

Jeepney

Directed by Esy Casey. Produced by Sarah Friedland. 2014. Philippines. 60 minutes.

Study areas: Phillipines, World War II, art, globalization.



Jeepney gestures toward a number of contemporary issues in the Philippines such as the influence of multi-national corporations, the afterlives and continuances of U.S. imperialism, labor rights, overseas labor, and indigeneity within the Philippine context. Jeepneys are World War II remnants, mass produced and ultimately left behind by the United States. Through the jeepney, which has since become a major form of mass-transportation in the Philippines, the documentary's director Esy Casey threads together a number of stories and voices. The documentary is attuned to how jeepney art, the wide range of images and crafts that adorn jeepneys, highlights varying social aspirations and different ways of seeing the world. However, the documentary also highlights the struggles of Public Utility Jeepney (PUJ) drivers against prohibitive oil taxes and other government regulations. Overall, *Jeepney* is a vibrant examination

of labor, transportation, and foreign intervention in the Philippine context. The filmmaker is attentive to both the contexts out of which the jeepney is made as well as to their use as spaces for political and cultural expression. Although the jeepney is the film's primary object of interest, Casey more broadly provides viewers a complex, multivalent local history of the unevenness of globalization.

One of Casey's main focuses is the production of jeepney art. Casey and her interview subjects trace the history of jeepney art from the jeepney's World War II origins, through Marcos era promotion of Philippine culture and arts, all the way up to contemporary airbrushing and computer design. She follows artists from the province of Ifugao, airbrushing artists, and other kinds of layout designers, drawing attention to the artistic expression made possible in the jeepney. One artist describes the care and labor he puts into his work, explaining that it takes him about three weeks to complete the images in each jeepney. Another artist, Domingo "Lhudz" Malungcay, describes his work as a means of sharing and exchanging his knowledge, beckoning the audience to see jeepney art as much more than a kitsch object or even simply a mode of transportation. A PUJ driver describes his own encounters with jeepney art, explaining that while he sits in traffic he often finds himself looking at the phrases or images on jeepneys around him, considering their many possible meanings. Similar to this driver's insight, each of the vignettes highlight the varied art forms expressed on the jeepney canvas, as well as the ways that these artistic productions take an object which has its origins in U.S. presence in the Philippines during World War II and makes possible different forms of meaning.

Two of the characters, Ed Sarao, a jeepney manufacturer, and Gerry Diano, an Igorot PUJ driver in Baguio, help hold together the complex webs of jeepney cultural production and political context. Sarao helps contextualize the genealogy of the jeepney. Yet, as Sarao points out, there are also other genealogies of the jeepney such as *kalesa* drivers. (For those interested in further reading on the genealogies of transportation in urban Manila, historians such as Michael D. Pante have drawn crucial attention to these dynamic histories of colonial transportation.) Sarao also emphasizes the wide-ranging materials that make up the jeepney: wood, tin, and coconut fiber from all over the Philippines; rebuilt engines from Japan; and batteries constructed to be easily recyclable. Near the end of the film, Sarao expresses sadness for the lessening interest in the craft and art of jeepney-making. For Sarao, jeepney production is a vital but fading form.

Gerry too, is attentive to the artistic expression made possible by the jeepney. On the images that cover his jeepney, Gerry points to the ways that he has projected his aspirations onto the vehicle. However, Gerry also threads together issues of labor, multi-national corporations, and shifting relationships to the land. As he drives through Baguio, Gerry underscores the importance of land to the lives of his people, and he points critically to the ways that foreign corporate interests have monopolized and harmed the land in and around Baguio. Later in the film, Gerry draws attention to the phrase "Freedom Fighter" at the rear of his jeepney. Here, Gerry calls attention to the struggles of indigenous peoples in the Philippines and all over the world. For Gerry, conversations about the jeepney are an entry point to critical examinations of the impact of foreign capital on Philippine land and labor as well as to discussions of indigenous relationships to the land.

Transportation in urban cities in the Philippines is certainly a pressing political issue. As mass Filipinos rely on various forms of affordable transport, oil prices, infrastructure, fare prices, government regulation, and overall accessibility remain pertinent. Casey's interview subjects add another layer to this story, drawing attention to the PUJ drivers who spend half their daily gross income on gas for their vehicles as well as to the gas station attendants making about 272 pesos (\$6.07) each day. At one point, Gerry wonders aloud about the free reign that multi-national corporations are given throughout the country, noting the stark inequity of the situation. That is, while corporate environmental destruction and exploitation goes untaxed, the PUJ driver must navigate fears of a prohibitive increase in gas prices or perhaps a fine for smoke belching that will cost days worth of wages. This project is particularly well-timed as Casey is able to draw attention to the work of groups such as PISTON to organize around issues facing laborers in the transportation industry. Here, the question that ends Casey's documentary, "Development for whom?" looms heavily. If we consider the informal economies associated with transportation such as the dispatchers/"barkers" who gather passengers for the jeepney or vendors that sell water, snacks and other goods to PUJ drivers and passengers along jeepney routes, then the economic disparities revealed are even more harrowing.

