

The Concept of the Superhero in Filipino Films

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This essay examines a number of Filipino superhero films (Captain Barbell, Darna, and Lastikman) and how a uniquely American creation was “Filipinized”, taking into account the cultural and social aspects of the Pinoy superhero as demonstrated in the films. For the first time in Filipino film history, three superhero films were included in the 2003 Metro Manila Film Festival. While the producers were most likely following the popular trend in Hollywood, the films Fantastic Man, Captain Barbell, and Gagamboy, still reflect the Filipino longing for a hero to look up to. All films were big box-office hits. Just as 9/11 gave rise to the popularity of fantasy and superhero films in Hollywood, societal ills and the 2004 elections have fanned the flames of fantasy heroics in Filipino commercial films. While the American heroes (e.g., Captain Marvel, Superman, and Wonder Woman) have heavily influenced the Filipino superheroes, several aspects of Filipino culture and society are still evident in the films. It is also noteworthy that the comic book industry that created the superheroes is now experiencing a severe drop in popularity. Thus, film is now the medium that showcases the superheroes. The movie versions of these heroes have a history in film that is almost as long as the comic book versions, and modern audiences are more familiar with the movies than the comics.

The Metro Manila Film Festival is held every year during the Christmas holidays as an event intended to feature the best (both critically and commercially) Filipino film producers have to offer. The festival was originally held from December 25 to January 1, but in 2002 was extended by another week. During festival time, only Filipino films are shown, giving a much-needed boost to the local film industry, which is currently in dire straits with its annual output of films reduced from 200 to about 70. Given the commercial aspect of the festival, organizers look at the selection of films with variety and audience accessibility in mind. Thus, the festival traditionally features a socially relevant and/or family themed drama, an action movie, a horror movie, a comedy and a fantasy film. It is in this last category where the superhero film traditionally belongs. The 2003 festival featured two firsts for the Filipino film industry: first, it was held nationwide instead of being limited to Metro Manila as

the name suggests and second, three superhero films, *Captain Barbell* (Mac C. Alejandre), *Fantastic Man* (Tony Y. Reyes), and *Gagamboy* (Eric Matti) were chosen as official entries.

Just as the superhero comics cover a number of genres (fantasy, science fiction, action and horror), the superhero movies in the festival seem to cover different bases as well. The films incorporated fantasy, action and comedy (plus, in the case of *Fantastic Man*, a bit of science fiction which is a rarity in Philippine cinema). The current wave of American superhero movies such as *Spider-Man*, (2002 & 2004, Sam Raimi), *X-Men*, (2000 & 2003, Bryan Singer), *Daredevil* (2003, Mark Steven Johnson), and *The Hulk* (2003, Ang Lee) must have convinced the producers and the festival organizers of the viability or rather marketability of the three superhero movies. In the 2002 festival, *Lastikman* (Tony Y. Reyes) was not considered a main entry and was only shown in the second week of the festival. It ended up being the second highest grossing movie of the year.

Superhero films have been around since the 1950s with the Darna movies and given their resurgence in popularity, this paper will examine how this sub-genre of fantasy that is directly taken from American comics reflects traditional and popular Filipino culture. The paper will focus on three films: *Darna* (Joel Lamangan), released in time for the 1991 Metro Manila Film Festival, *Lastikman* in 2002, and *Captain Barbell* in 2003. The three movies feature the three most recognized superheroes in the Philippines which are creations of the Dean of Filipino comics, Mars Ravelo. All three were big box-office earners in their respective festivals.

Ravelo's characters were taken from American superhero comics. The superhero, a person in a colorful costume who fights for justice either with or without superhuman powers, is an American invention. During the Depression in the 1930s, there was a need for strong characters in the comics and the superhero concept proved to be popular and influential, gaining worldwide popularity throughout the years. To examine the Filipino superhero films, it is important to understand the superhero concept as developed by the Americans.

