

No Ads
Please

No Ads *Please*

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For the reader's convenience, we have taken the liberty, when possible, of translating the visuals and integrating the translations directly into the images. These translations are therefore the sole responsibility of the author and publisher.

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Foreword

Have you ever been inside of an advertising agency? Long ago, I entered one. And I never left. This strange fact is what led me to write this book. On my phone more often than not, and in a fair amount of taxi rides. Just like anyone, I have been living for already quite some time with both my hands and my head tethered to a small, *smart*, glossy black machine.

Right now, it's early, traffic is flowing smoothly through the streets of Paris, I'm on my way to the agency. I catch a glimpse of the Eiffel Tower through the taxi's window, playing with the sunshine like a stroboscope. I close my eyes. And think back on the years past. Inside the tiny machine in my hand, my life has become enmeshed with an indescribable era. A few clichés might suffice to sketch it out: the planet is burning, narratives are catching fire, social networks are fuming, technology is making commerce and communication explode. Things are heating up. "Change is our lifeblood," once claimed David Ogilvy. What would the adman say today? In our arteries as well as in our feeds, our blood is boiling. The Earth is spinning ever-faster thanks to this tiny machine. Only that which changes endures.

We cross a bridge over the Seine. So far so good; even through the distorting effect of the good ol' force of acceleration, Paris looks more or less stable, and that's cool. We hear on the radio that some youngsters now *speed-watch* video content, 1.5x faster than the original. So far, so manageable.

It's been some time since I first started writing, but I still find it incredible that I landed one fine day in the world of commerce and advertising. In the eyes of my family, business schools were very far down the list of acceptable prospects, even if they didn't put it that way. Yes to literature. Yes to mathematics. Yes to the arts. But no to commerce. And advertising? No way. Now that I think about it, our family motto could easily have been "*Pas de publicité, merci*," echoing the French "no ads, please" stickers that I see everywhere on both urban letterboxes and rural mailboxes. I understand why people put them up – I feel the same way. I'm often fed up with ads. If you're embracing a career in advertising, a substantial part of your job will consist of defending your profession.

The radio now plays the Talking Heads' "Psycho Killer": it's a surprise, but a pleasant one. I'm traveling back in time. But even if his timing is off, the driver has something to tell me. I catch his eyes in the rearview mirror: "There was a technical bug at Vivatech: three minutes of pitch darkness during Elon Musk's interview," he says. We have a good laugh about it. After all, the critique of technical progress makes the world move forward as much as the enthusiasm it sparks does. That's an important lesson I learned from both my parents and my agency, BETC.

The taxi crosses the Louvre via the Place du Carrousel, passing Ieoh Ming Pei's pyramid. I know, I know: we

must be wary of the optical illusion that makes current problems seem more important than those of the past. Still, every other day I feel like we're trudging through an endless Middle Ages without any glimmer of Renaissance in sight.

If I'm to talk about our corporation, I'd say that we ad people navigate a sea that's grown immensely since advertising took its first laps in its original fish bowl. Our ancient trade has been engulfed in the *mare incognita* of generalized hypercommunication. And, at times, you need the resilient energy of a fish out of water. Of course, you usually try to think about something else. But this morning, on my way to the agency, I feel like sending a message to Earth, like making an announcement to the passengers of our giant space shuttle: "Please fasten your seatbelts, we are currently experiencing communication issues." But I'm in a taxi and no one can hear me screaming internally.

The car is driving down Avenue de l'Opéra. And I'm walking down memory lane, when a funny thought crosses my mind. I've always been the silent type. When I was eighteen years old, I lived with my grandmother, and her nickname for me was "the carp," from the idiom "*muet comme une carpe*," meaning "silent as a grave." Is this the reason why I founded a communication agency? Perhaps I have a severe need to communicate, and perhaps it's more severe than anyone else. Thinking about it, I must admit I was never a great communicator; it was almost pathological. For a long time, being asked to chair a prestigious jury would cast a dark cloud over my day, being invited to a dinner party with interesting people would make me break out in a cold sweat, being considered for a TV show would fill me with anxiety...

