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There are two popular ideas about the meaning of the absurd. The first argues that absurdity occurs when tragedy is so acute it flips into comedy (as when extreme physical pain is experienced as numbness). The absurd is the humour of suffering.

Another idea is that absurdity occurs when material reality overwhelms social reality. If we look too closely at a thing, and really see it for what it is, such hardcore clarity makes us stop believing in symbolic meanings: a bombed-out street is no longer property (destroying the fantasy of real estate); a lazy police officer is just a man in costume, no longer an agent of justice (destroying the myth of rule of law). In certain lights (naivety and sincerity), the emperor's clothes simply vanish. He becomes a figure of ridicule. Absurdity rejects all authority.

It isn't the representation of violence in the Gaza Strip that is so disturbing; it is the absence of representation. The grief and despair of a child is penetratingly real. The extreme realism of these events has now driven a wedge between our realities, material and social. The scale and speed of this suffering has destroyed our ability to sustain any belief in the symbolic values of "the international community" and "human rights". We can no longer even pretend these ideas correlate to any form of reality. This issue of Real Review is dedicated to the current mood, the Phantom of Liberty.

What has been allowed to occur in Gaza has not only exposed the complicity of Western leaders, but fundamentally altered the collective understanding of what a state is and why they exist. The character of the nation-state is bare: malevolent, irrelevant and belligerent; monstrous perversions of the human spirit. This is bad news for those in power, whose incompetence this century has already left their rule on shaky ground. There is not currently any obvious path to reconstructing a popular faith in social, political or economic institutions. While it might not always feel like it today, the unwinding of colonial modernity is underway and accelerating.

Before October, the mood had been charting another path; some traces of this trajectory remain within our new present. Pessimism and optimism describe probabilities. Hope is pure desire. While cynical irony is falling out of fashion, we have no longer any reasons to be optimistic. And yet, hope is resurgent – a hope against hope, a hope in the absence of any justification for hope. We are filled with pessimistic hope, for a better past and a better future.

REAL REVIEW

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REAL REVIEW
What it means to live today

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collective needs. Placed in the context of our wider environment, I think that it helps to create awareness of what you could do with your natural landscape, what you could do about diversity, because if you can create it in the city, you might think about what you could do outside the city. But I don't see any general appetite for that thinking, and I don't see much of this happening yet.

JS It sounds like you're talking about giving people hope. But then you don't sound that optimistic.

PO Do you see any change? You can plant a million trees, and I think that's good, but people know the scale of what is needed is much larger. When you look around, and you see what is happening, how can you be optimistic?

JS Well, maybe optimism and hope are not quite the same thing. I'm quite pessimistic about the future. I don't have a lot of obvious reasons to be optimistic. However, I am quite hopeful. I'm not a religious man, but hope for me is more like a kind of faith.

PO I see it in the same way. I'm not a pessimistic person. I don't have to worry, because I'm gone within ten years. But pessimism is a big problem for younger generations. Hope is the only way. And try to get things done. It's important that you fight for something political, in order to make things better.

JS I think of how my parents thought about the future. In the 1960s or 1970s, let's say, the future was filled with amazing technologies and possibilities. For young people today, every summer is the hottest summer. The future is not something that they look forward to, they don't feel positive about it. It is really important to have hope, because otherwise you don't change, you don't do anything.

PO When I look at my Instagram, most of my followers are 25–35 years old. And I think that although people follow me for the beautiful gardens, they also follow me for the teaching. They can take something from it now, for their own future. I think that is important. My work gives them a little bit of hope.

MORE PUBLIC RELATIONS

Decentralized Agency

Advertising, branding, commercial creativity... whatever you want to call it, no ad-blocker really stands a chance. As an ever-present force, it's not only manipulating our desires and directing where we spend our money – it is coercing creative people to almost exclusively dedicate their talents to serving its needs. How else are we to make a living from our creativity “in this economy?”

Some people buy into the idea that commodification and social change can work together – as if these are complimentary processes, and not water and oil. Other people conflate self-expression with the escape from commercial homogenisation. But the future of advertising won't be transformed by more individualisation. Could we instead aspire to lend our communicative skills to each other outside the context of commerce? Could we try to cultivate them more publicly, while leaving the rat race behind? For this we must become completely disillusioned with the industry of mass communication. We must also become re-encharmed with the potentialities underpinning it. That might be asking a lot.