The American Superhero

Since his appearance in 1938, Superman has served as the source for the new genre in adventure and fantasy comics, the superhero. In fact, most of the superhero clichés like the powers (superhuman strength, speed

and invulnerability), the cape, the symbol all come from Superman. For many the superhero is synonymous with Superman. The television shows *Lois and Clark* and *Smallville*, and of course, the Superman movies starring Christopher Reeve have helped cement his place in global popular culture.

While considered the generic superhero, Superman nonetheless demonstrates various cultural aspects of his origins as a character. Given the Jewish background of Siegel and Shuster, Superman has been connected to the golem, a being of great strength who protects the people. The Jewish aspect is further explored in Superman's Kryptonian name, Kal-El. According to Engle (1997), *el* can be translated as "of God" while *kal* can mean "with lightness" or "swiftness" or when connected to *hal* (pronounced as chal) can mean "all that is God." Thus according to Engle (1997), "*Kal-el*, then, can be read as "all that is God" or perhaps more in the spirit of the myth of Superman, "all that God is" 351).

While he was once described as the "Nietzschean ideal wrapped in a cape" by Lois Lane, Superman, who possesses powers far beyond mortal man, is essentially a Christ figure. He is the last son of Krypton sent to save the Earth. He is brought up by a WASP family with traditional Christian values of service and sacrifice. While he does not make his own rules, he does have an overriding sense of justice.

Because he was an immigrant who was raised in Kansas, Superman is the quintessential American. His mission is to fight for truth, justice, and the American way. According to Engle (1997), he is the ultimate immigrant who represents individual mobility (literally through his ability to fly) but who has to assimilate into society by creating a secret identity. These characteristics embody the American experience of immigration, individual progress (the American Dream) and cultural assimilation.

As a template, Richard Reynolds uses aspects of Superman's origin to define the superhero. He points out the following features of the superhero:

1. *Lost parents*: The hero is marked out from society. He often reaches maturity without having a relationship with his parents.
2. *The man-god*: At least some of the superheroes will be like earthbound gods in their level of powers.

3. *Justice*: The hero's devotion to justice overrides even his devotion to the law.
4. *The normal and the superpowered*: The extraordinary nature of the superhero will be contrasted with the ordinariness of his surroundings.
5. *The secret identity*: Likewise, the extraordinary nature of the hero will be contrasted with the mundane nature of his alter ego.
6. *Superpowers and politics*: Although, ultimately above the law, superheroes can be capable of considerable patriotism and moral loyalty to the state, though not necessarily to the letter of its laws.
7. *Science as magic*: The stories are mythical and use science and magic indiscriminately to create a sense of wonder. (Reynolds 1992: 16)

It must be noted that Reynolds uses Superman's origin depicted in 1938 during the so-called Golden Age of American comics. As time passed, superheroes including Superman went through various phases depending on the cultural climate. Still, Reynolds' features are a valid template that can be used to examine the superhero concept. The character in the Superman films of the 1970s and 80s, however, adheres more closely to the superhero template. The first film released in 1978 reinforces the superhero myth represented by Superman.

The Filipino Superhero Films

In examining the Filipino superheroes in the five films, the template will be applied. However, to demonstrate how the superhero was assimilated into Filipino popular culture, the template will be adjusted using Darna as the generic hero. While acknowledging Darna's roots in Filipino comics and her appearances in numerous films since the 1950s, the examination will focus on the *Darna* film released in 1991. The film was chosen because it served as a reintroduction and thus retold her origin (albeit a different version from the comics) unlike the 1994 film, *Darna: Ang Pagbabalik* (Peque Gallaga), which is more of an extension of the Darna story.

Darna was created by Ravelo in the 1950s as a Filipino version of Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel. She was a simple small town

lass named Narda who transforms into a powerful heroine when she swallows a magical stone and shouts out the word “Darna”. She resembles Wonder Woman in appearance and powers although she had the power of flight from the onset (Wonder Woman could only fly when the character was revamped in the 1980s). Darna is similar to Captain Marvel in the sense that she is a young person who transforms into a powerful adult by speaking a magical word. Aside from the western influences, Darna was also inspired by the Ibong Adarna, a magical bird of Philippine folklore.