The taxi runs through the intersection under the above-ground metro line, near the Stalingrad stop. The GPS indicates that the agency is still seventeen minutes away. Every day, I'm still in awe of what I have discovered thanks to this agency: very few things lie outside the scope of advertising. This will hold true for as long as humankind exists. There will always be salads to be sold, speeches to be written, loves to be declared, planets to be saved, narratives to be simplified, shop windows to be lit, cars or movements to be launched, and chocolate to be spread... Toothpaste, a bank, a book, liquor, philosophy, tires, jewelry, chocolate, the anniversary of a revolution, the city of Paris... My favorite question, at the very core of what we do, remains the same: Do we love and buy things or words? Or both? The cake and the sweet talk. I chose advertising for this brand of magic, for language, in the broad sense, through which you can manipulate the value of things. An advertising agency sails between art and commerce, at their confluence.

As we leave the intersection behind us, the Canal de la Villette appears. The agency moors further upstream. I have a physical connection to the building, probably because I had a close hand in its construction. When the canal ices over, it looks austere in the metallic coldness of winter. In the summer, the light of the water dances in the upper levels. Every day, I appreciate the privilege of my position, both in the control room and at the lookout post. Epic, poetic images that also make me chuckle whenever I remember my children seeing me dive into an abyss of all-nighters on a regular basis and wondering what my job could be. They would ask me to describe what I do precisely. Invariably, I would fail, offering that I attended lots of meetings and had lots

of conversations. "But what do you do? And what do you *do* exactly?"

Thirty years ago, I co-founded BETC with Éric Tong Cuong and Mercedes Erra. It might as well be a thousand years ago. In any case, a thousand is roughly the number of people working at the agency nowadays, with Bertille Toledano and Stéphane Xiberras at the helm. If we always had an eye out for economic rationality and technical innovation, what really carried us is the agency itself and its people, the constant collision of their unique minds and imaginations, turning our company into a one-of-a-kind spaceship to explore the world for each and any of them.

The taxi now cuts through the *boulevard périphérique*, the ring road surrounding Paris. One dream of mine was always to inspire our employees to feel as if the agency was bigger than what they thought, even if what they had in mind was already huge. If I'm honest, I probably often dreamt of turning BETC into something different from an advertising agency, too. If I hadn't entertained this dream, I never could have succeeded, with all my amazing partners, in turning the agency into "also an ad agency," as *Creative Review* dubbed us.

Today, before dreams even come into play, to remain a creative agency while communication is becoming more and more industrialized has become an endeavor in itself. A somewhat exhausting fight at times. A battle in which each and every employee must lend a helping hand to eloquently plead the case of the companies, brands, organizations, and institutions that we take care of. Our daily job is to fiercely defend this and bravely champion that. For causes that aren't always easy.

The taxi parks in front of the agency and, at this very moment, I strangely hope that this book will also speak to those who know nothing about advertising, that it will pique the interest of a larger and broader audience for creative work and creative companies. I hope I will be successful in this.

I wrote this book myself. The statement might sound weird – especially for a former copywriter – but people actually offered to write it with me, to have someone write it for me, to think about what would make a good book. “You’ll see, it won’t take up too much of your time, you just check if you like it, you edit it a bit. There are even people who can write like you, you won’t notice that it’s not coming from you.” That’s sort of what goes on in the case of big bosses. I confess it didn’t sound tempting to me at all.

Incidentally, I likely infringed on a good many rules when it comes to book writing. Throughout my life, I’ve always loved what we French call the *mélange des genres*, mixing genres, styles, topics... and more. So I followed the same recipe for this book. I put things I love in it. (Not everything, alas! But it would have made for too hefty a volume...) I compiled ad campaigns, ideas, events, architecture, music, design, projects on a minuscule scale or a planetary one, technical or subjective approaches, viewpoints of all kinds, days, years, and centuries. I have weaved together details and general considerations, mixed and matched ideas, people, and subjects that seldom cross paths, let alone meet. There are also dates and instances of work at every turn of the page. This book is time-stamped, in a way, which brings me joy and serenity. In the end, one fairly classic question probably emerges from it all: what do we pass forward? Hopefully, maybe, this book will bring some light to the mystery.

You can read it in the same way I wrote it, bit by bit, during entire holidays, weekends, and a lot of taxi rides, exactly like the one I hopped off of just before taking you with me inside the agency, right now.

*Reputation, reputation, reputation! Oh, I have lost
my reputation!*

*I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what
remains is bestial.*

William Shakespeare, *Othello*

*Advertising is fundamentally persuasion and per-
suasion happens to be not a science, but an art.*

Bill Bernbach