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The Sacred Diesel: Infrastructures of  
Transportation and Religious Representation  
in Manila\*



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## Abstract

This working paper describes a representational shift in the style and content of images that occurred upon the surface of the Jeepney, one of the most popular modes of public transport in the Southeast Asian megacity of Metro Manila. Through a focus on the pious visual culture of the crowded streets of Manila, the paper proposes a new way to describe and theorize *paratransit*, or informal modes of urban transportation. By examining the Jeepney and its religious images, the paper demonstrates how this form of paratransit has refashioned the urban landscape into a mobile network of miraculous appearances, communal prayers and divine blessings.

**Keywords:** Art, Christianity, infrastructure, Southeast Asia, paratransit, pollution, prayer, urban transit

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The majority of public transportation in Metropolitan Manila, a densely populated South-Asian conurbation, is carried out by the Jeepney.<sup>1</sup> Recent figures from the Philippine Land Transportation Office (2007) estimate that there are around 55,000 Jeepneys maneuvering through the crowded and narrow streets of Metro Manila. The Jeepney is a small bus carrying around 20 passengers seated facing one another on two benches running parallel to the length of the vehicle. In the urban transportation literature, the Jeepney has been categorized as a form of *paratransit*. This term emerged in the early 1970s to describe unconventional forms of transportation, that, opposed to city buses and commuter trains, operated outside the conventional fixed-route genre.<sup>2</sup> At its most basic level, paratransit describes creative forms of mobility that emerge when large bureaucracies and their concomitant infrastructures of transportation fail to meet the demands of the commuting public. With the increasing inefficiency of state sanctioned systems of bus and light rail, the Jeepney has flourished to become a ubiquitous presence on the extremely congested streets of Manila. Over the last three decades, a great deal has been written on the role of paratransit in Asian cities; however, because these studies have focused on financial feasibility and transport efficiency, they have neglected the religious dimensions of informal modes of transportation such as the Jeepney. This presentation takes a closer look at what might be called pious infrastructures of transportation, in order to describe the Jeepney as a vibrant vehicle of religious representation upon the crowded streets of Metro Manila.<sup>3</sup>

In terms of its historical background, the Jeepney represents a creative re-assembly of components of the American war machine. More specifically, thousands

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- 1 I would like that thank the conference organizers, Marian Burchardt, Stefan Höhne and AbdouMaliq Simone for their insightful comments and suggestions on the topic of infrastructure and its relation to visual culture. A recent report issued by the Philippine Land Transportation Office (2007) estimates the number of Jeepneys operating within Metro Mania to be around 54, 868. No doubt there has been a significant increase in this number over the last decade.
- 2 Kirby et al., *Paratransit*; Cervero, *Informal Transport*; Rimmer, *Role of Paratransit*; Rimmer, *Rikisha to Rapid Transit*.
- 3 A useful introduction to the anthropology of infrastructure can be found in: Larkin, *The Politics*.



Figure 1: Jeep driving up the steps of U.S. Capitol, archival image; unless stipulated, all other photos by author



Figure 2: Jeepneys queue on Aurora Blvd., Manila

of all-terrain vehicles known as “jeeps” were abandoned as surplus throughout the Philippines after the Second World War (Figure 1).

With remarkable ingenuity, these surplus vehicles were modified with an elongated bed and new roof in order to provide much-needed public transportation vehicles for a country whose infrastructure had been decimated by the war. Yet what was only meant to be a temporary fix to the infrastructural woes of the Philippines not only persisted throughout the second half of the twentieth century, but the general form of these early Jeepneys still persists as the most popular form of public transportation throughout the Philippines. In terms of historical residues and the religious resonances of the Jeepney, it is interesting to keep in mind that many commentators on the origin of the name “Jeep” cite not only the military abbreviations “GP” or “general purpose” vehicle as the etymological origin of the popular name, but reference “Eugene the Jeep,” a popular cartoon character who first appeared in the Popeye comic strip in 1936 (Figure 3).<sup>4</sup> By the time the early prototype of the

<sup>4</sup> See for instance: Dumlao, *Jeep Ni Juan*, 20.

general purpose vehicle was being tested in 1940, the cartoon character Eugene the Jeep would have been a familiar character on the landscape of American popular culture.