Individuals within *Jeepney* speak about their own or others' experiences seeking livelihoods elsewhere, such as working overseas or even shifting from the transportation industry to agricultural work. In each instance, they constantly confront the reality that development does not seem to benefit them. This documentary makes clear that the issues of labor pointed out by the interviewees extend far beyond the transportation industry. However, Casey's story is also deeply interested in the possibilities within the daily actions and navigations of her subjects. Jeepney art presents vibrant modes of expression and aspiration, worker protest can demand attention to the ways that different kinds of labor are so critical to the Philippines, and the jeepney itself underscores the ways that a colonial, wartime object can be made to have meanings beyond the contexts of its origin.

This documentary is suitable to multiple audiences. Students and educators would find this to be a useful and vibrant introduction to a number of contemporary Philippine issues. Furthermore, this documentary can help guide/promote discussion on labor, migration, U.S. empire, indigeneity, and globalization on a number of levels.

Mark Sanchez is a PhD student in the Department of History at UIUC focusing on the Philippines and U.S. and the Philippines. His current work focuses on U.S. based opposition to the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines.

For an interview with Esy Casey that describes her influences as well as the music used in the documentary, see this article in Cultural Anthropology:

<http://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/622-screening-room-jeepney>

For more information about the film, visit the film website:

<http://www.jeepneymovie.com/>.

The logo for the Society for Cultural Anthropology is a solid red rectangle with the text "SOCIETY FOR CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY" in white, uppercase, sans-serif font, centered within the rectangle.

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Screening Room: Jeepney

By [Patricia Alvarez Astacio](#)

November 17, 2014

We hope you were able to enjoy *Jeepney*! The film has been taken down, but this page will remain up with the filmmaker interview and other teaching resources.

For the next two weeks (November 20 to December 3) we have the pleasure of screening the visually stunning documentary film *Jeepney* by filmmaker and artist Esy Casey. The film follows the material and social life of military jeeps left in the Philippines after US military intervention. These customized jeeps are both an indigenous art form and the most accessible public transportation system. This iconic symbol of the Philippines, and main mode of transportation for many, is at the brink of extinction due to increasing government regulations, taxations and raising oil prices that make it difficult for independent Jeepney owners to make a living. There is also a dwindling interest in continuing the skilled craft of Jeepney making. The film pays close attention to the complex networks of specialized craftwork that go into making these mobile artworks as much as it does to the social life of the Jeepney.

A beautifully shot film that explores the complex socio-cultural entanglements between aesthetics and politics that take material form in the Jeepney. The brightly colored Jeepney's at once speak to indigenous rights, struggles and dreams of economic justice, and government policy towards the environment and multinational corporations as they drive passengers around the urban areas of the Philippines. This is a film of interest for those concerned with material culture, cities and urbanism, indigenous art forms, globalization and social inequality, and economic justice.

[Film Website](#)

Synopsis

Jeepney visualizes the richly diverse cultural and social climate of the Philippines through its most popular form of mass transportation: vividly decorated ex-WWII military jeeps. Unlike mass transportation in many parts of the world, jeepneys are not a government service but are individually operated by the drivers, who manifest their identity, values, and dreams in its painting and decoration. The stories of a jeepney driver, artist, and passenger take place amidst nationwide protest against oil price hikes that pressure drivers to work overseas to earn a living. Lavishly shot and cut to the rhythm of the streets, *Jeepney* provides an enticing vehicle through which the rippling effects of globalization can be felt.

Biography

Esy Casey (Director/Director of Photography)

is a Filipino American Filmmaker. She produced and shot [*Things With No Name*](#), (2008; available on iTunes + Amazon), which was nominated for the Haskell Wexler Prize for Best Cinematography at the Woodstock Film Festival. Her films with Sarah Friedland have been featured on the sites of Filmmaker Magazine and Art Asia Pacific Magazine.