Over the years, Darna has appeared in numerous comic book stories, films, television shows, commercials and even in ballet productions. She is the most popular Filipino superhero and like Superman is almost synonymous with the word. A pop song titled *I'm Not Your Superwoman* was translated into Filipino as *Hindi Ako Si Darna* (I Am Not Darna). It is significant to note that the most popular superhero in the Philippines is a woman. The Philippines has had two female presidents and in the typical family, the mother traditionally controls the budget. Thus, while patriarchy may actually rule over Philippine society, the Filipino seems to have no problem with a woman as a *symbol* of power. As a symbol, Darna is arguably the most popular fictional character in Filipino popular culture. It must be noted though that (lesser well-known) male superheroes outnumber the heroines. Is the current proliferation of male superheroes in the movies an indication of Pinoy machismo reasserting itself on the symbolic level?

Darna was not meant to be a domineering female. Like Superman, she merely used her powers for the good of the people and she just happened to be a woman. This demonstrates the belief that early pre-Spanish Philippine society had gender equality. According to Aguilar (2003), women participated in the hunt for food as well as the chores in the home before the colonizers came. As a provincial young girl who becomes a powerful heroine, Darna was supposed to symbolize the strong Filipina.

Darna's gender already presents a departure from the American superhero mold. Most superheroines such as Supergirl and Batgirl were merely female versions of the more prominent male heroes. It is important to note that they were girls and thus had a lesser role to play in the superhero pantheon. Characters such as Wonder Woman and Ms. Marvel were overt symbols for feminism and thus the designations “woman” and “Ms.” This can be plainly seen in the words of Dr. William Marston,

Wonder Woman's creator: "Give them (male comic book readers) an alluring woman stronger than themselves to submit to and they'll be proud to be her willing slaves" (Reynolds 1992: 34).

The Darna in the 1991 movie deviates from this symbol as she was portrayed by Nannette Medved who, with her Chinese and Russian ancestry, hardly resembled the typical Filipina *morena* (brown-skinned beauty). Given the overwhelming presence of white-skinned movie stars, it can be said that the standard of beauty in Filipino films still remains Western. Despite this fact, the film still demonstrates Filipino characteristics even as it is sifted through the superhero template.

Like Superman, Narda's parents are also gone, but unlike him, her grandmother is still alive even during her superheroic adventures. The grandmother is not aware of her grandchild's other identity but she still provides guidance throughout the film. This shows the important part elders play in the life of the Filipino superhero. They offer advice and inspiration even up to the end. In the climactic battle with Demonico Lipolito, the film's demonic villain, the grandmother discovers Narda's heroic identity and provides moral and spiritual support right in the middle of the battle.

As was noted, Darna possesses powers similar to Wonder Woman and this aspect is highlighted in the film. She has superhuman strength and blocks bullets with her bracelets. But in the end, it is her purity of heart that gives her victory. In fact, it is because of her purity that she receives her powers in the first place. In the film, it is an angel in the Philippine folk Catholic tradition that gives the magic stone to Narda when she is still a child. The angel says that because of Narda's pure heart (*kalinisan ng puso*), Narda will be given the power to fight evil. And in the final battle, the same angel gives her the knowledge needed to defeat the enemy. With the angel as the source of power and the villain's use of a trident as his main weapon, the religious symbols are very evident.

With this set up, Darna the heroine is herself a symbol in the film. She is viewed by the public as a savior who will rescue the people not from just crime and injustice but from evil itself. Her appearance seems to clash with this role. As the superhero costume usually acts as a symbol of the superpower and the role of the superhero, Darna's skimpy costume seemingly does not. Her winged tiara, however gives a hint of the origin of her name. The story of the Adarna bird comes from Philippine metrical romance. In the Adarna story, the king of the mythical kingdom of Berbania falls seriously ill and sends his sons to look for the

magical Adarna bird. It is believed that only the bird's singing can cure the king of his sickness (Eugenio 1987: 166). With this characteristic of the bird, it can be viewed that Darna was envisioned by her creator to be a hero for the healing and salvation of the land.