For the purposes of the present analysis, it is important to keep in mind that Eugene the Jeep was quite a curious little dog, not only because he could climb seemingly impossible obstacles and barriers upon the urban cartoon landscape, but because he demonstrated preternatural capacities to discern the future and become a spectral entity with the ability to cross over into other dimensions. In many ways, the contemporary Jeepney carries on this earlier legacy, not only for its ability to deftly maneuver through the narrow streets and obstacle ridden terrain of the metropolis, but because it can also be seen

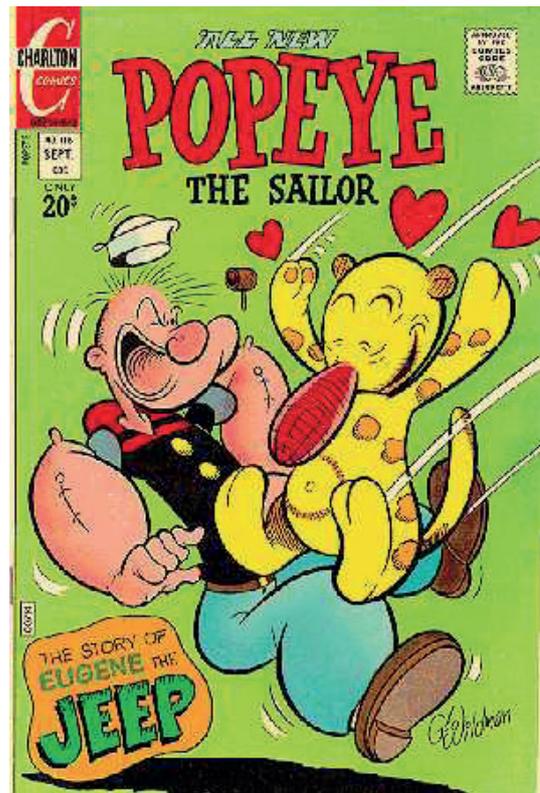


Figure 3: Eugene the Jeep cartoon (1936)

as a liminal figure who traffics between the sacred and the everyday.

## The Divine Realm

The Jeepney is not only the dominant mode of public transportation in Manila, but a crucial representational vehicle in the religious life of the city. Since at least the early 1950s, the exterior of the Jeepney has been an important site of Filipino folk art, featuring symbols of speed and masculinity such as abstract representations of rooster wings creatively “split” around the exterior panels of the vehicle (Figure 4).<sup>5</sup> This essay articulates a certain representational shift that occurred upon the exterior surface of the Jeepney. This transformation in the subject and style of Jeepney

<sup>5</sup> For the now classic study of the Jeepney and its folk art, see: Torres, *Jeepney*. My project extends a body of work in the field of folklore and art history on the visual culture of the Philippine Jeepney to include an analysis of a significant representational shift that occurred upon the surface of this popular vehicle of urban mass transit after many of the classic interpretations of the “Jeepney as Folk Art” were published.



Figure 4: Archival image

folk art coincided with new charismatic Christian and evangelical religious movements that packed large coliseums and enlivened new communities of collective effervescence in Manila in the mid 1980s. Directly coincident with these new religious movements, the metallic surface of the Jeepney became filled with brightly colored spray paint lettering proclaiming pious slogans such as “Praise the Lord!” “Prayer Warrior” and “Power of Prayer” (Figure 5). Likewise, these movements signaled an increasing orientation of the Jeepneys’ exterior space of visual representation around the themes of the Virgin Mary [Roman Catholic] (Figure 6), biblical characters (Figure 7), and prayer [predominantly evangelical and charismatic Christian] (Figure 8).

