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**Visual Literacy and Popular Culture
in the Philippine Literature Classroom:
Teaching Filipino Literature through the Graphic Novel**

by
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Visual Literacy and the Graphic Novel

The use of visual literature in the classroom has long been a practice in the teaching of literature and reading especially in the preschool up to the high school levels. This practice has been further reinforced by the growing trend towards more visual and interactive forms of art, and studies reiterating the integral function of visual images in comprehension and interpretation. Nonetheless, it has yet to be an accepted means of teaching literature in the college level. Literature in higher education remains a field restricted to the traditional, canonically accepted, texts. However, the present generation of students is heavily exposed to various media that evolve as rapidly as their attention and interests shift. With students who no longer possess the inclination for traditional subjects and material, the literature teacher is faced with a challenge of keeping up with, and taking advantage of, students' fascination with more visually-stimulating media by expanding her choices for literary texts. After all, "the primary literacy of the twenty-first century is visual." (Frey, 2008, p. 5) Visual images serve as stimulating agents that aid in the processing of meaning, which eventually lead to opinion formation, critiquing, and imaginative response. Ultimately, the objective of literature teaching is to incite creativity and critical thinking – both of which are results that can be produced through visual literacy.

Not all forms of visual media make for a good text. It also comes down to selection, taking closely into consideration the work's aesthetic merits, appeal to target readers, the teacher's intended learning goals, and approaches to the teaching of the said

text. Among the emerging popular literary forms, the graphic novel is one that has gained a devout cult following among young adult and adult readers alike. The graphic novel is a narrative work in which the story is conveyed using the comics form. (Reposar, 2008) The term *graphic novel* -- as all new genres borne out of popular culture -- has yet to be strictly defined by writers, artists, and critics of the form, who each have varied views as to its exact definition. Generally, it is a comic book or a series of thematically unified comic volumes bound in a more durable format. The genre originated in the US and Britain as part of the “comics renaissance” in the 1990’s – an endeavor to raise the comic book to a more serious literary status. It also gained popularity in the Philippines in the same decade.

Filipinos’ positive response to the genre may be attributed to our predilection for fantasy and hero adventures – motifs which mainly dominate Western graphic novels – and the genre’s textual affinity to the Pinoy komiks. The Pinoy komiks has become popular throughout the decades mainly because, according to Filipino fictionist Efren Abueg, it is “very deeply interwoven with Filipino life. It projects various aspects of Filipino realities, [and it is] not far from the experiences and situation of the Filipino reader” (Roxas, 1984, p. 3). Likewise, the Filipino graphic novel, although adapted in part from a Western art form, is grounded in Filipino culture and identity. Its themes usually involve a quest for identity or sense of ancestry, the need for justice, and conflicts arising from oppression. The only reasons, perhaps, why the graphic novel has been unable to duplicate the immense popularity and wide readership of the komiks are that the graphic novel is comparatively more expensive than the komiks, it is available in bookstores rather than in newsstands, and many of them are written in English – factors which greatly affect the accessibility of the genre to the larger public. Nevertheless, it has undeniably become not just a part but also a bearer of popular Filipino culture.

The literature classroom in the tertiary level remains exclusive to the traditional texts. By traditional, we pertain to the canonical works of literature – the selection of which automatically marginalizes popular fiction in favor of established, “noteworthy” works. The introduction of the genre into a Philippine Literature course syllabus seems unthinkable, and would raise numerous questions as to its “legitimacy” as a literary form in the first place. This hesitancy to use the graphic novel in literature teaching may be

attributed to the fact that works in comics form have generally not been seen as bearers of literary merit. Since most graphic fiction involves fantasy and larger than life superheroes, they are deemed to be substandard and wanting in relevance for their inability to represent social reality. However, Soledad Reyes (2009), who has written extensively on the Filipino komiks, argues that “to privilege social realism is to denigrate other modes that do not view the world in the same way in which the realist perspective sees reality” (p. 4). Realism is not the only acceptable mode. The use of fantasy in graphic fiction is a means of representing a relative reality, and of bringing about multiple layers of meaning. Despite possible skepticism from certain portions of the academe, the graphic novel is a text ideal for the teaching of Philippine literature and culture. It is a genre which lends itself to rich literary discourse, by virtue of its very form. It is a genre in which the visuals require reading as intensively as the written texts do. Comprehension is arrived at not solely through textual analysis, but also by an examination of the images that accompany the narrative. The graphic novel also uses literary devices, depicts recognizable archetypes -- or subversions thereof, and may be studied using varied literary approaches.