DISILLUSION

Advertising has always been best at selling the world what it already wants. Even as its alleged manipulative abilities begin to show signs of failure, widespread belief has continued at a feverish pace. This is hardly surprising, when you realise everyone is incentivised to buy into the concept of advertising (or, more accurately, sell it). Tim Hwang's 2020 book *Subprime Attention Crisis: Advertising and the Time Bomb at the Heart of the Internet* chronicles this growing bubble, but the writing's been on the wall for a while now. In 2012, Ebay switched off Paid Ad Search by accident, and discovered it had no effect on sales. In 2017, P&G cut \$200 million in digital ad spend and found similar results (i.e. no effect on top line). In the same year, JPMorgan reduced display ads from 400,000 websites to 5,000 websites, also without change. Ad-fraud is partially to blame: bots clicking ads to inflate impressions (approximately 38% of all web traffic is automated/bots). But it's also because digital advertising is a lot like handing out flyers promoting a store to people that are coming out of that very same store. Just think about all the banners, pre-rolls and insta-ads you get for products you've already bought. The reason no one seems to mind this wasted money and effort is because there's more money to be made by keeping up appearances. Everyone wins if the click-rates are taken at face value; marketeers, agencies, media, platforms, clients, or at least those in the client's marketing department, creatives; everyone gets to justify their jobs. Even when clients discover the truth, they quickly know to fall in line with the lie. In 2019 Uber saved \$120 million on their digital ad spend, without

rrangement. Provided by Phaidon."

affecting their app-downloads. A few months ago they gained \$650 million in annual revenue – by launching their own ad-network. Now they sell digital ad space for display within their app, to both riders and drivers alike. Why pop the bubble when you might one day become the advertiser, rather than the advertised?

It's not only economic rationale: belief that advertising works runs far deeper, and goes beyond just digital ads. Between 2008 and 2010 the UnitedHealth Group, an insurance provider in the US, was court-ordered to stop all advertising for two years. Bradley Shapiro, a Professor of Marketing at University of Chicago, took advantage of this exceptional case-study. To everyone's disbelief, Shapiro found that there had been no shift in market shares, not even a small one. Most notable of all? As soon as they could, the insurance company went back to advertising. Likely because of that same nagging feeling you might've gotten just now. Something must've been overlooked. Something must've been affected by turning off all those ads. But as marketing pioneer John Wanamaker (1838-1922) said: "Half the money I spend on advertising is wasted, the trouble is I don't know which half." This magical belief has been with advertising from the start, the only difference today is that it turns out to be much more than just half that is wasted.