These mobile Marian apparitions reflect the shrines located just to the side of the road in residential neighborhoods throughout Manila (Figure 6). Many of these shrines display a ceramic statue of Mary adorned with silk flowers and surrounded by the residual traces of wax from the burning of votive candles. From her niche of cobblestone and mortar, Mary casts a plangent gaze toward the crossroads.



Figure 5: Phrases of charismatic Christian praise (paint on steel)



Figure 6: Marian apparitions on passenger side door (airbrush on steel)

At night her shrine is anointed by the sallow luminescence of a soot-stained light bulb: a sacred beacon on streets prone to accident, contingency and breakdown.

As vehicle of religious representation, the Jeepney marks the proliferation of pious visual culture within urban public space. Through the mobile surfaces of the Jeepney, the presence of pious imagery has transitioned from the private devotional shrine of the domestic interior and the candlelit space of the Cathedral and, quite literally, taken to the street. As an apparatus of mobile piety, the Jeepney takes the annual



Figure 7: Biblical story on side panel (paint on galvanized steel sheeting)



Figure 8, Manual gestures of charismatic prayer (paint/spray paint on steel sheeting)

Festival procession of the Saints and plunges this pious imagery into the vibrant circulation of *everyday* life.

This urban transit research describes how these new forms of pious imagery are not merely a passive reflection of religious movements occurring around them in the spaces of churches, cathedrals and public coliseums; rather, these vibrant images



Figure 9: Stainless steel side door panel with dove

themselves actively refashion the urban landscape into an enchanted mobile network of miraculous Marian apparitions, fervent communal prayer, and pious exhortations. In this way, the infrastructure of public transportation becomes an apparatus of urban belief, mapping the grid and the informal economies of everyday life that take place upon its asphalt surface with sacred visions shrouded in delicate plumes of dust and diesel fumes.

In terms of infrastructure and materiality, the Jeepney is not only a ‘vehicle’ of representation, but the form of the technology itself is ‘quickened’ or actuated by the force of religious community and the experience of sacred presence. For an example of the way religion is fabricated into the very materiality of the infrastructure, we could take the flying dove, a symbol of the immanent power of the Holy Spirit in the Christian tradition – descending through the polished steel surface of a Jeepney side panel (Figure 9).

In this instance, religious representation and instrumental function become indistinguishable within the shimmering form of “stainless” steel. Thus the idea of divine

communication and the miraculous traffic between the sacred and the everyday has become so sedimented within the history of the Jeepney that it is now “fabricated” into the structure of the machine in the independent manufacturing and assembly garages located around the city. This “stainless” steel suggests a promising method to describe and theorize urban infrastructure in many developing countries, not merely as an assemblage of bureaucratic practices and technical instrumentalities whose functions can be calculated, consciously managed and rationally controlled, but as a machine ensemble whose “functioning” is undergirded by an excessive underbelly of miraculous appearances, prayers, and prestige.

## Down to Earth – Everyday Transactions

After the boarding passenger has climbed into the narrow rear opening of the Jeepney and negotiated her way through a sea of knees and the baggage of seated travelers, she takes a seat on one of the two crowded rows and exclaims “byad po!”, (meaning literally “take it, friend”), extending a fist of coins – usually no more than 15 pesos per person (about 33 US cents) – in the direction of the driver. If the payee is not located within reach of the backwardly extended hand of the driver or his front seat assistant, other passengers will assist in the passing of the coins to the front of the vehicle. In an age when the collection of transportation fares and tolls is mediated by sophisticated systems of analysis and calculation increasingly abstracted from the communal experience of the passengers (electronic swipe cards and remote barcode scanners, for example), the collection of fares within this space initiates a unique form of urban sociality through exchanges of hand.<sup>6</sup> Not only are 3-5 individuals physically involved in this payment process of passing coin to and from the payee, but this communal payment structure elicits the attention of the other passengers not directly involved in the process – who are so cramped and facing one another on the opposed benches that they can’t help but observe this transaction. This gesture of payment and the concomitant act of grasping and letting go, culminates in the clinking sound of coin as it falls into a hand-made box located in the center of the dash board (Figure 10).