This paper takes the graphic novel *Ang Kagilagilalas na Pakikipagsapalaran ni ZsaZsa Zaturannah* by Carlo Vergara to demonstrate the genre’s efficacy as a reading text in Philippine Literature. *ZsaZsa Zaturannah*’s story revolves around a gay beautician named Ada who finds a huge stone that dropped from the sky. His friend Didi prods him to swallow the stone and shout the inscription “Zaturannah”. Ada transforms into a voluptuous, red-haired Darna-like woman who possesses super powers. As Zaturannah, Ada encounters and defeats vile creatures such as a giant frog, a host of zombies, and ultimately a group of misogynist femme fatales from another planet. Along the way, Ada/ZsaZsa comes to terms with his identity as he encounters the zombie of his homophobic father – who had refused to accept his being gay, and confronts his affections for love interest Dodong – who in the end develops real love for Ada. From among the various aspects for which *ZsaZsa Zaturannah* may be explored, this paper focuses on three facets: the concept of Heroism, *ZsaZsa* as a postmodern text, and *ZsaZsa* as a pop cultural artifact. This paper does not seek to exhaust each aspect extensively, but

it aims to propose starting points for classroom discussion that may later on be more comprehensively studied.

ZsaZsa Zaturannah as Hero

ZsaZsa Zaturannah, like most graphic fiction, is a super hero story. A *superhero* is generally defined as “a fictional hero (as in a comic book) having extraordinary or supernatural powers”. (Superhero, 1995, p. 1080) Still, as a superhero, the protagonist ZsaZsa falls under the larger classification of hero. One interesting approach to the study of *ZsaZsa Zaturannah* would be to examine the concept of heroism presented in the narrative.

A hero is defined in most Western dictionaries, like this one from Merriam-Webster, as:

1. a : a mythological or legendary figure often of divine descent endowed with great strength or ability; b : an illustrious warrior; c : a man admired for his achievements and noble qualities; d : one that shows great courage
2. a : the principal male character in a literary or dramatic work; b : the central figure in an event, period, or movement. (Hero, 2010)

Such definitions of heroism are based on the Western hero of myth and legend. The requisites for divine origin and possession of super human abilities endowed by a greater power are evocative of epic heroes: Hercules, Odysseus, Achilles, Aeneas. He is “illustrious” and larger than life, having abilities no ordinary human being would be capable of. The same criteria requires for a nobility of character that is assumed to accompany a strongly virile nature. The hero is therefore someone who is not only touched by the divine, but is also masculine in physique and demeanor. These are definitions we adhere to because we have been shaped by what Soledad Reyes dubs as an “uncritical tendency to look up to the west as a source of heroic constructs.” (Reyes, 2009, p. 70) We use the same Western criteria for heroism to look for heroes in our own culture, and in doing so overlook the fact that heroes emerge from specific cultural contexts. The concept of heroism springs from a community’s own need for affirmation and the values it holds dear. Thus, our local heroes do not come at par with the heroes of

Western myths because the Filipino concept of heroism springs from a different context and collective experience.

ZsaZsa, if examined based on the Western hero tradition, falls short in several respects. First, and most conspicuous of all, is ZsaZsa's homosexuality. By bringing forth a gender issue into the equation, ZsaZsa already directly negates a major requisite: masculinity. Ada being an ordinary person leading a regular life, the requirement for divine descent is also left unfulfilled. The supernatural abilities he acquires come from a stone with the inscription of his would-be super-powered alter ego's name that falls mysteriously from the sky. ZsaZsa's heroic mission to save his people from oppressive forces comes not from a divine order, but from an instinctive urge to serve his immediate community. Although hesitant in the beginning but only goaded on by sidekick Didi, Ada's motivation ultimately arises from the need of the community. ZsaZsa does not fit the mold of a Western mythic hero. The heroism of ZsaZsa is one that is specifically Filipino.