Sarah Firedland (Producer)

Is the director of *Thing With No Name* (2008), which was nominated for Best Documentary at the Los Angeles Film Festival. Her award-winning editorial work (*Free to Fly: The US-Cuba Link I*, principal editor, 2004, *The Life and Times of Frida Kahlo*, assistant editor 2005) screened at the Tate Modern and MOMA, and she was named one of the top 10 filmmakers to watch in 2009 by the Independent.

Interview with Director Esy Casey

Patricia Alvarez: Could you tell us about the background of the project? What attracted you to the Jeepney?

Esy Casey: My mother's from the Philippines and my father's from Detroit, so I suppose I feel akinto a Filipino American vehicle. My mother was born in a MASH camp in the mountains during WWII, and raised near Subic Bay, by the largest offshore US military base in the world. The first time I visited the Philippines I was seven; the jeepneys were even more ornate back then, with little plastic dolls glued to them, and even more hand painted patterns. I was really into Barbies at the time, and this was like riding in a Barbie dream van come to life. Plus you could hang off the back!

PA: The Jeepney allows you to link and relate different social, economic, political and environmental issues affecting present-day Philippines while also considering the impact and legacy of war and US occupation. Can you expand on the figure of the Jeepney and how did it become clear to you that they were such a political and complex symbol?

EC: At first I was surprised that no one had made a film about the jeepney; it's become such a glaring icon of the Philippines, and it illustrates the islands' tribal, colonial and current history on its sides. But some are embarrassed by how out there it is, decoratively. The more I looked at it, the more beautiful it became, revealing all kinds of very personal sentiments that people might not otherwise talk about, like the heartache of missing your family while working abroad. Or a dirty joke. But having it all there in one place, the funny and the sad and the holy and the crass strikes me as one of the most earnest, honest art forms I've seen. They're so individualized, when everywhere else in the world it's about blending in to this sleek homogenic blandness that's somehow come to represent modernity and progress.

PA: The skill and specialized work that goes into making a Jeepney is amazing. Eventhough they are based of off military Jeeps, these are completely transformed into something else. One does not typically think of modes of public transportation as objects of art. Can you talk about the relationship between local arts, especially indigenous arts, and politics that the Jeepney seems to embody?

EC: Gerry, the main driver we follow in the film, is a proud Igorot, whose family hails from the Banaue rice terraces, these incredible mountains that you see in brochures about the Philippines. Part of the reason we focused on the city of Baguio was that the indigenous arts of the tribes there are still very much alive today; this mountainous area in central Luzon (along with tribes like the Maranao in the southern island of Mindanao) was one of the only areas that the Spanish colonizers were unsuccessful in permeating, because of the rough terrain and because of success of the tribes' resistance. We hiked some of the terraces and these 80 year old tatoood women would just breeze by like it was nothing. I was very glad to see traditional farming and arts still going on up there, and with a lot of support from artists in Baguio. Some of the more percussive music in the film is from a now disbanded group called Pinikpikan (also rooted in that region); their work used a lot of traditional instruments made from wood, steel and coconut, which are the same materials as the jeepney. Including it was a way of imagining the jeepney's 'voice'.

PA: One of the things I really enjoyed about the film is the ways we as viewers getto inhabit and become familiar with the Jeepney's. We really get a sense of the materiality, details, craft, space, movements of the Jeepney's. Can you talk about these editorial decisions that always keep the Jeepney as the central element of the film?

EC: It's tricky to make an object the main 'character' when we as audiences are so accustomed to documentaries following human characters to create that emotional connection; that's what gets funded, so that's what we see. I knew it would be a challenge, but I really wanted to try it. The enormous amount of jeepney art + mudflap quotation footage we amassed proved to be helpful to illustrate a lot of things that people said, which helped it maintain a consistent presence.

PA: We see how the Jeepney as a mode of transportation is on the verge of being eliminated, leaving large masses of people without transportation. In conjunction to this it seems to be also dying as an art form. Younger generations don't want to continue the craft. What's your impression of the future of the Jeepney and the broader social and economic impacts that might unfold if it disappears?

EC: Someone asked me what this film was really about in one word, and I said "loss." A loss of individual expression during a time when economic need presses people to leave their countries + identities behind to eat. So the jeepney tells of a loss with the drivers who become migrant workers overseas, who lose the independence of running a jeepney business, and sometimes lose their own families and community in the process of serving the global elite as oil workers or domestic workers. And the forecasted loss of jeepney artists and builders by the manufacturer Ed Sarao, that fill the city streets with traditional imagery and stories of the past. Amidst the warmth and humor of the many people we met, there was an underlying sense of loss and absence, as there are in many countries who depend on the remittances of migrant workers. But it was important for me not to victimize the people in the film, since films examining these issues can easily veer into that for a strong emotional response. There is loss, but there are a lot of people recognizing the roots of it; The Philippines has an incredibly strong network of people inside and out of the country voicing these issues via BAYAN, whose unite in masses far greater and more diverse than the Occupy movement every time there is a need to hit the streets and be heard.

