

11-1-2013

Timothy de Waal Malefyt and Robert J. Morais. Advertising and Anthropology: Ethnographic Practice and Cultural Perspectives. New York: Berg, 2012.

John McCreery Ph.D.

The Word Works, Ltd., Yokohama, JAPAN, jlm@wordworks.jp

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McCreery, John Ph.D. (2013) "Timothy de Waal Malefyt and Robert J. Morais. Advertising and Anthropology: Ethnographic Practice and Cultural Perspectives. New York: Berg, 2012.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 5: No. 1, Article 19.

DOI: 10.62608/2158-0669.1181

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol5/iss1/19>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of International and Global Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact phuffman@lindenwood.edu.

Timothy de Waal Malefyt and Robert J. Morais. *Advertising and Anthropology: Ethnographic Practice and Cultural Perspectives*. New York: Berg, 2012.

This book is written by anthropologists for anthropologists and others who are interested in advertising and related industries such as marketing, marketing research and design. We hope that our experience, views, and recommendations will be of value to those who work or plan to work in these kinds of enterprises and contribute to anthropologists' study of organizational culture, consumption practices, marketing to consumers, and the production of creativity in corporate settings. (2012, p. 3)

Thus begins "Anthropologists In and Out of Advertising," the first chapter of a book of particular interest to those of us who, while trained as anthropologists, have found employment in other fields, are looking for jobs outside of academia, or share an interest in understanding, from an anthropological perspective, the industries that employ us. It is important in reading this book to take seriously the experience on which it is based. If debates on the Internet are a trustworthy guide, academic life has become, for too many, like Hobbes' description of the state of nature: nasty, brutish, and short. (Malefyt and Morais challenge this depiction and energize the traditional academic practice of anthropological observation by approaching it from a decidedly non-traditional angle.) The popular television program *Mad Men* suggests that working in advertising is not much better than life in academia: an endless round of booze, babes, and betrayals. To those who see advertising in this light, it may come as a surprise to read what Malefyt and Morais have written about their careers:

We gained the ability to work intimately with colleagues and clients, often mediating across conflicting departments, disciplines, personalities, and objectives. We were taught to respect and include our clients' and colleagues' points of view in our thinking, especially when their views contrasted with our own. We grasped early on that we should look toward the goal of representing consumers' beliefs and practices about brands while inspiring and building teamwork among our colleagues and clients. Throughout our professional lives in advertising, we have experienced the intensity, thoughtfulness, and hard work entailed in developing an advertising agency's strategic and creative products. (2012, p. 4)

After several years of immersion as practitioners in the industry, the authors undertook an anthropological approach to examining the world of marketing and began observing and describing it from within. In so doing, they say, they "[went] native," a reference to their departure from the classical approach to the conducting of fieldwork, in which an anthropologist spends a year or two living with the people whose lives he or she is studying, doing participant observation. The participant-observer occupies a liminal space on the boundary of the world being studied; even living among the natives, sharing their food, and pitching in to lend a hand with chores, the participant-observer remains a guest, a visitor, who will, when the research is over, go home. In this paradigm, anthropologists typically study lives they have no intention of living. As such, "going native" (i.e. failing to maintain a "proper" distance from the population being observed) is seen in the academic world as a methodological sin, representing a loss of the objectivity that participant-observation and scholarship requires.

Malefyt and Morais specifically are not, they say, participant-observers but are, rather, borrowing a term from John Sherry, *observant participants* (Sherry, 2003, p. xii). When they embarked on their business careers, they were not engaging in fieldwork, observing a lot and participating a little over a brief, time-limited period. Rather, both were embarking on a life's work, in which they continue to be fully engaged; their anthropological observations simply reflect an additional and intentional "stepping back" in order to examine,

observe, and reflect upon careers that have, they tell us, lasted a combined forty years, as of the time this book was written.