The Filipino hero, in its Tagalog translation *bayani* is defined in the Diksiyonaryo ng Wikang Filipino as:

Taong may di pangkaraniwang tapang at tigas ng loob sa harap ng panganib o kaya ay katatagan ng kalooban sa paghihirap at pasakit; Taong matapos mamatay ay ipinagbubunyi ng bayan dahil sa kanyang hindi pangkaraniwang paglilingkod sa bayan o sangkatauhan.

The non gender-specific Tagalog definition completely contrasts against the Western definition. The focus is not on ancestry or source of power, but on strength of character and innate courage in the face of adversity; on unwavering integrity in the face of suffering. Filipino heroism is characterized by a deep sense of servitude -- the giving of oneself in the service of the community. In these respects, ZsaZsa is a Filipino hero -- or superhero for that matter. By his very action and being, he renders a noble form of servitude. In doing so he also incites the spirit of community among his people -- *bayanihan* in its noblest form. The neighborhood folk cheer him on and join in his battles, defying fear and uncertainty. He is celebrated as a hero because he has served for the greater good in extraordinary ways. This deep sense of community and kinship valued by Filipinos is what ultimately molds our notion of what is heroic.

Postmodernism of *ZsaZsa Zaturannah*

Still, *ZsaZsa* as a protagonist defies tradition in various ways. His homosexuality presents a gender issue that has never been envisioned in any prior superhero, Filipino or otherwise. The traditional alter-ego duality is shattered; the two-faceted protagonist is further splintered to create a third dimension to his identity. Instead of the traditional Narda/Darna or Teng-Teng/Captain Barbell dual identities, we are presented with Adrian/Ada/*ZsaZsa*. Although largely inspired by Mars Ravelo's *Darna* saga, *ZsaZsa Zaturannah* differs in that Darna fits the traditional superhero mold while *ZsaZsa* outright subverts it. *ZsaZsa Zaturannah* is a postmodern hero. This brings us to an examination of *ZsaZsa* as a postmodern text.

According to Soledad Reyes (2009), in her essay "From Darna to *ZsaZsa Zaturannah*":

If Darna was rooted in folklore and shaped by a consciousness that was shaped by a traditional view of the world (modern but still feudal in many ways), *ZsaZsa Zaturannah* is unarguably a postmodern text that could have emerged only in the twenty-first century, a period of awesome advances in science and technology, and/or frightening borderless wars. (p. 22)

ZsaZsa's splintered identity is one aspect of the text's postmodernism. This fragmentation of the hero's self completely goes against the grain of the hero/superhero grand narrative wherein the internal conflict is only between the protagonist's personal identity and that of his alter-ego, and the ultimate goal is the triumph of good vs. evil -- a utopian ending. *ZsaZsa*'s hero journey involves a search for identity. He finds through his superhero self a way in which to perform his gender. The conflicts in *ZsaZsa*, both internal and external, are not clear cut black and white, good vs. evil, since what each side represents is not stable and absolute. For instance, the zombies who attacked the neighborhood may represent such things as death, vestiges of the colonial past, or a morally corrupt society. However, one zombie turns out to be the corpse of Ada's father, who verbally torments *ZsaZsa* by proclaiming his disgust and disappointment over Ada's homosexuality. The meaning of the zombie representation now shifts from an apparent

“forces of good vs. forces of evil battle” to a past but unresolved antagonism between Ada’s asserted identity and his father’s oppressive attempts to stifle it. Meaning and representation in *ZsaZsa*’s carnivalesque world are not fixed and determined.

The images and comic frames in *ZsaZsa* defy convention as well. Instead of observing the usual borders to separate one comic panel from another like most comics do, *ZsaZsa*’s images are mostly borderless. The pictures overlap and totally disrupt the conventional narrative sequence of a comic book, creating an impression of a limitless flow of images and depriving the text of stable meaning.

ZsaZsa, by virtue of being a genre of popular culture, is already in itself a demonstration of postmodernism. According to Stanley Grenz in his discussion of Postmodernism as a Phenomenon in Popular Culture:

In a sense, exposure to the postmodern ethos through popular culture is itself characteristically postmodern. The refusal to set “high art” above “pop” culture is a defining feature of postmodernity. Postmodernism is unique among avant-garde movements in that it appeals not to an artistic elite, but to all those engaged in the activities of daily life through popular culture and mass media. (Grenz, 1996, p. 31)

ZsaZsa is an outright rejection of the primacy and value of what is dubbed as “serious” literature over popular fiction. Its appeal is mainly to an audience that is exposed to popular culture and mass media – the likes of whom comprise our students today.