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6 For a useful introduction to the history of systems of fare collection, see: Miller, *Fares, Please!*

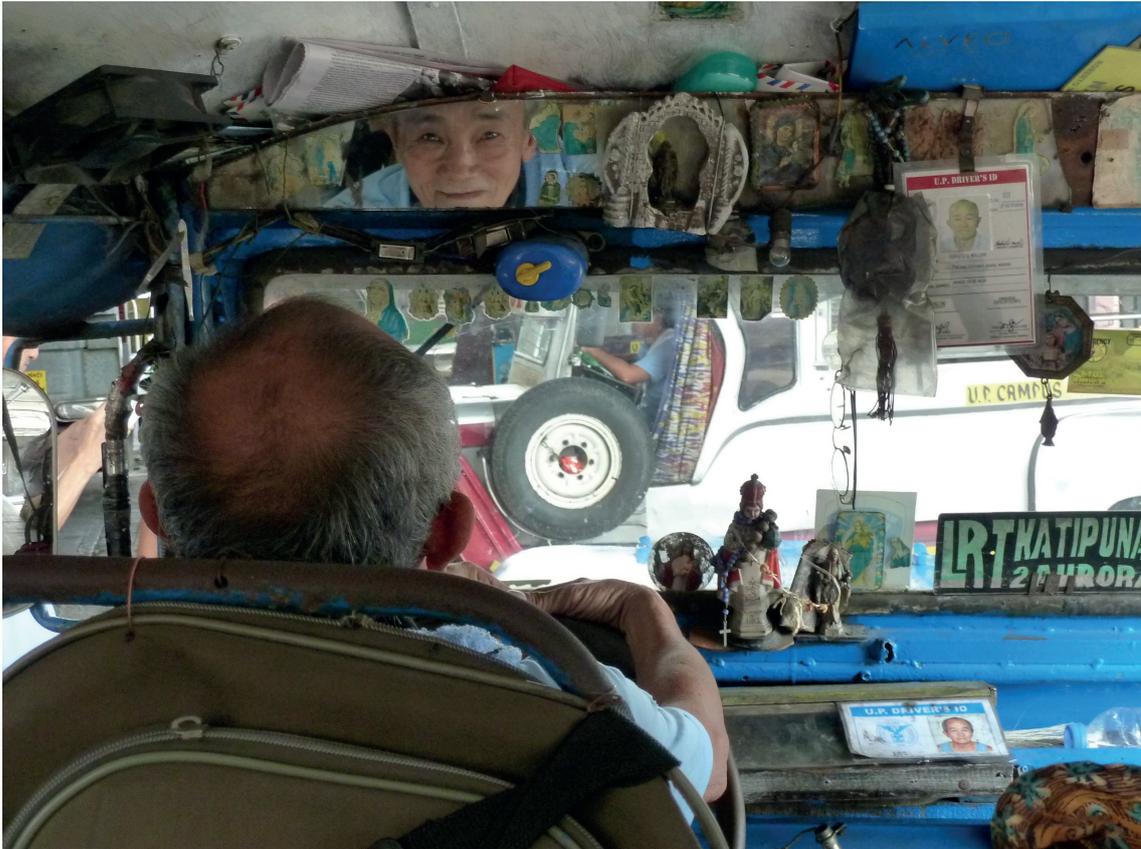


Figure 10: Black cashbox, with driver I.D. located beside the driver's elbow (note the numerous Catholic icons located on and near a rearview mirror)

Guarding over this coin box is a reliquary of devotional objects: rosaries swaying to the rhythmic ensemble of combustion engines and traffic lights, a small statue of the *Santo Niño* in his gesture of divine wisdom, perfumed garlands of freshly-blessed flowers, printed images of the saints, and small woven curtains featuring pious phrases such as “God is Love.” As previously mentioned, the communal practice of fare collection culminates at the base of this shrine, an offering that not only ensures that one maintains a legitimate space within the Jeepney, but a metaphysical insurance of safe passage on urban streets prone to accident, breakdown and contingency (Figure 11).

