaim although it being a Viking epic did not really portray Filipino culture even if the art style was Filipino. Whilce Portacio attempted to showcase Philippine lower mythology to international comic readers with *Stone*. Alas, the tikbalang and manananggal were treated as "universal" creatures not unique to the Philippines and Philippine culture was glossed over. Cats Studios released *Aster* in the United States and proudly boasted that it was totally Philippine-made. As the story was about a cosmic being in the vein of the Silver Surfer, it had nothing that was distinctly Filipino about it. Hopefully, the relaunch of Mars Ravelo's *Darna* to both the local and international markets will give Filipino talent and culture a chance to be known. Indeed, once upon a time, the international comics community praised the works of Francisco Coching without him even releasing a single work abroad. Perhaps, one day Filipino komiks as a whole will be recognized. Then, cultural influence would not be so lopsided.

In an increasingly globalized world, is cultural distinction still important? Why is it important to be known as a Filipino creator? Shouldn't the individual creators be recognized for their work and not their nation-

alities? Why should Filipino culture be known to the world? Because of our history as a people who were colonized before there was any sense of nationhood, cultural identity has always been an important though many times elusive part of our lives. Perhaps it all boils down to pride, not just in showing that something good can come out of our country but that something good is already in it.

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