***ZsaZsa Zaturannah* in Pop Culture**

ZsaZsa is an admiring homage to Mars Ravelo’s *Darna*, whose heroine Narda/Darna has become an iconic figure in Filipino popular culture throughout the decades. Several aspects of *ZsaZsa* are observably adaptations from the *Darna* pop-cultural mythology: the voluptuous superhero figure with flowing hair and wonder-womanesque costume; the mystical stone (“ang bato”) as source of power and the trademark shouting out of the superhero’s name inscribed on the stone; the femme fatale antagonists; and the presence of recognizable character types (i.e., the sidekick Ding adapted as Didi). The conversion of the protagonist as a gay hero in *ZsaZsa* alters the adapted elements to suit the character and circumstances of *ZsaZsa*. Hence, the superhero

costume is one that is borrowed from a gay friend who joined a beauty pageant; the stone is no longer the tiny pebble Narda effortlessly swallows, but a chunk of rock the size of a brick Ada forces down her throat; and the faithful sidekick is a gay best friend from the beauty parlor. *ZsaZsa* may be a respectful spoof of *Darna*, but it holds a pop-cultural status of its own. *ZsaZsa Zaturannah* has become a gay icon in a society which has never portrayed gays in ways other than that of the usual stereotypes: loud cross-dressing minor characters who are made fun of or serve as comic relief. *ZsaZsa* presents the character of Ada as a regular person, with the same inner conflicts and deserving of the same sympathy and admiration as any hero.

ZsaZsa also makes several pop-cultural references in its dialogue, character names and portrayals, even in its very minor details. The female antagonists in *ZsaZsa*'s final battle are named: Nora A., Sharon C., Dina B., Vilma S., after movie stars from the 70's and 80's. Titles and lines lifted from popular Tagalog movies from the 80's such as "Pasan Ko Ang Daigdig" and "Bukas Luluhod ang mga Tala" appear in the characters' dialogue. These references also reinforce the gay culture from which *ZsaZsa* emerges.

The graphic novel *ZsaZsa* has crossed over into various media as well. Adaptations in theater and film, with the former being the more successful venture, have been made the past few years since the novel's initial success. Tanghalang Pilipino adapted it into a stage musical in 2006 –Chris Martinez did the stage adaptation, Vincent de Jesus wrote the lyrics and music, and Chris Millado did the stage direction. Eula Valdez starred as *ZsaZsa*. It remains one of the theater company's most successful productions. It's most recent staging was March 2008 at the CCP. The film adaptation, however, which was directed by Joel Lamangan and starred Rustom Padilla as Ada, performed below expectations at the box office when it was screened as part of the Metro Manila Film Festival in December 2006. Despite the discrepancy in success in terms of box office draw and recognition bestowed by award-giving bodies, the fact that *ZsaZsa* has crossed over to more than one medium, and continues to draw a cult following among young adult and adult readers as a graphic novel, means that it has made for itself a definitive place in Filipino popular culture and has unlimited potential to be explored as a cultural text.

***ZsaZsa Zaturannah* in the Classroom**

These may serve as initial points of classroom discourse on the graphic novel *ZsaZsa Zaturannah*, along with discussions of key literary devices such as symbolisms, foreshadowing, figurative language, character archetypes, and the like. Lesson plans for each of these areas may be modified according to target learning goals and student level. It may be approached using the same modes as would be used in studying any other literary work, but being a form of visual literature, exploring the visual aspect of the text is an imperative. One such strategy would be the employment of panel analysis wherein students, working either individually or in small groups, analyze images within a single selected panel and “connect *local* meanings within the panel to *global* themes throughout the book”. (Frey, 2008, p. 98) This would allow students to take notice of significant visual features within a single comic panel and how the individual meaning of which contributes to the overall significance of the entire text.

As a literary text for Philippine Literature class, *ZsaZsa*'s merits are numerous, although its inclusion in a formal course syllabus may require considerable effort to justify in a traditional academic environment. Still, it has gained for itself an indubitable place in contemporary Philippine cultural and literary studies, and by its very genre, has become a demonstration of cultural empowerment.

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