Her secret identity is highlighted in the fact that she actually does not have any powers when she is Narda. In the Darna story, this is her greatest weakness. Much of the film's suspense comes from the fact that she is prevented from swallowing the magic stone that enables her to transform. Her non-heroic self is her liability. Given this fact, she differs from American superheroes, as she does not take great pains to hide her dual identity. While she usually transforms in secret, she also does so in the presence of her foes especially if they mean to harm her in her non-heroic guise.

In the film, Darna respects the rule of law but has to contend with a bumbling policeman who sees her as a threat to his ego. She solves crimes before he does and thus, he publicly denounces her. Still, despite his ineptness, she submits herself to the law and goes peacefully to jail when she is accused of a crime she did not commit. However, when the life of her grandmother is threatened, she escapes from her cell right in the presence of the police and to the cheers of the inmates who, despite being criminals respect what Darna stands for. "She's the one who gives justice to us all," one arrested gang member proclaims. In the end, Darna and the policeman become allies to stop the greater evil and save the country. The final battle happens in the presence of Narda's family, the media, the police and other people, demonstrating a call for unity that is common in contemporary Philippine politics.

With this discussion of the Darna film, a new Filipino superhero template is developed and divided into key features along the lines of Reynold's typology: *Parents* (or guardians), *Powers* (including costumes as symbols of superpowers), *Purity and Piety*, *The Private and the Public* (secret identities and public perception), and *Politics*. These features will be used to examine two recent superhero films. It is noted that the use of alliteration is a very common Filipino political practice.

Captain Barbell

Created by Ravelo in the 1960s, Captain Barbell seemed like a direct copy of Captain Marvel. Just like the American superhero of Fawcett Comics (later bought by DC Comics), a boy transforms into an adult

hero with superpowers by shouting a magical word. In Ravelo's version, Enteng, a poor boy who collects junk for a living helps an old man who gives him a magical barbell. When Enteng lifts it and shouts "Captain Barbell" he becomes the superhero. The different aspect here is that the Filipino version needs an external object (the barbell) to become a superhero much like Darna. The very successful film version released in 2003 retains the barbell as a source of transformation but modernizes the way it is found. Enteng is older (perhaps in his twenties) and is now a janitor in a fitness gym. He finds the barbell in the gym's storage room, lifts it and says that he, too, can become Captain Barbell. In uttering the name, he becomes the superhero. It is interesting to note that in the 2003 movie (there have been other Captain Barbell movies in the 1960s and 1980s) Captain Barbell exists as a comic book character and is a sort of mascot for a bodybuilding contest.

Parents: The role of the parents in the 2003 movie is a complex one. In the film, Enteng (Ogie Alcasid) lives with his mother Belen, a younger sister who is in high school and a brother who is in elementary school. Their family being poor, all three children work to support each other. Their father, Arnaldo, had mysteriously left the family when Enteng was still a child earlier on. The mother holds the family together, comforting them and encouraging them to study and work hard. It is only when she thinks of her missing husband when she becomes vulnerable and Enteng is the one who comforts her. When Enteng becomes the alter ego of Captain Barbell (played by Bong Revilla), the mother as well as his siblings are left unaware of his dual identity. It is revealed later on that the main villain Lagablab, a man who can fly and shoot out deadly flames, is in fact, Enteng's father, driven mad by the corruption of his boss. The father was a sideshow performer who ate fire. Asking for an advance in pay to help his family, he is promptly refused by his boss who apparently uses the money earned by the fair to support his excessive lifestyle. The father then gains powers from a magical stone that is also the source of the barbell's power. He uses the power to kill his boss and then goes mad.

The relationship between father and son takes an Oedipal turn as Lagablab kidnaps his wife Belen and battles Captain Barbell who comes to her rescue. It is in this fight that the mother discovers his son's dual identity. The final fight becomes complicated and the two personas Enteng and Captain Barbell literally argue about the fate of Lagablab. Enteng begs Captain Barbell, his own alter ego to spare his father. "My

father is a good man!” Enteng cries. “He is not your father anymore!” Captain Barbell replies. Captain Barbell then proceeds to fly Lagablub into outer space where the villain’s flames are extinguished and Enteng’s father turned villain is destroyed. Here the mother is the source of inspiration and the father is the source of conflict. Technically though, Captain Barbell is a separate entity from Enteng so the superhero is removed from the conflict between father and son.