Moreover, in this space of mobility saturated with the theme of divine blessing, can we not see the metaphysical presence of money and its promise of miraculous accumulation? If these silent witnesses and sacred objects of the shrine are not enough to dissuade thieves and passengers who would attempt to elude the honor system of fare payment and jump off before they have fulfilled the rite of coin passing, one often finds a written warning located in the space between the driver and the



Figure 11: Close-up of shrine located above cashbox



Figure 12: Urban surveillance (paint on steel)

passenger. Ever attuned to word play and the force of allusion, the phrase forcefully reads: “God Knows *Hudas* Not Pay.” [Spanish-Tagalog word play on the biblical character Judas] – Is there any need for a transportation security camera when a form of automobility such as the Jeepney is surveyed by an all-seeing divine eye (Figure 12)?

The explosion of pious Jeepney imagery in the 1980s coincided with the proliferation of outdoor advertising media such as the billboard. During this time, large-format print technology enabled the production of gigantic images of scantily clad bodies, glistening alcohol bottles and frost-covered milkshakes. Just as the proliferation of the pious Jeepney image facilitated the emergence of new charismatic Christian publics, authors such as Gomez describe how the prodigious increase of billboard advertising signaled a new appropriation of urban space through the “aggression of private commercial interests” (190).<sup>7</sup> With over 8,000 large billboard advertisements crowding the skyline of Metro Manila, many politicians and academics have

<sup>7</sup> Gomez, Jr., *The Billboardization of Metro Manila*. For another insightful account of billboards and morality in Manila, see: Cornelio, *Billboard Advertising*.

lamented the “billboard blight” that has flourished within circumstances of bureaucratic graft and lack of governmental regulation.

Although the pious Jeepney image and the billboard have both emerged within the same historical period of increasing urbanization, it is interesting to contrast these two instances of urban visual culture in regard to the everyday realities of life and movement on the street. While the billboard draws the visual attention of the urban commuter “up” into a skyline populated with images strategically designed to organize desire for middle class commodities, the representational surface of the Jeepney circulates on the level of what might be called “street vision.” As opposed to the elevated gaze, street vision is immersed in the buzz of the urban crowd, at one moment frenetically scanning the landscape and its mobile images, pedestrians and automobiles, while in the next arrested in the crowded confines of stalled traffic and congested pedestrian flows. The billboard organizes its capitalist desires above this flow of everyday life, while the Jeepney’s images weave in and out in precipitous proximity to other bodies and machines in motion on the street. Likewise, the billboard is visibly accessible through the windshield of the middle-class car or private taxi, while the majority of the 12 million daily commuters in Manila are crowded within Jeepney’s whose small windows and crowded orientation allow for limited visibility outside the cab.

In addition to this visual orientation, the images featured on the Jeepney are, so to speak, able to “fly under the radar” of state censorship, a tactic that is impossible for large stationary billboards. Although much controversy has been fomented as of late from large outdoor advertisements featuring images of “sexualized” bodies and verbal sexual innuendo, these visual examples pale in comparison to the highly eroticized images of women often featured on the side panels of the Jeepney. In fact, the voluptuous images of anime cartoons and other figures of male fantasy often appear alongside images of the Virgin Mary. In a kind of surrealist profanation, the ecstatic countenance of the erotic cartoon image suggests an expression that is also visually depicted on the face of many Jeepney images of the Virgin. These basic differences in the visual orientation of urban visual culture have been highlighted in order to demonstrate the power and intimate proximity of the pious Jeepney image within the vibrant networks of everyday life on the street. Unlike the billboard, the Jeepney image does not inhabit a static space above the crowd; it circulates in traffic, and presses close to life on the street.

