

Hidden Dimensions of the Hidden Dimension

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Makagon, D. (2004). *Where the Ball Drops: Days and Nights in Times Square*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 268 pp. ISBN 0816642753. \$29.95 (cloth).

My father owns a restaurant that has been in his family since 1936. In 1997, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) decided to audit my dad. This was somewhat disconcerting since the restaurant did not have a history of tax fraud. My father and his family did not have one, either. On one of the days the audit occurred, I happened to be working at the restaurant. I remember a woman came in, took a seat with my father, and asked him a few questions. At the end of their meeting, my father asked her one, too.

“Why did the IRS pick me?” he said.

“We want you little people out of business,” she replied. “We make more money from large businesses. Small businesses, like yours, are wastes of time.”

Hearing this, I quickly glanced at my father’s expressionless face. I was angry, but did not want to make the situation awkward for my father. After the auditor left, my dad told me that big business jeopardized his small business. He told me that he only asked the auditor this question because I was around: he wanted me to hear it, for myself, from an authority figure. He told me that much of society was moving in this direction, towards bigger and thus better visions of society, visions that welcome and worship corporate politics. I think my father’s assessment of U.S. culture was accurate. I think Daniel Makagon would say he was accurate, too.

Informed by ethnography, rhetoric, and phenomenology, Makagon, in *Where the Ball Drops* (2004), presents “one version of a story about life in Times Square” (p. xv). He does not claim to tell “*the* story” of the space (p. xv), and, influenced by the writings of Walter Benjamin, uses his experiences of being a “flâneur” to understand the square’s workings and our workings of it. He provides us with a “thick description” of the space, a description utilizing (in)formal interviews, local

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literature, government documents, cultural myths (e.g., ghost stories), personal experience, and mass-mediated texts featuring the district (e.g., films like *The Out-of-Towners*). Makagon lived in the area for two years during the early 90s, and, for research purposes, returned four times around the millennium. This book is not an account of a specific group of people, but rather of a contested, dynamic space and the meaning it holds for a variety of groups.

In the first part of the book, Makagon describes how “authorities” (e.g., corporations, politicians) impact our experiences of Times Square. For instance, he reminds us that while it may seem like an unplanned, organically produced event, the New Year’s Eve celebration in the square is heavily regulated by these authorities, regulated according to how *they* want *us* to act. Makagon also highlights how “deviant” stories of the square’s past, such as those dealing with prostitution and drug use, are used by authorities as rhetorical forces to establish a “pristine Times Square fantasy” (p. 49). This fantasy, however, often privileges “the bottom line,” and thereby disregards the groups (e.g., the lower class) and businesses (e.g., pornography stores) that do not contribute to the district’s economic success. For example, authorities remove “unwanted populations” by offering tax incentives for large corporations to set up shop in the space. This, in turn, increases the property value of the square which, in turn, increases rent for area residents. This also forces small businesses to close since they (1) do not receive the same tax breaks as the corporations, and (2) have a difficult time competing with the large stores, if they manage to stay afloat. Ridding the square of these groups occurs under the mask of “revitalization,” and most supporters of the pristine fantasy often “overlook the intricacies of what the changes mean for different segments of the population” (p. 94).

In the last three chapters, Makagon documents ways of experiencing Times Square. He suggests that it attracts many visitors because it provides a familiar and thus comfortable environment. For instance, he observed a couple become excited on seeing a Ruby Tuesday’s in the square. Ruby Tuesday’s, a nationwide restaurant chain, allowed them to experience the “comforts of home” while away from it; the square became simultaneously familiar and strange. This idea is what helps make the studios of *Good Morning America* and David Letterman enticing as well. Makagon also discusses the transformations of the space after September 11, 2001, and, based on his observations of the New Year’s Eve celebrations around the millennium, has faith that people still “converge for a common purpose other than collective shopping” (p. 208). He concludes by noting the difficulties in looking for a single vision of the square, and contends that the only stable elements of the space are desire and its status as a contested site.

In the past few decades, space has remained an important topic for communication scholars. Makagon continues in this vein by showing us that “space matters”: it is not apolitical nor does it serve as a mere “backdrop” of social interaction (Shome, 2003). And while Edward T. Hall in *The Hidden Dimension* (1966) described how space impacts communication, Makagon takes this one step further by describing hidden dimensions of the hidden dimension, i.e., the behind-the-scenes particulars that influence experiences of Times Square. For instance, city officials make decisions

about the district “from a distance,” decisions that do not often come from personal interactions with the space but from nostalgic ideas of how it should look, feel, and function. Here, Makagon highlights a layer of influence that much communication research disregards.

Makagon notes: “The look and feel of a city reflect decisions about who and what should be visible” (p. 100). The look and feel of culture in general rests upon such decisions as well. As a communication scholar, I find it important to critically evaluate decisions that make possible our most mundane experiences and desires. By understanding such possibilities, we can, in the words of Dwight Conquergood (1986), continue our work to “construct a world that is worth living in” (p. 33). *Where the Ball Drops* is a step in this direction, and is an essential read for anyone interested in ethnography, tourism, cultural studies, and/or studies of space. Makagon situates his discussion in the particular qualities of an urban experience, but provides us with a way of seeing applicable to a variety of situations.

References

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