Powers: Like Superman, Captain Barbell is like a generic hero with no specific, identity-based or origin-based powers. Although the barbell is a symbol of strength, which Captain Barbell possesses, it does not suggest the power to fly, super breath, super speed, and the ability to create a magical energy shield and to cause the superhero cape to expand to a great degree as to cover a large portion of the Manila Bay. The last two powers were just created for the 2003 film just as additional powers (force beams, expanding ‘S’ symbol and magical amnesia-inducing kiss) were added to Superman’s abilities in *Superman II* (1981, Richard Lester).

No explanation is also given for the yellow, red and blue costume (it lacks the color white to connect to the Philippine flag). It merely designates Captain Barbell as a comic book based superhero complete with the cape and ‘CB’ symbol on his chest. Given that the superhero is a creation of American comic books, the film clearly makes this acknowledgement without much fuss. As was mentioned earlier the character of Captain Barbell exists in the film’s reality as a comic book character that is also apparently a magical being who resides in whoever wields the barbell.

Purity and Piety: Unlike most American superheroes whose powers are inherent within themselves (Superman, the X-Men) or permanent (Spider-Man), Captain Barbell is actually a separate being who resides in a person of pure heart. The barbell is a device that enables the person to act as a vessel of power. The idea of purity is common in Filipino heroic tales. In Manalo’s review of the film, he suggests that Captain Barbell demonstrates the Filipino concept of *loob* or inner life or spirit. According to Manalo:

The power of the barbell buried in Philippine soil manifests itself for use, but only to a Filipino with a *busilak na puso* (pure heart). That quality is embodied by the character of the underdog Enteng...who becomes

Captain Barbell's alter ego. Enteng is the *kalooban* of the Filipino spirit, the embodiment of the...call to be *matiisin* (enduring). (Manalo 2004)

To demonstrate his pure and enduring nature, Enteng does not fight back when local bullies beat him up and he does not even bear malice towards them. Despite the hardships he faces, Enteng remains cheerful and giving. To endure hardship is a trait that is important to Filipinos given centuries of colonial rule and oppression.

While there are no overt references to Catholic iconography in *Captain Barbell* as compared to *Darna*, the idea of a higher power is clearly presented. "The rusty magical barbell manifests itself to the one who deserves it...it is a *kalooban* (boon) to the true and pure of heart, and a *patotoo* (testament) that there is a higher force that will provide Order, Justice and Freedom for those in need" (Manalo 2004). If science is used as magic in American superhero lore, then magic is usually attributed to divine providence in Filipino superhero films.

The Private and the Public: While Enteng acts as a vessel for his heroic alter ego, there are times when the two become separate beings when they converse. This can simply be a device the film uses to show how the two personas communicate. When Captain Barbell reveals the truth about the barbell he adamantly tells Enteng that nobody should know about his dual identity. This is to avoid complications in Enteng's own life and his mission. However, the usual superhero secret identity problems ensue as the object of Enteng's affections, a schoolteacher named Cielo (played by singer Regine Velasquez) falls in love with Captain Barbell. At first, Enteng rejoices because he states that he is in fact the superhero. However, when the superhero himself falls for Cielo, problems erupt. Just as the two personas are conflicted about Lagablub (Enteng wants to save him, while Captain Barbell destroys him), the two are competitors for Cielo's heart. Eventually, the superhero helps Enteng win Cielo over by acting as a bridge between the two, a common practice in Filipino courtship.

Captain Barbell decides to help Enteng and stop seeing Cielo after having a romantic interlude with Cielo. As the hero is taking Cielo on a night flight, a fire breaks out in a squatter community and Captain Barbell arrives late. While he is able to save many lives, a mother blames him for the death of her child. "This dependency is somewhat typical of several Filipinos who choose not to *saloob* (internalize) the problems surrounding them. Instead they blame it on the *labas* (outside forces)"

(Manalo 2004). This also demonstrates what the public expects of Captain Barbell. He is supposed to save the nation and in effect save each person in trouble. Thus, when Joseph Estrada won the presidency through his action star image, thousands of people flocked to the presidential palace to ask for work. They were politely given a reality check.