PA: How was the experience on filming in public transportation and Jeepney workshops?

EC: From the articles I'd read on the completely male jeepney culture, I'd anticipated the most extreme situation—a super macho, maybe threatening environment that would reject us. But that couldn't have been further from our experience; everyone was very warm and welcoming of us nosing around and appreciating the skills involved in putting this vehicle together. In public, we shot with small DSLRs to keep a low profile, and largely in slo-mo to minimize bumpiness. And the jeepney's long side windows just happened to fit the 16:9 ratio beautifully.

Influences/Related Films

Influences for Jeepney

Kidlat Tahimik—[*Perfumed nightmare*](#)

EC: Kidlat Tahimik (see *Perfumed Nightmare*) is one of the filmmakers from the Baguio area, and has been one of my experimental filmmaking heroes who can bring a bittersweet history into a thoughtful, beautiful, and funny portrait. And somehow through the grapevine, I ended up at his son's wedding party on my first trip up. I took it as a good omen.

Michael Glawogger—[*Workingman's Death*](#)

EC: The late Michael Glawogger's *Workingman's Death* is a mesmerizing portrait of work that keeps the labor as the central focus . . .

Jessica Oreck—[*Beetle Queen Conquers Tokyo*](#)

EC: . . . and Jessica Oreck's *Beetle Queen Conquers Tokyo* proves that experimental doesn't always mean slow; it's got a fun pace to it, which definitely prompted me to think of the pace of the jeepney as part of the shooting and editing process. I think it was Coppola who picks a

thematic word that guides him through the visualization to realization process, and the word for *Jeepney* was "fleeting."

Related Readings from *Cultural Anthropology*

Cultural Anthropology has a Curated Collection on [Infrastructure](#); a theme list on [Cities and Urbanism](#); and articles on the politics of art such as Öykü Potuoğlu-Cook's "[Beyond the Glitter: Belly Dance and Neoliberal Gentrification in Istanbul](#)" (2006), Joshua Rubin's "[Making Art from Uncertainty: Magic and Its Politics in South African Rugby](#)" (2014), and Ana María Alonso's "[Conforming Disconformity: "Mestizaje," Hybridity, and the Aesthetics of Mexican Nationalism](#)" (2004).

Cultural Anthropology has published many articles about the Philippines, including Deirdre de la Cruz's "[Coincidence and Consequence: Marianism and the Mass Media in the Global Philippines](#)" (2009), Lieba Faier's "[Runaway Stories: the Underground Micromovements of Filipina Oyomesan in Rural Japan](#)" (2008), Nicole Constable's "[At Home but Not at Home: Filipina Narratives of Ambivalent Returns](#)" (1999), and Sally A. Ness's "[Originality in the Postcolony: Coreographing the Neoethnic Body of the Philippine Ballet](#)" (1997).



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Jeepney 2013

✓ Recommended

Distributed by Sarah Friendland
Produced by Sarah Friedland
Directed by Esy Casey
DVD , color, 57 min.

Sr. High - General Adult

Automobile Industry, Postcolonialism, Area Studies, Culture, Art

Date Entered: **04/14/2015**

Reviewed by [Justin Cronise, D'Youville College, Buffalo, NY](#) and [Genesee Community College, Batavia, NY](#)

Jeepney is an enjoyable and beautifully-shot exploration of the legacy of the jeeps left behind in the Philippines by the American military after World War II. By the same talented filmmakers who created *Thing With No Name*, this documentary will give viewers a sense of the Philippines' history, show how the jeeps were transformed into pieces of public art and transportation, and offer a charming slice of life in the Philippines through the windows of a Jeepney.

This film is at its best at the start when focusing on the impact of these iconic automobiles as a cultural identity for the common people, with each jeep a piece of art imbued with an impressive level of detail and meaning. Later on, the film examines the plight of the drivers in the midst of national protests against rising fuel prices, casts a shadow on the effects of globalization, and concludes with fascinating portraits of several of the drivers.

Jeepney is **recommended** for general public audiences and will offer unique insight in an educational setting on topics such as public art, design and craftsmanship, as well as the impact of war, foreign occupation, and the rise of global interconnectedness in the 20th century.

Awards

Best Cinematography, Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival