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Appletopia: Media Technology and the Religious Imagination of Steve Jobs by Brett T. Robinson

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*Appletopia: Media Technology and the Religious Imagination
of Steve Jobs* by Brett T. Robinson (review)

Michael M. J. Fischer

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(Review)

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period visioneering's brand of futurism also reached broad, new audiences through *Omni* magazine.

While visioneers often felt the credibility of their enterprises was threatened by association with such disreputable supporters as LSD guru Timothy Leary and, later, the cryonics movement, the case of nanotechnology offers an interesting twist. McCray argues that Drexler and the Foresight Institute (which Drexler co-founded) successfully leveraged the credibility of then-recent advances in the understanding of biomolecular processes to help generate not only enthusiasm but generous funding for nano-scale research. When this research began to focus on instruments such as the scanning tunneling microscope and materials such as carbon nanotubes, Drexler's computer simulations of molecule-sized machines, and his speculation about the danger of them turning their environment into a "gray goo," came to be regarded as endangering immediately productive research.

The Visioneers does not purport to be a comprehensive history. Notably, the wonderful "leaping robot" on the book's cover belies a dearth of content on robotics, cybernetics, and artificial intelligence. Nevertheless, the book is a worthy contribution to a growing historiography of the sprawling intellectual and cultural spaces that have existed around the edges of mainstream science and technology. It may be profitably read alongside Fred Turner's *From Counterculture to Cyberculture* (2006), David Kaiser's *How the Hippies Saved Physics* (2011), Michael Gordin's *The Pseudoscience Wars* (2012), Andrew Pickering's *The Cybernetic Brain* (2010), and Helge Kragh's *Higher Speculations* (2011).

WILLIAM THOMAS

William Thomas is a senior historian at History Associates, Inc., in Rockville, Maryland. His book, *Rational Action: The Sciences of Policy in Britain and America, 1940–1960*, is available this spring from the MIT Press.

Appletopia: Media Technology and the Religious Imagination of Steve Jobs.

By Brett T. Robinson. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013.
Pp. xii+147. \$24.95.

This reading of Apple ads—for the Macintosh (iMac), iPod, iPhone, and iPad—by a marketing professor suggests "Jobs and Apple provide an allegory for reading religion in the information age" (p. 105). With white dust jacket, black lettering, and silhouette with dark red highlighting of "topia" and "Steve Jobs," the slim book mimics an Apple product. Brett Robinson traces his method to the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies (p. 108) but it seems more akin to the University of Chicago's symbolic interactionist marketing studies in the 1950s and to the symbolic anthropology of

the 1960s and 1970s (see Melissa Cefkin, ed., *Ethnography and the Corporate Encounter*, 2009).

Robinson argues that Apple, with its forbidden fruit icon, like other culturally key technologies (cathedral, arcade, railroad-telegraph, Golden Gate Bridge, automobile, translucent Le Grande Arche, Fifth Avenue Apple Store) is a vehicle of transcendence. Like his hero Edwin Land, Jobs wants to stand in the intersection of engineering and the humanities, dissolving the antagonisms between machines and human beings. For this, advertising is not just a tool of persuasion, but a highly emotive “aesthetic encounter” (p. 16). “The representations and practices of technology are composed of a diffuse set of rituals and rhetoric”; “images and slogans of technological advertising provide a computer catechism” (p. 5). Citing Umberto Eco’s satire of the Protestant PC (free interpretation, but difficult choices, not all can achieve salvation) versus the Catholic Macintosh (cheerful, friendly, conciliatory, catechistic in telling the faithful how to proceed step-by-step, and promising salvation to all), Robinson sees Apple ads operating like medieval morality plays. The PC is the fall into tedious work and depersonalization; the Mac is liberation and creativity, facilitating “self-divinization by procuring the powers of omniscience and omnipresence granted by a global communication network” (p. 17). Robinson cites Ralph Waldo Emerson as seeing new technologies “reducing the earth to a brain . . . by telegraph and steam the Earth is anthropologized” (p. 7), Pierre Teilhard de Chardin updating this as a noosphere or superconsciousness through electronic communication, and Timothy Leary calling the personal computer the LSD of the 1990s (“It makes perfect sense to me that if you activate your brain with psychedelic drugs, the only way you can describe it is electronically”) (p. 55).