Politics: As a savior figure Captain Barbell does not really strive to change the status quo. He helps people and fights crime and evil. Still, the evil forces he fights take the form of super beings corrupted by society. There is Dagampat, a rat-like man who spits poison and acid. He is not evil per se but because he is maltreated he wreaks havoc on those who hurt him. There is Freezy, who is raped and then frozen by her abusive boss. She gains ice powers and thus takes revenge on all men. While these villains demonstrate the social ills of the country, Captain Barbell merely thwarts them and does not address the root causes. Doing so might force him to become a dictator, a person Filipinos are against given the 20-year rule of Ferdinand Marcos. Thus, the Spider-Man adage of “with great power comes great responsibility” applies to Captain Barbell and he must not abuse his power. In doing so, he still must be subject to the law and to the state. More importantly, he is subject to the people.

Lastikman

Ravelo created Lastikman in the 1960s as a Filipino version of Plastic Man who first appeared in the 1940s. Unlike the American superhero, the *Lastikman* film version released in the 1960s was more serious. Lastikman gradually fell out of the popular culture radar until he returned in a big way. The 2002 movie broke box-office records and paved the way for a cameo appearance in 2003’s *Captain Barbell* as well as a new graphic novel. The movie’s popularity was most probably due to the popularity of comedian Vic Sotto who expectedly played the hero for laughs.

Parents: Hilario or Larry lost his father when he was still young. He was raised by his mother and his maternal grandfather. An environmentalist, Larry’s mother dies in the act of saving members of an indigenous tribe, leaving Larry in the care of his grandfather. While walking alone in the woods one night, he sees a meteorite streak through the sky. Larry hides under a rubber tree, which is the very tree that is struck by the meteorite. The tree’s sap flows over the boy and gives him the power to stretch and manipulate his body shape.

Parental influence plays a big role in Lastikman's origin. Larry's father was an amateur astronomer and looked to the stars as a source of energy. Larry inherits his father's interest in science. His mother's crusade to save the environment instills in him the values of serving the greater good. It is his mother's death that makes him seek solace, looking into the night sky for answers.

While his superhero origin seems accidental in nature, his parents appear to Larry in a vision and tell him to use his powers for good. Thus while they are absent in his life as a superhero, they indirectly contributed to his gaining his superhuman abilities and then directly give him his mission. While humorous in treatment, this directive reinforces the power that Filipino parents have over their child's life goals, for good or bad. Moreover, Lastikman's chief nemesis in the film, Stryker, traces his psychosis to his hypocritical parents who go to prayer meetings but are actually leaders of a criminal syndicate (they're video pirates).

Larry's guide in his new life as a hero is his grandfather who figures out what happened and dubs him "Lastikman." Interestingly enough, the grandfather is also the one who accidentally discovers his weakness: ice. Just like Darna, the grandfather in Lastikman shows the role of grandparents in Philippine society as surrogate parents. Traditionally, grandparents can speak more candidly to their grandchildren and they can point out young ones' mistakes, their weaknesses. The advice of the grandparents is usually received with less animosity. Even when Larry grows up and becomes a physics professor, he still listens to his "lolopops" (a combination of *lolo*, Tagalog for grandfather and *pops*, English slang for father).

Powers: Lastikman's powers are more specific, making him different from the usual Filipino superhero. He is elastic and can change his body shape into different objects such as a ball, a mattress and a bicycle wheel. The latter is his usual way of traveling or escaping from harm. The choice of the bicycle wheel gives him a distinct Filipino look, as a bike wheel is a common sight in provincial towns and suburban areas. His elastic powers are also well suited for the slapstick comedy in the film.

His black costume shows his "rubbery" characteristics and the checkered look suggests a jester's disposition. His eyewear is similar to Plastic Man's and this might serve as a sign that Lastikman follows the American hero's comedic aspect. In the comics, Lastikman wore a mask instead of shades.