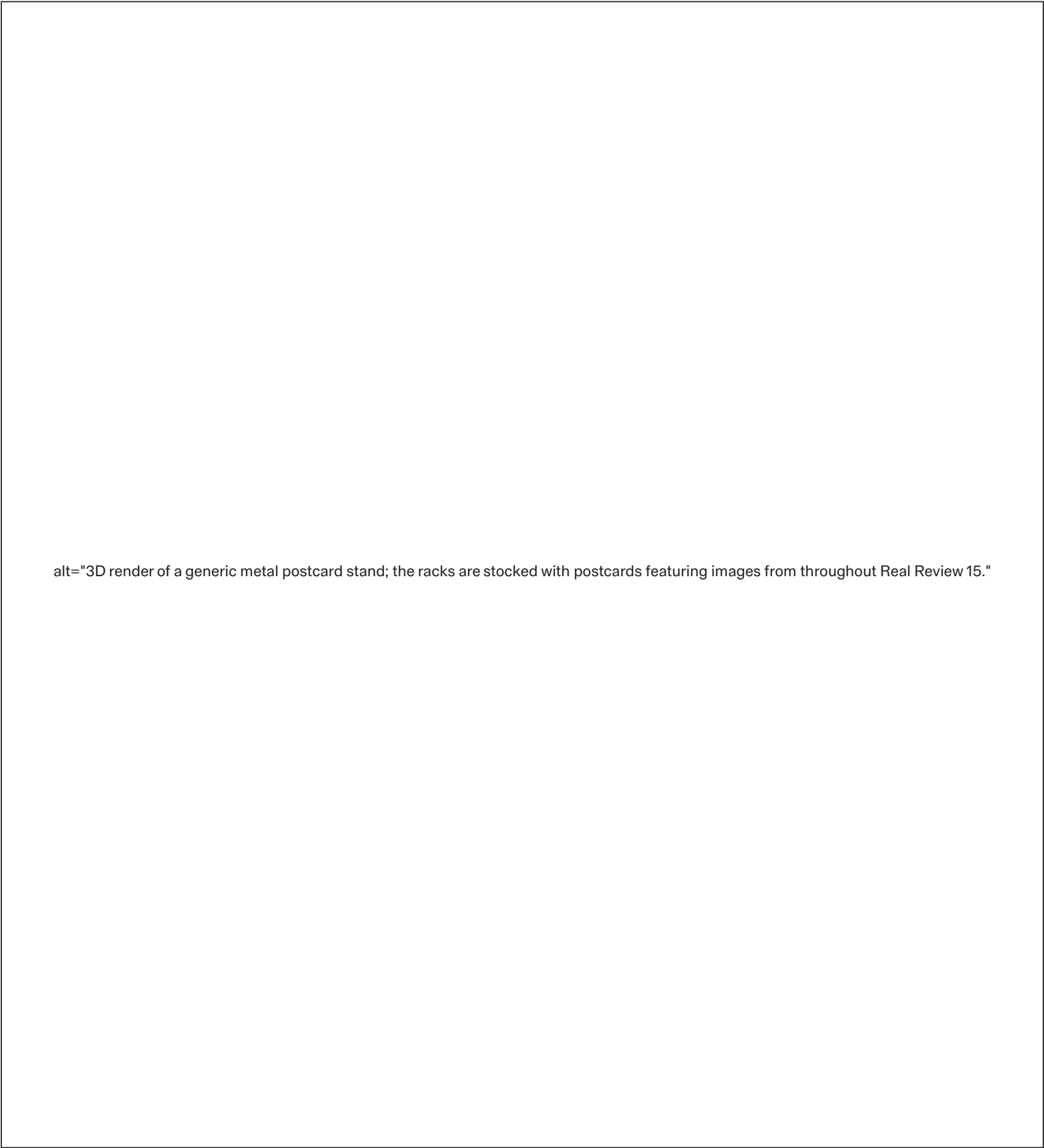
Even critics of advertising often inadvertently become evangelists. Take Russiagate, the Russian state interference in the 2016 United States elections. Russia took advantage of both "organic" Facebook accounts impersonating Americans, as well as Facebook ads. Whether this campaign swayed the elections or not, and whether success was driven by the social network itself, or simply by its ad networks, almost doesn't matter anymore. Eight years of media-fuelled worries led to two new social conditions: mass suspicion of election results (arguably even priming the January 6th riots of 2020); and a collective belief that Facebook's ads are extremely effective. Of course, once in the crosshairs of congress and parliamentary committees, the social network was happy to overstate the role of its ads as well – not only because it distracted away from too many questions about its role in society overall, but also because it helped further inflate its ads' perceived power and thus revenue (\$40 billion in 2017 to \$154 billion in 2023).

Panic fulfills the prophecies of advertising time and again, as Balenciaga can now also attest. The fashion house caused a stir with its 2022 Holiday campaign, which featured imagery of children holding bondage-clad teddy bears. The ensuing uproar drew light towards separate imagery that included US Supreme Court documents concerning child pornography as background props. We'll never know if, without the backlash, the campaign would have made society collapse into one giant Epstein island. But fears that the ads held the power to shape popular norms created a satanic panic truly worthy of fashion's current 1990's throwbacks. In the end, the fashion house was forced to apologise,

pull the campaign, and bid goodbye to Kim Kardashian, their most famous ambassador (albeit temporarily, Kim returned recently walking the SS 2024 runway show). The brand was even blamed for Kering's "as bad as it gets" Q4 2022 earnings.

