

boom—a loud deep sound with much resonance

... as of a distant cannon or

an earthquake

a rapid advance in prices

or a sudden bound of activity in any business

truth and the consequences that follow from it, as when

one “lowers the boom”

the effective launching of anything upon public attention

an impetus given to any movement or enterprise

a long beam from which a microphone is suspended

to capture conversations in a crowd

a spar run out to extend a ship’s sail

a pole set up to mark the course

of the deep water

the cry of the bittern

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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

The Cost of Our Dreams

Way back in the 1970s when the earth was young and on-board car computers were frightening novelties, there emerged an urban legend about a terrible accident. It began with a driver who steered his new motor home onto the freeway, accelerated to the national speed limit of 55 miles per hour, and clicked on the cruise control. Then he went back to the kitchen to make himself a cup of coffee.

Recently, Google began to promote a computer-assisted, driverless car. No joke. You can watch it on YouTube. Although successes so far might be limited to test tracks and a trip to the drive-thru at Taco Bell (at least the computer knows where to eat), corporate honchos insist the robot car will rule the freeways, safely steering legions of living passengers—us—to work and play while we sleep, eat, read, talk on the phone, or play computer games. Should that day come to pass, the automated motor home surely won't be far behind, the one that allows us to shower and coif not before we go to work but on the way, as we grab our latte from the espresso machine of our dreams, the one halfway between the front seat and the bathroom—and all at 75 miles per hour. George Jetson never had it so good.

If Google succeeds, the car's inventors stand a chance at joining the ranks of California's big dreamers. We have a history of such people, after all. It was Californians who first mass-produced global stardom through the movies, and Californians who rerouted a desert river over 200 miles to the beach, where they hooked it up to a port they dug in the shallow sand and created modern Los Angeles. Expand the list to include transistors, microchips, and vacuum tubes and we'd just be getting started.

But dreamers are demanding, and maybe it's time to admit we not only have a history of them, but a history *with* them. The preposition is telling. When you hear someone say "I have a history with him," you know the speaker not only spent time with that person, but some of that time wasn't really that much fun.

So it is with us and California dreamers. None of their achievements have been so golden as they might seem in retrospect. The vacuum tube allowed for new mass communications and a democratization of knowledge, but it also facilitated the rise of great dictators who manipulated the masses through propaganda. The microchip has re-ordered our culture; yet in allowing us to “network” through computers and cell phones rather than in person, it has in a thousand ways alienated us from one another. At the same time, it has exacted a horrifying cost on natural systems from which we extract the minerals to make all those Nokias, Samsungs, Dells, Macs, PlayStations, and other essentials of the digital revolution. For visionaries to realize dreams, masses of people must re-order their lives and their connections to the earth, sacrificing something—the touch of human hands or a patch of coastal meadow—to get the goods. So it will be with the driverless car, if it comes to pass. It may smooth out the commute and leave us free to focus on our individual concerns. It could even make us safer. But what happens to the sense of mutual responsibility we are forced to cultivate on the road, when a moment’s glance away from the commons may cost us all? Will it be long before not noticing leads to not caring about that human being in the next lane?

What does it take to make our dreams real? And do we want to, even if we can? In different ways, a number of the authors in this issue of *Boom* seem to be asking that very question. Peter Alagona and Clinton Smith investigate the corporate plan to spin Mojave sun and wind into electrical gold, and ask what kind of desert might survive if it happens. Mitchell Schwarzer unpacks the art of Todd Gilens, whose images of endangered species, expanded to cover the sides of San Francisco buses, express his hopes of getting urbanites to think about the small creatures who lose almost every time the city at the Golden Gate expands. An artist with a very different agenda, Casey O’Connor, one day placed 500 ceramic figurines of the Buddha’s head in the American River. Greg Levine traces the consequences: the discovery of the heads, the rush to explain the mystery surrounding them and to cash in on it, and the meaning of all this for the people who live along the river that connects the mountains to the coast and all of us to one another. Still another essay considers Ansel Adams, who won renown as the world’s most famous wilderness photographer, particularly of Yosemite. Catherine Cole points out that Adams’s second most common subject was actually the University of California. In his images of the golden age of Golden State higher education, we can see traces of a shared utopian sense of California that seems to have slipped further away with every year since the early 1990s, when the public began to abandon that sweet old dream. (The fate of the old, affordable university is the subject of another essay.) And student activist Ian Lee, who imagines a new university, talks with us about the experience of being pepper sprayed for trying to create it.

The late novelist James Houston maintained that from the moment the Spanish named this coast for Calafia, a character in a fifteenth-century romance novel, it became as much a state of mind as a place, a fiction for measuring against its realities. All our envisioning carries with it a higher responsibility to weigh the costs against the possibilities, and to keep in mind that abandoning our communities is no good way to make our dreams come true.

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