



Flashing LED billboards cause disturbance to residents and danger to drivers blinded at pivotal turns on the Gulf Road as well as to pedestrians.



The spread of these billboards feels like a physical assault, a violation of the senses. Our eyes are being forced to do the work of capital process without our consent. Forced to affirm obesity and diabetes through the endless ads for fast food, soda, and sugar; forced to affirm sweatshop labor through the ads for disposable clothing; forced to affirm climate change through the ads for cars; and on and on. The triumph of the billboards—evidenced by their ceaseless proliferation and apparent permanence—affirms the triumph of money over every other value. Certainly the beauty and care of the landscape and nature mean

nothing, confirmed by the brutal uprooting of precious greenery along the medians. The uglification of the country in the name of commerce proceeds unchecked. The supposed law against billboards placed on “islands,” protecting the safety of drivers, passengers, and pedestrians, is overridden by the cash they haul in to advertising companies and businesses. There is great power behind these advertising companies and commercial interests, power that cannot be countered by mere petitions or newspaper articles. Nonetheless, I resent having to do their work for them with my eyeballs.



SPECIAL REPORT

Seeing Stars: Kuwait Without Billboards

Story and photos by Mai Al-Nakib

Special to the Arab Times

Mai Al-Nakib (maialnakib.com) is an associate professor of English and comparative literature at Kuwait University and author of the award-winning short story collection *The Hidden Light of Objects*.



In September 2017, I returned to Kuwait after months away to a blazing, oversized, double-sided LED billboard outside my apartment building. I made the last turn into my street blinded by white flashes, unable to check whether there was a car coming to my left or right. I unlocked the door to my apartment only to find that the eerie blue light from that same billboard strobed in almost every room. I live above the tenth floor and the pulsating light made it seem like I was inside a television set. I could only imagine the situation on the lower floors.

I set to work immediately. I rallied as many residents as I could to sign a petition for the sign's removal, which I planned to take to the local municipality. I wrote a cover letter describing the disturbance the flashing LED billboard caused to residents in the area, and, more pressingly, warning of the danger it posed to drivers (and, of course, to pedestrians) blinded at a pivotal turn off the Gulf Road. Years earlier, a static, much smaller billboard had been removed due to the weekly accidents it caused at the same exit. This new sign was double the size, double-sided, with moving pictures; surely if the previous sign warranted removal, this one did even more so. I took the petition to the local municipal office, gave it to the officer in charge, who promised to take it in person to the municipality headquarters. He explained that, in fact, placing a billboard on an “island”—a self-contained pavement or strip between two streets—was illegal. We exchanged numbers. I felt cautiously optimistic.

I heard nothing from him or from anyone else about my petition. Ever.

One month later, illuminated billboards by the hundreds appeared overnight along the median strip between opposing traffic along the Gulf Road, arguably the loveliest street in Kuwait. Scarcely thirty meters separated one billboard from the next. The beautiful and no doubt expensive landscaping of the median strips was uprooted, pavement bricks ripped out to accommodate the billboards. Piles of sand, spoiled greenery, and broken bricks were left around the billboards, evidence of the shameless destruction. More of the monstrous, flashing LED billboards appeared in conspicuous locations precariously close to the edge of roads, blinding to drivers and life threatening to pedestrians. Given the

lack of response from any municipal officer, the municipality, or the general population, the takeover felt irrevocable.

A year and a half later, the multiplication of these billboards all over Kuwait—static, illuminated, and animated LEDs alike—continues apace. Wherever there is space to be had—between streets, at U-turns, on the tops and sides of buildings, on buses, on roundabouts at the airport, inside buildings, surrounding trees—a billboard of one sort or another appears. Everywhere we turn, our eyes land on advertisements for disposable clothing; unhealthy fast food; soda; chocolate; bank lotteries; cars; electronics; among other fulfillments of materialist desire. The advertisements, like the billboards they appear on, reflect our values. What they suggest about who we are should give us pause.

The spread of these billboards feels like a physical assault, a violation of the senses. Our eyes are being forced to do the work of capital process without our consent. Forced to affirm obesity and diabetes through the endless ads for fast food, soda, and sugar; forced to affirm sweatshop labor through the ads for disposable clothing; forced to affirm climate change through the ads for cars; and on and on. The triumph of the billboards—evidenced by their ceaseless proliferation and apparent permanence—affirms the triumph of money over every other value. Certainly the beauty and care of the landscape and nature mean nothing, confirmed by the brutal uprooting of precious greenery along the medians. The uglification of the country in the name of commerce proceeds unchecked. The supposed law against billboards placed on “islands,” protecting the safety of drivers, passengers, and pedestrians, is overridden by the cash they haul in to advertising companies and businesses. There is great power behind these advertising companies and commercial interests, power that cannot be countered by mere petitions or newspaper articles. Nonetheless, I resent having to do their work for them with my eyeballs.

What I would rather be doing with my sense of sight is to allow it to take in ad-free spaces uncorrupted by mercenary interests. I want to see nature, even if that nature is desert sand. I want my eyes to see what's there rather than what's for sale, so that I can be left to reflect on a range of unspecified ideas and to imagine alternative visions. I believe this is why, as a writer especially, I've experienced such aggravation over these billboards erupting all over Kuwait. Billboards—assaults on vision—foreclose the imagination. Italo Calvino puts it this way: “Nowadays



Uprooted: Examples, above and below, of the uprooting of plants and bricks.



we are bombarded by so many images that we can no longer distinguish direct experience from what we've seen for a few seconds on television. Bits of images cover our memory like a layer of trash, and among so many shapes it becomes ever more difficult for any one to stand out. ... [We] are in danger of losing a basic human faculty: the power to bring visions into focus with our eyes closed, to cause colors and shapes to spring forth from an array of black characters on a white page, to think through images.” Because of the endless images shoved into our line of sight by advertisers, merchants, influencers, and others motivated by greed, we lose the capacity to bring to mind our own singular images. Without this capacity to imagine our own images (note the shared root), we lose our ability to at least attempt to shape the world around us according to values other than commercial ones.

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson, thanks to the efforts of his wife, Lady Bird Johnson, signed the Highway Beautification Act to prevent the natural beauty of the American landscape along highways from being covered up by massive billboards. The effort was not entirely successful, but it did have some positive effects and, at the very least, championed the value of protecting the beauty of the environment. In São Paulo, Brazil, most outdoor advertisements, including billboards and even large commercial signs, are prohibited. The mayor responsible for the law, with the support of the public, wanted to reduce what he termed “visual pollution” in the name of seeing the city again. Debates around billboards and outdoor ads have been raging all over the world for decades. It's high time these debates begin in Kuwait, regardless of power interests.

In a Kuwait without billboards, our senses might become sufficiently freed up to imagine a Kuwait without unpolluted seas and skies; a Kuwait without one of the highest childhood diabetes rates in the world; a Kuwait without individuals living paycheck to paycheck driving Porsches; a Kuwait that recycles its trash; a Kuwait that values its natural and cultivated landscape; a Kuwait that values a sustainable future, both environmental and economic; a Kuwait that learns to value aesthetic appreciation over instant gratification; among many other, non-consumerist, non-materialistic Kuwaits. In a Kuwait without flashing billboards and light pollution, it might become possible to see stars again. One can dream, anyway, if the billboards will still grant us that luxury. For me, sadly, the incessant strobing inside my bedroom makes such dreaming almost impossible.