In many such cases intentionality is assumed. Whether campaigns go viral for good or bad, people imagine the controversies to have been premeditated in modern Mad Men boardrooms (to throw some realism to this vision, it is more likely the creative teams are WFH in group chats). But as creatives from the industry will tell you, DA included, it's hard enough to convince corporations to do anything interesting, much less purposefully controversial. Other than maybe a small daring brand, no c-suite concerned with their shareholders' sensibilities is going to buy some 4D-chess-marketing move to try and trigger memes – not before, and especially not after, Balenciaga. And yet, such caution from corporate chiefs only reinforces (certainly in the minds of creatives) the argument that ads matter. Moreover, when a client denies creatives the chance to do something interesting, it becomes proof that such a chance could have an impact. Since this belief in the agency of the ad – propped up on all sides, and supported by nearly unlimited amounts of money – who can blame creatives for sticking with the dogma? One day you might get a chance, and until then you're getting paid to try. Just work hard enough, and you too could see your ideas supersede the brand they serve. The Logos becoming greater than the sum of its logo. Besides, what other options are there? We're all in advertising now. Lest we forget, the biggest movie of the year is an ad too.

To some, Barbie (2023), by now a billion-dollar blockbuster, is the ultimate achievement. Greta Gerwig was able to direct a feminist film despite, or perhaps to spite, the pink logo it carries. To others, the film's politics barely catch up to the feminism fought for in advertising's heyday. It would've been easier, for the sake of argument, if the movie was indeed a win for Mattel alone. But while the doll's mother company will be "raiding its entire toybox" for another 45 movies, and definitely selling a lot more plastic, we can't say in all honesty that this will be the film's only legacy. From reddit fables of people inspired to leave their toxic relationships, to anecdotal conversations within conservative families that wouldn't have happened otherwise, to numerous countries banning the film – and not just for its border depiction of the South China Sea, but for contradicting "values of faith and morality" – basically, Barbie didn't have to go so hard. There is a version of this film that's much less subversive, and it would have had a much more negative impact. Whether its current positives make up the balance is not only impossible to measure, but beside the point. Our issue here isn't with those trying to make a change through commercial work, it's with the industry's bloated self-belief, blinding creatives to any possibility that does not use commercial work as its vehicle.



alt="3D render of a generic metal postcard stand; the racks are stocked with postcards featuring images from throughout Real Review 15."

This goes for us, DA, as much as anyone. If not ourselves now, then ourselves from not that long ago. Creatives who, in the lingering hope that one day their own Trojan Barbie Horse will arrive, end up holding out for that opportunity, and that opportunity alone: exclusively expending their imaginative potential on an industry mainly made up of imagined potential. A true waste, and another impressive sleight of hand: advertising's over-rated emphasis on outcome that makes us all lose sight of what we're capable of outside its predetermined systems. Or worse, flat out underrating our abilities all together. It's a shame, especially when considering these abilities in their historical context, removed from today's hyper-commodification.

RE-ENCHANTMENT

Advertising used to be called Public Relations. But even before that, the core skills of informing people, persuading people, and integrating people with people (as Edward Baynes, pioneer of PR, describes it) were playing their part in shaping the world. Examples (by way of Wikipedia's History of Public Relations page) range from Greek sophists practicing persuasive communication, Egyptian court advisers consulting pharaohs to speak honestly, and England's Lord Chancellors acting as mediators between rulers and subjects. More than assisting leaders, communication skills made leaders. Especially in those societies where rule by force was absent. The Dawn of Everything, a book by David Graeber and David Wengrow (see Real Review #12), points to this significance within those Native American societies who, as free people, "submit to their chiefs only in so far as it pleases them." These civilisations were not shaped by a monopoly on violence, but rather through "reasoned debate, persuasive arguments and the establishment of social consensus." Reports by seventeenth-century Jesuits, who had learnt native languages such as Iroquoian in order to spread the Christian faith, were full of amazement at the counter-arguments they faced. "Even hardened European generals pursuing genocidal campaigns against indigenous peoples often reported themselves reduced to tears by their powers of eloquence." This power isn't just rhetorical or historical, it's neurological. As The Dawn of Everything points out: "the 'window of consciousness', [...] tends to be open on average for roughly seven seconds. [...] the great exception to this is when we're talking to someone else. In conversation, we can hold thoughts and reflect on problems – sometimes for several hours on end."