The delicious review of *iMac ads* includes: “Narcissus” (the impish iMac monitor following a man walking past; man stops to look; as if in a mirror he sees in the screen extensions of his own creativity, productivity, sociability, and memory) (p. 33); and the sixty-six 30-second ad series “Get a Mac” (Mac dressed casually, PC in business suit, vignettes of “conflict between the human spirit of creativity and the dreary environment of labor and soulless efficiency”) (p. 40). The *iPod ads* shift from sharp product photos to silhouette dancers on neon backgrounds, white wires hanging from their heads, giving new meaning to the term “wirehead” (1960s hippies who liked electronics). In “Cubicle,” single albums and the materiality of analog media are sucked into the iPod nano as universal container; in “Wild Postings” it is the twenty-six iPod poster ads that are in color as a plugged-in man blocks out street sounds and encounters a man with child on his shoulders, the child’s legs in affectionate embrace around the man’s ears, “a visual metaphor for the companionship of the iPod” (p. 52). The *iPhone ads*, “Touching Is Believing,” evoke Michelangelo, doubting Thomas, the idiom “seeing is believing,” and Buddhism-Gnosticism (suffering body, digital liberation).

Robinson's rare criticism is formulaic: "what Apple offers us in the iPhone ads is a false freedom, one that offers amusement and efficiency as counterfeit forms of human leisure" (p. 73). More trenchant: the Waldorf School, where many of the children of Apple, Google, Yahoo, and H-P executives go, eschews computers, in favor of "chalkboards, wood desks, encyclopedias and No. 2 pencils," "learning math by knitting and baking" (p. 199).

In the ad "Listen to the Music," dancers paint the air with neon light from the iPod, like glow sticks at a rave, or seeing trails when on acid; Cut Chemist plays trance-inducing acid house. Robinson delights in identifying the music in the ads (naming is owning, *also* access to purchasing)—hip-hop, reggae, and tribal percussion (The Black Eyed Peas) and rock and symphony (Chris Martin); and 1960s legacies in Jobs's belief in enlightened individuals—therapist and LSD researcher Richard Alpert (turned Ram Das), yogi Paramahansa Yogananda, Bill Gates's psychedelic history, Tim Berners-Lee's Unitarian Universalism, and Roberto Parada's illustration "The Night Steve Jobs Met Andy Warhol."

MICHAEL M. J. FISCHER

Michael M. J. Fischer is professor of anthropology and science and technology studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Arming Mother Nature: The Birth of Catastrophic Environmentalism.

By Joseph Darwin Hamblin. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.
Pp. 298. \$29.95.

This fascinating book explores the ingenious, cruel, ludicrous, and heinous ways that American scientists, military planners, and medical professionals attempted to recruit nature into their plans for waging total war against the Soviet Union and other ideological enemies. Joseph Hamblin traces this broad-based effort: among other things, he argues that military investigations into environmental interdependencies and weaponry were part of the emerging ecological and environmental consciousness of the post-World War II era.

Narratives about total war typically focus on nuclear weapons and doctrines of mutual assured destruction, in which the targeting of entire cities decisively obliterates any remaining division between civilian and combatant. But once the United States lost the monopoly on nuclear weapons in 1949, and as the increasing destructive power of those weapons made nuclear war unthinkable, planners shifted their focus to other ways of waging total war by turning the environment into a weapon of mass destruction. The Pentagon was thus cooking up various dastardly plans to harness nature: triggering massive earthquakes and tsunamis with strategically placed nuclear explosions, unleashing diseases, defoliating forests, changing weather patterns. Even if these transformations affected both the United States and the Soviet Union, catastrophe planners assumed that the United