Lastikman's weakness is also interesting. Ice or extreme cold causes him to physically stiffen and thus makes him vulnerable to physical injury. Normally, blows and bullets would just bounce off him because of his elasticity. As the Filipino bends with life's problems like the bamboo, Lastikman can fend off the literal slings and arrows that are meant to destroy him. Emotionally however, he is not that pliant. When the media and the public denounce him, he is severely affected. Even when the people who attacked his reputation publicly apologize he still refuses to help the city. Sticks and stones don't hurt his bones but words nearly kill him as a hero. Filipinos can weather any hardship but criticism hurts them severely.

Purity and Piety: While humorous in tone, the film still adheres to the purity of heart aspect of Filipino heroes. While seemingly accidental, divine intervention is credited for Lastikman's powers. In Larry's vision, his father tells him that his powers are a gift from god and if he does not use it for good, they will be taken away. As science is treated like magic in the superhero template, both science and magic are treated as divine in the Filipino superhero's world. When Stryker goes on a rampage, the children who stay with Larry and Lolopops pray to Jesus to send Lastikman to fight the villain. It is interesting to note that the character that is more "scientific" in origin and comedic in treatment is more overt in its treatment of religion's role in the hero's mission. The prayer scene is not done in a tongue and cheek manner as it occurs when Larry has a crisis of faith in his role as Lastikman.

The Private and the Public: Unlike Darna and Captain Barbell, Lastikman does not transform into a super being; Larry is Lastikman just as Clark Kent is Superman. But like Darna, he does not guard his secret identity with the utmost care. He keeps his secret from the public but does not find it difficult to reveal his secret to his girlfriend Linda played by former MTV VJ Donita Rose.

Lastikman's relationship with the public is given much focus in the film. Lastikman is presented as the "friendly *kapitbahay*" (friendly neighbor- one of the numerous nods to Spider-Man) and is actually treated in that manner. While walking with Linda, passers by greet him as if he were an old friend. Even criminals he has apprehended applaud with the rest of the people. Of course, this is all for comedic effect but this treatment also serves as a set up for the film's critique of the media. When Lastikman is framed for various crimes, an arrogant reporter who plays nice when trying to get an exclusive interview but treats others with

disrespect, demonizes Lastikman in her broadcasts. Soon public opinion sways against the one time idol of the people. Thus, Larry thinks about giving up his heroic identity only to be called back by the children's prayers.

The film demonstrates the sensationalism that pervades Philippine media particularly television. It is not uncommon for newscasters to give their own opinion on events and pass judgment on people on their programs. Indeed, in many occasions, politicians use the media to accuse their opponents of various misdeeds instead of bringing them to court. The court of public opinion is often greatly abused by politicians and media personalities. Lastikman clearly demonstrates this but does so in the Filipino way, through comedy mixed with a little melodrama.

Politics: While it criticizes the media, the film does not comment about any misdeeds in the government. Lastikman does run away from the police when they go after him, but the policemen are clearly shown as being influenced by the media. In fact, before and after the media maligns him, the police actually treat Lastikman with respect and admiration.

Most superhero movies treat the authorities as benevolent. Perhaps this is because the superheroes are hardly oppressed (although their alter egos initially are) and possess the power to actually change the status quo. In Filipino action movies, the heroes are usually maverick loners who fight for justice against corrupt government officials. Many of these heroes are actually hardened criminals who tend to kill people indiscriminately. Those films however are usually for jaded adults while superhero films are aimed primarily at children. How can one teach children societal values when the ruling establishment itself is portrayed as evil? The films by no means shelter children from reality. In fact, as noted above, many social ills are portrayed in the movies. However, by focusing on the values that the superheroes practice instead of the pervasive darkness in society, there may be hope for the future.

Perhaps this is why the superhero myth endures in the Philippines. The superheroes are symbols of a childlike hope in a better society. If America's Superman is about truth and justice, the Pinoy superhero is all about hope. After much oppression from foreign colonial powers and oppressive regimes, the Filipino is still hoping for a hero to save the country or at least lead the way.

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