Contemporary PR can hardly be said to open a "window of consciousness", or contribute to reasoned debate, and yet the creatives working at its centre do inevitably have to master these skills. What if the abilities we hone within this system could be put to use outside of it? Obviously, that's easier said than done. The very

structure of the current system leaves many creatives no other choice but to stay stuck inside of it. "Who can afford to be critical?" asks the title of designer Afonso Matos' upcoming book, joining others such as CAPS LOCK: How Capitalism Took Hold of Graphic Design by Ruben Pater and What Design Can't Do by Silvio Lorusso. Poignant in their questions, these books are in and of themselves a first set of answers: creatives applying their skills of communication beyond commerce, despite their precarity. We don't mean to suggest everyone becomes a writer (as if that is any less precarious of a profession), but switching careers is one option some are exploring. Therapy, for example, definitely requires some rigorous communication skills, and has so many people retraining to it that the Financial Times recently called it the "profession of the century." This also aligns with reporting from the recent book After Work: A History of the Home and the Fight for Free Time, which mentions how more than a quarter of the labour force in G7 countries today are in care. From health aides to physician assistants to physical therapists, nine of the 12 fastest growing fields are "different ways of saying nurse," as Appelbaum writes for NYT. So After Work might be onto something when it states "the future of work is not coding, but caring."

We'd love to see more care. A lack of nuance would make our point a lot easier to land, but a massive retraining doesn't seem like the right answer. A better start would be if more people were to recognise their current job for what it is: a job. Rather than trying to meet the false and performative expectations set by advertising, or adding more pressure on ourselves for trying to change it, the real revolution might be letting go a little. To decouple our ego from our output, untangle our identity from our resumés, and rethink how our skills could make a difference outside of the systems to which we normally apply them. Of course, we all have rent to pay (unless you got lucky with crypto, or crib into which you were born). And there are plenty of skills to hone in the process, but by refusing to meet the system on its terms we can go a long way in saving some energy to spend elsewhere. Energy to lend our abilities, not just to a better boss, or our own individual self-expression, but to each other.

What do we think the future of advertising should look like? Take Her seriously. Not in a circa 2018 "Time's Up Advertising" way, but in the 2013 Spike Jonze film way. Specifically, we are thinking of the film's opening. For those who haven't seen it (or refuse to watch it, like Sofia Coppola); Her the movie opens with Theodore Twombly (Joaquin Phoenix) performing his duties at the offices of BeautifulHandWrittenLetters.com. We're quick to realise that the love letter he's dictating is, in fact, not from the heart, but meant to invoke the woman who hired him, voicing her feelings for her husband of 50 years. Serving as a soft-dystopian-tone-setter for the film, we'd argue it gets much closer to something utopian than most think.

The film itself goes for an inversion as its ending; Theodore finally expressing himself in a heart-felt letter to his own ex-wife. As one of the top YouTube comments points out: "It starts with Theodore composing a fake love letter for a stranger, ends with him composing a real one for himself." But is that really the choice; fake for strangers versus real for ourselves? Why not a secret third thing? Why not real love letters for strangers?

That's the future we'd like to see more advertising types aspire to realise. A shift from imagining ourselves as the great creators towards more humble narrators. Using our skills for sharp, sticky and attention-grabbing communication – not to invent unwanted needs, but to translate the very real, existential ones we all already have. To articulate the complexity of modern life. To help one another be more understood. As advertising continues to excel at selling its blinding belief, plenty have long given up on it and yet still find themselves stuck. So perhaps we must first use our skills to find each other, because there's definitely no getting unstuck alone. To cooperate, to collectivise, but to do so beyond any veiled new self-importance, and more as public servants. A more public Public Relations. Plenty can use our help to stand a chance at beating the signal-to-noise ratio of today's media landscape – whether it's our neighbours, our environment, our food systems, an unprofitable way to build zero-emission housing, or a community land trust (if you happen to know one). Maybe there's still time to give voice to those who dare to imagine worlds truly free from exploitation, both of human by human (and of the domination that emerges from it) of nature by human (shoutout Murray Bookchin). Worlds in which there would only be more need for more communication about more complex needs and abilities. Maybe it's too late for all that. And even then, if futures end up collapsing into warring factions over ever-dwindling resources, we bet that communicative abilities – ones that can negotiate our own needs and that of each other – would still not be the worst skills to have practiced outside the logics of capital. Let's at least try.