## The Underworld

The threat of thieves and dangerous accidents takes this analytical trip down into the darker, more subterranean aspects of the Jeepney. Like a traveler descending into Hades, a look under the Jeepny's hood reveals a mythical landscape of heat and flame, strange bodies transformed by the blackness of oil, grease and soot, and the noxious sulfur-tinged smell of death. Indeed it is heat itself, or the constant threat of an extremely overheated engine that reveals these dark worlds, forcing the driver to pull to the side of the road and bathe the boiling, steaming radiator in a steady stream of water (Figure 13). Here in this fiery underworld, sits the king, in his unction of grease and soot – the Isuzu 4BC2 diesel engine (Figure 14).



Figure 13: Cooling the engine      Figure 14: Isuzu 4BC2 diesel

Already expired and outmoded when it reaches the Philippines, these second-hand engines have been imported from Japan and rebuilt multiple times. These motors are a remarkable testament to creative ingenuity and resourcefulness in the face of poverty and the failure of state organized infrastructures. Yet the extreme inefficiency of these outmoded engines, coupled with the use of low-quality diesel fuel whose sulfur content is many times that of diesel standards in Europe, unleashes a deadly pall of particulate matter upon the urban landscape. This particulate matter, or “black soot,” is not only the direct cause of the premature death of thousands of city inhabitants each year, but it creates an occupational environment for the Jeepney driver that

places his life expectancy among the lowest of the city dwellers.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, this black soot has recently been identified as the second most important contributing factor to global warming. As a crucial mode of urban transport in Metro Manila, the Jeepney traffics between two worlds; while significantly contributing to the vibrancy of urban life by delivering millions of poor and middle class commuters to their place of work each day, it also belches deadly pollutants into the metropolitan environment.

## Resurrection



Figure 15: “Resurrection” Jeepney parked on the side of Aurora Blvd., just below the overcrowded light rail transit elevated railway line

Recently there have been many strategies proposed by the transportation agencies of the Philippine government and various NGO’s to help ameliorate the environmental crisis created in part by the Jeepney and its outmoded diesel engine. Given the exigencies of both the commuting public and the current environmental crisis, one immediate and practical response to the Jeepney and its noxious soot would be the implementation of an inexpensive system of exhaust pipe capping. This simple device can be attached to the end of the exhaust pipe and is capable of filtering up to 40% of the particulate matter that is emitted into the atmosphere through the diesel combustion engine.<sup>9</sup> In addition to the strategy of exhaust filtration, the immediate situation of environmental pollution in

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8 Balanay and Lungu, Exposure of Jeepney Drivers; Fabian and Vergel, Analysis of Air Pollution Exposure.

9 Gallardo, Air Pollution Studies in Metromanila; Krupnick et al., Air Pollution Control Options for Metro Manila.

Metro Mania calls for new diesel fuel standards with greatly reduced sulfur content. This higher-quality fuel will decrease the amount of particulate matter that is created through the process of outmoded diesel engine combustion. These immediate pollution control strategies may not instantiate the kingdom of heaven upon earth, as they say, but they will provide the first necessary steps toward a more sustainable transportation infrastructure in this expanding Asian megacity.

In conclusion, I have attempted a novel description of urban transit infrastructure as powered not only by outmoded engines and low-quality diesel fuel, but greased through the gestures of prayer and enlivened by the appearance of the miraculous in a reflection of stainless steel. Mimicking the Jeepney drivers' creative capacity for world play, we might begin to theorize the informal networks of transportation in Manila and other Southeast Asian cities not in terms of paratransit, but *prayer-a-transit*.

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