

## The Philosophical Luddite

by Jim Blaylock

I'm thinking about a portentous day during the dreadful close of the 1960s, back when I had the pleasant idea that I'd one day become a marine biologist like Ed Ricketts and spend my life at the beach. On campus I ran into a math-major friend who had just bought a new Texas Instruments calculator – something that I had never seen before and that seemed highly fantastic. He had paid a lot of money for it, but it actually possessed a sort of intelligence, and would do square roots in an instant and it knew about pi and long division and other mathematical arcana. A couple of days later he and his math friends ceremoniously tossed their slide rules into a trashcan in the Student Union and walked away from them. They never looked back, and neither did the world. Fifteen years later I was given a calculator the size of a credit card in return for buying a tank of gas. The signs and symbols on it were meaningless to me. It lay around the house for a few months and then I tossed it into the trash without much ceremony at all.

At one time I myself owned a slide rule, which I admired as an object, in the same way that I admired my abacus, which was built out of dark

oriental wood and was strung with painted beads. I couldn't do a damn thing with either one of them. I also owned smoking pipes that I didn't use. I still have a shirt pocket briar with a rotating stem, its bowl carved in the shape of a wooden shoe, and a short-stemmed bent-bulldog pipe that a peg-legged sea captain would smoke. Over the years I seem to have paid a certain amount of attention to strange but useless objects. I look up from the computer screen now and am confronted by the utterly useless Duck With the Rotating Propeller Cap, whose tin-toy charm has outlasted (and I suspect will outlast) any electronic marvel in the house. If I had a useful cart with the words "Nifty Stuff" stenciled onto the side, I could fill it easily. The thing is, there would scarcely be a single object in the cart that was contrived after the 1950s, and that fact defines a part of who I am to some small but vital extent.

One time I was haranguing a class full of freshman college students about what the world was like back in my day, and I insisted, to their mass contempt, that very few really necessary things have been invented in the last fifty years or so, with the exception, perhaps, of the electric guitar and closed-cell Styrofoam for making surfboard blanks – and I'm not at all certain about the Styrofoam, since balsa wood works just fine and doesn't contribute to the death of the Earth. What, I asked them, do I need now that

I didn't have then? One of the students, who had recently had her eyesight restored by laser surgery, raised her hand with an unassailable answer, and so in my teacherly fashion I assailed it by reminding her that a teacher is an authority figure and shouldn't be argued with.

There's a paragraph in one of my short stories, something called "Thirteen Phantasms" in which the hero of the piece, a man named Landers, considers smashing his cordless telephone (a modern source of irritation) and dropping it through the attic hatch onto the floor tiles below. I haven't actually done that, although I've been tempted, but I admire the bumper sticker that reads, "Kill Your Television," and I'm a fan of Joe Gould, a New York City writer and vagrant in the early part of the last century, poverty stricken and living on soda crackers and ketchup at various diners, who was so infuriated by radio and its threat to literature that he carried one out into the middle of Broadway and beat it to death with a baseball bat in "full view of the public," to quote the written account. Joe Gould didn't prevail, of course, and neither did the Luddites when they set out with hammers and tongs nearly two centuries ago to bring down the Industrial Age.

In fact, when my student called my shameless bluff I was compelled to admit that a part of me was kidding. But there's another part of me that's serious, that keeps one eye on that Louisville Slugger (an "eyeball peeled for

the great big shoe” if my memory for the brilliant Beanie and Cecil bit serves me right) and that’s the part of me that wrote “Thirteen Phantasms,” in which I assailed modern technology.

The hero of that story got caught up in reading old copies of *Astounding Science Fiction*, written during a time when science was largely speculative and imaginary. I’ve got dozens of copies of the magazine that I page through from time to time, reading the stories and letter columns. Of course I pulled some of them off the shelf when I was writing “Thirteen Phantasms.” I’m looking at one right now, published in 1956, and opened at random to an ad for something called “Geniacs”: “Make your own baby genius computers!” The kit includes everything one needs to construct a “small electronic brain” that will work an array of puzzles including the “Fox, Hen, Corn” puzzle and the difficult “Hired Man” puzzle. On the next page there’s a list of books from Gnome Press that can be had for 95 cents, except that you’ve got to buy three, which runs the bill up considerably, and on the page after that there’s an ad for the Werewolf Bookshop, which I like to imagine still exists, still selling its 7,000 science fiction and fantasy titles at 50 to 90 percent off, a place where a customer can assemble a small library at the cost of a roll of dimes. In those halcyon days strange fish still swam in Martian canals and it hadn’t been revealed to us that the Moon is

just made out of dirt, and that once we'd gotten there and knocked a golf ball into a convenient crater, we'd lose our enthusiasm for going back.

You'll point out that it's blatantly contradictory of me to prefer Geniacs to Macintosh, especially when the Macintosh is so utterly necessary to me at this very moment, and the Geniacs would simply go into the nifty things cart. Before you send for the psychoanalyst, consider one more thing: half a century ago, Orange County boasted a first-rate mass transit system called the Red Car Line. You could hop on the Red Car in Santa Ana and for twenty-five cents shoot straight out to Hollywood Boulevard to see a movie at Grauman's Chinese Theatre or into Long Beach to ride the roller coaster at the Pike. Another branch of the Red Car ran along the Pacific Coast Highway from Huntington Beach to Balboa and back again. On a Saturday afternoon in summer it was standing room only on board.

The Red Car went the way of the wooly mammoth in the 1950's, and the tracks along the Coast Highway rusted in the sea wind for years after that, until they were obscured by beach sand and ice plant. Around the time that slide rules became artifacts, you could park your panel truck on the side of the Highway, kick the scraps of railroad iron aside, and toss your surfboard and wetsuit over the broken-down chain link fence before climbing over yourself to paddle out into the empty winter ocean.

Nowadays the old Red Car tracks are a dim memory, hauled away along with the ice plant and replaced with “no parking” signs. The highway is several lanes wide but clogged with traffic anyway. The beach has been sanitized, parking in the lots costs ten dollars, and half a dozen times a year the ocean is closed down for repairs because of mysterious floating sewage that has sanitation engineers baffled.

But I’m being unfair to modern science. There’s some mitigating value in knowing that this very afternoon you can pay someone at the local cryogenics lab to clip your head off when you die and float it in liquid nitrogen until the happy day comes to reanimate it. That’s science fiction come true if ever we’ve seen it, and it’s got an undeniable glory. Problem is, it’ll take a Geniacs electronic brain to figure out what good it’ll do you when you’re simply a head on a plate. Maybe all those happy heads could hire themselves out to Chinese restaurants as lazy Susan ornaments and babble out the array of dishes on the pupu platter as they rotate, now and then surreptitiously slurping up a stray dumpling.

And now, of course, you’ve had it with this line of baloney. Pitch out the neoprene wetsuit, you say. Dump that CD player and crank up the old Victrola. Haul the Smith-Corona out of mothballs, re-ink the ribbon, and type the great American novel. Better yet, use a quill pen. Go out shopping

for a Hudson Wasp and a bottle of rose-scented hair oil. Close down the email account. Take your television out into the middle of Chapman Avenue and beat it to death in full view of the public. Put a match to your little corner of the modern world.

But of course putting a match to it would simply turn me into a crank. People would mutter, “There goes poor old Blaylock,” when I shamble past dressed in a pair of high-waisted trousers, waving a cold smoking pipe and a tin duck, weeping with regret for the passing away of the Katzenjammer Kids and mumblety-peg and the village green. Admittedly it wouldn’t do to indulge my Luddite whims, and so now and then I have my characters do it for me.