

## TAKE THE GOOD WITH THE BAD

BY BOB ZASLAVSKY

From the very beginnings of human history, technology has been a mixed gift, part blessing and part curse. It all began with fire. When Prometheus stole fire from the other gods, he meant it to be the basis for all human art. The ancient Greek word for art was *technê*, within which the Greeks included teachable utilitarian knowledges as diverse as medicine and shoemaking. (What we call art, namely fine art, the Greeks called *poiêsis*, making, from which our word "poetry" is derived, and which included painting, literature, sculpture, and music.)

We should not forget that Prometheus's gift of fire, with its potential for art, i.e., for technology, was rooted in a crime, a theft. Hence, there is something illicit in technology from its very inception.

The Biblical account of the origin of technology is strikingly parallel to this. In the Bible too the origin of technology is a crime, namely the crime of the first murder. After Cain was expelled from Eden and went to dwell "in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden" (Genesis 4:16), he and his descendants developed cities (4:17), technology (represented by metalworking, 4:22), agriculture (4:20), and the fine arts (represented by music, 4:21).

In other words, for both the Greeks and the Hebrews, the founding of technological civilization is a crime. Technology, therefore, never loses the illicit dimension that lurks perennially below the surface of the wonderful benefits that it provides.

Some persons then, and some persons still, have railed against technology because humans seem to be inexorably drawn, they say, to the illicit or debilitating or destructive possibilities inherent in any technology. Such possibilities are undoubtedly there, even in the most benevolently intended technological developments.

After all, not only does fire give us light, warmth, and toolmaking efficiency, but it also burns our flesh, torches our books, and razes our homes.

Not only does movable type printing give us the Gutenberg Bible and the First Folio edition of Shakespeare's plays, but it also allows for the proliferation of pablum and pornography.

Not only does the art of film give us *Metropolis*, *Citizen Kane*, and *2001: A Space Odyssey*, but it also gives us *Olympia* and *The Triumph of the Will*.

And certainly the most pervasive and intimate of mass media, namely television, is not exempt from such extremes. Television showed us *Omnibus*, the coronation of Elizabeth II, the journalism of Edward R. Murrow, the pioneering lunar steps of Neil Armstrong, *The Twilight Zone*, *The Prisoner*, and *Babylon 5*. But it also showed us infomercials, the tabloid-worthy death of Princess Diana, the professional reader of news, the moonwalk of Michael Jackson, and so-called reality show after reality show.

Television, like any technology, has revealed us at our best and at our worst. And the degree to which the one or the other of these predominates at any given time is a function, not of the technology itself, but of the level of cultural literacy that characterizes us as a people.

Let us not, then, rail against the medium. Let us not bemoan what Marshall McLuhan lauded, that the medium is the message. Instead, let us look inward to our own failure to educate ourselves and our children so that we strive to maximize our best possibilities. In other words, let us make a commitment to insuring that the message is the medium.

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