

Cannes. Strangers at the circus

 By [Damon Stapleton](#)

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There were two boats in Cannes. They were part of the seemingly endless cavalcade of behemoth yachts moored in the South of France for the Cannes advertising festival of creativity.

One belonged to some venture capitalists and was obscenely large. It had its own planet-sized chandelier and a place to land a helicopter. The other was more modest, by Cannes standards. It belonged to the advertising agency BBH. One of the great agencies in the world.

The venture capitalists had been on their deck staring with great intent at the BBH boat. In particular, they had been looking at the flag of BBH, which is a black sheep. I believe it comes from one of Sir John Hegarty's early ads for Levi's. It shows a whole flock of white sheep and one black sheep and I think the line was "when everybody zigs, zag".

The venture capitalists looked at this for a while and one of them shouted across to BBH.

"So what kind of business are you guys in? Livestock?"

Now, I don't know if this story is true. I was told the story on two separate occasions while I was in Cannes. And after being there for the week, I can certainly believe it happened. The reason I mention it is that it is the perfect example of where Cannes and advertising is right now.



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For years, Cannes was the place where old buildings met new ideas. Strangely, it was a very consistent, predictable template that housed necessary madness and bleary-eyed hedonism. It was a simple, crazy beautiful celebration of ideas and creativity that said we are the creators and the disruptors. It was about a tribe that believed in taking risks and finding ways to bring the new. There was a bit of *schadenfreude* mixed with joy and full-frontal ambition. It was a place where your sputtering career and where the industry was at merged. This weird fusion gave you a pretty good read of the advertising landscape, a vague map and a way forward.

This Cannes was different.

There were many tribes. Venture capitalists wanting to buy stuff. Tech companies wanting to sell stuff. Consultants. Entertainment. Gaming. Media. Facebook. Google. And Snapchat with a Ferris Wheel.

I could go on and on. But it's safe to say that there were many strangers at the circus. And even the ones you used to know were trying to re-invent themselves. They were all saying, "We used to be this, now we are that."

To me, we have reached a point where advertising no longer knows what it is because it has become everything. That's a pretty big place. Believe me, a new world is forming that is both frightening and exciting in equal measure. You could see the tectonic plates shifting and the lava oozing out around your newly bought espadrilles.

I have a love-hate relationship with Cannes. It gives you the best and the worst of our industry in one place, in a single week. It can be overwhelming. I don't know why, but in a year where Cannes had maximum madness, I felt quite serene. Maybe it's because I had a North Star. I just looked at the ideas. And to be clear, they were pretty bloody good this year.

For me, creativity at Cannes was not a sideshow.

For many others that were there, it was. And if I am honest, I found that a little sad.

Cannes felt like an eye desperately trying to look at itself. But there was too much to see.

However, if you can look past the insane circus of obscene boats, shiny people with mirrored ray-bans and far too much linen; if you can peer past the endless bull\$#!t jargon and polished bravado there will always only ever be one ringmaster: Ideas.

“Great perils have this beauty, that they bring to light the fraternity of strangers.” - Victor Hugo

ABOUT DAMON STAPLETON

Damon is regional chief creative officer for DDB in New Zealand and Australia. Before that, ECD at Saatchi and Saatchi Australia, before that, group ECD of TBWA Hunt Lascaris and global ECD of Standard Bank. He has won over 500 awards internationally, including a D&AD Black Pencil, Cannes Grand Prix, Grand Olios, ADC Black Cube and most effective ad in the world by Warc 100. Damon is now regional chief creative officer for DDB in New Zealand and Australia...

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