alt="3D render of a postcard with a distorted slogan"

THE OCCUPATION OF WATER
Amnesty International
[Editor's note: this text first appeared in 2017, and so makes no reference to the current Israeli–Palestinian conflict. It has been selected for reprint on the basis of providing some additional background to the current crisis.]

Soon after Israel occupied the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip in June 1967, the Israeli military authorities consolidated complete power over all water resources and water-related infrastructure in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT). More than fifty years on, Israel continues to control and restrict Palestinian access to water in the OPT, to a level which neither meets their needs nor constitutes a fair distribution of shared water resources.

In November 1967 the Israeli authorities issued Military Order 158, which stated that Palestinians could not construct any new water installation without first obtaining a permit from the Israeli army. Since then, the extraction of water from any new source, or the development of any new water infrastructure, requires permits from Israel – which are nearly impossible to obtain. Palestinians living under Israel's military occupation continue to suffer the devastating consequences of this order until today. They are unable to drill new water wells, install pumps or deepen existing wells. They are additionally denied access to the Jordan River and fresh water springs. Israel even controls the collection of rainwater throughout most of the West Bank, and rainwater harvesting cisterns owned by Palestinian communities are often destroyed by the Israeli army. As a result, some 180 Palestinian communities in rural areas in the occupied West Bank have no access to running water, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Even in towns or villages connected to the water network, taps very often run dry.

While restricting Palestinian access to water, Israel has effectively developed its own water infrastructure and water network in the West Bank, solely for the use of its own citizens (both in Israel and in the settlements deemed illegal under international law). The Israeli state-owned water company Mekorot has systematically sunk wells and tapped springs in the occupied West Bank to supply its population, including those living in illegal settlements, with water for domestic, agricultural and industrial purposes. While Mekorot sells some water to Palestinian water utilities,

the amount is determined by the Israeli authorities. As a result of continuous restrictions, many Palestinian communities in the West Bank have no choice but to purchase water brought in by trucks at a much high prices (ranging from \$4–10 per cubic metre). In some of the poorest communities, water expenses can at times consume half of a family's monthly income.

The Israeli authorities also restrict Palestinians' access to water by denying or restricting their access to large parts of the West Bank itself. Many parts of the West Bank have been declared "closed military areas", which Palestinians may not enter – because they are close to Israeli settlements, close to roads used by Israeli settlers, used for Israeli military training or protected nature reserves.

Israeli settlers living alongside Palestinians in the West Bank – in some cases just a few hundred meters away – face no such restrictions or water shortages, and can enjoy well-irrigated farmlands and swimming pools.

In Gaza, some 90–95% of the water supply is contaminated and unfit for human consumption. Israel does not allow water to be transferred from the West Bank to Gaza, and Gaza's only fresh water resource – the Coastal Aquifer – is insufficient for the needs of the population. It is being increasingly depleted by over-extraction, and contaminated by sewage and seawater infiltration.

The resulting disparity in access to water between Israelis and Palestinians is truly staggering. Water consumption by Israelis is at least four times that of Palestinians living in the OPT. Palestinians consume on average 73 litres of water a day per person, which is well below the World Health Organisation's (WHO) recommended daily minimum of 100 litres per capita. In many herding communities in the West Bank, the water consumption for thousands of Palestinians is as low as 20 litres per person a day, according to OCHA. By contrast, an average Israeli consumes approximately 300 litres of water a day.

Nearly sixty years since occupation began, it is time for the Israeli authorities to put an end to policies and practices which discriminate against Palestinians in the OPT, and to address their desperate need for water security. The Israeli authorities must lift the restrictions currently in place which deny millions of Palestinians access to sufficient water to meet their personal and domestic needs as well as to enjoy their rights to water, food, health, work and an adequate standard of living.