What, then, do their reflections tell us? Part II of the work is devoted to deepening the reader's understanding of advertising agencies and how advertising is made. As someone who has worked in and around the Japanese advertising industry for three decades, I am struck by how similar the agency life they describe is to the one I have experienced in Japan (McCreery 1995 and 2001). Chapter 2, "Advertising Meetings and Client Relationships," offers a fine description of the tensions, managerial skills, and personal and professional stakes at play during the ad meetings in which an agency presents its work to its client. The one essential point missing from the chapter, however, is a discussion of deadlines. At times, even at a final presentation, neither the client nor the agency may be truly happy with the advertising that gets made and shown to the public, but when the space has been bought and the schedule fixed because, for example, a new product is being rolled out on a certain date or the advertising has to be ready to show at an already scheduled distributor meeting, concessions regarding advertising content must be made so that deadlines can be met. This can sour a relationship between agency and client and force the agency to pitch against other agencies to keep the account.

Chapter 3, "Rituals of Creativity in Advertising Agencies," is a fine piece of work that could have been even better if it had included a more subtle handling of the notion that every campaign is a "rite of passage," in which the old brand advertising dies and new advertising takes its place. Additionally, what is missing from the chapter is a discussion of the differences between relatively routine work in which new executions freshen up an existing brand message, the re-launch of a brand in which the brand message may change radically, and the launch of a totally new brand, for which no old advertising exists. Chapter 4 addresses the highly fraught issue of involving the client in ethnographic research, though, oddly enough, no mention is made of Sunderland and Denny's justly famous *Doing Anthropology in Consumer Research* (2007). In Chapter 5, "Advertising Emotions," Malefyt and Morais note how, thanks to interactive media, anthropologists must move beyond treating advertising as text or discourse, asserting that "advertisements are increasingly directed to embody personal and privately felt experiences for consumers" (2012, p. 62). They are talking about the shift from mass advertising directed at consumers conceived as rational economic actors with widely shared tastes and symbols to the more intimate, ultimately one-to-one, advertising that touches personal emotion and desire through largely non-verbal means, exploiting all the "touch points" where brands are encountered and products consumed. More might have been done here with the current practice of tracking of consumers through credit card and e-commerce transactions, social media sites, point of service (POS) systems, and surveillance cameras. Shrewd advertisers have always spoken to imagined individuals in a second person rhetoric designed to appeal to emotion (Cook, 1997); however, in today's brave new marketing world, there is less need for imagination: The individual to whom an ad appeals can now be known intimately (Barabasi, 2010).

Part III, the remainder of the book, is a series of case studies that illustrate and extend the discussion from Part II. The reader may question, however, how long these cases will remain of more than historical interest. As participants in recent Ethnographic Praxis in Corporations (EPIC) conferences already know too well, the rapidly emerging technologies collectively called "Big Data" pose the greatest challenge to business anthropology and anthropology in consumer research of the kind described in this book. Combining ethnographic observation with survey research and focus groups is already seen as "old school" by many involved in industry.

What, then, can we say about this book? The work provides an excellent introduction to the practice of marketing by two anthropologists who found themselves working in the

advertising business as the twentieth century ended and the twenty-first century began. The book is filled with valuable insights; in particular, the chapter on meetings is extraordinary, and the criticisms presented in this review should be taken only as suggestions for improvement. In short, the book not only constitutes a valuable contribution to the growing literature on how anthropologists have fared in business, especially in advertising and marketing, but it also asks the questions that advertising itself always tries to answer: What's new? What's next?

References

- Barabási, Albert-László. (2010). *Bursts: The Hidden Pattern Behind Everything We Do*. New York: Dutton Adult.
- Cook, Guy. *The Discourse of Advertising*. (1992). London: Routledge.
- McCreery, John. (1995). "Malinowski, Magic, and Advertising: On Choosing Metaphors." In John Sherry, ed. *Contemporary Marketing and Consumer Behavior: An Anthropological Sourcebook*. 1995. Thousand Oaks: Sage, pp. 309-329.
- McCreery, John. (2001). "Creating advertising in Japan: a sketch in search of a principle." In Brian Moeran, ed. *Asian Media Productions*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, pp. 151-167.
- Sunderland, Patricia L. And Rita M. Denny. (2007). *Doing Anthropology in Consumer Research*. Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press.

John McCreery, PhD
The Word Works, Ltd., Yokohama, Japan
jlm@wordworks.jp