

Maddog Unleashed

Smart Bike, Stupid Cars: Some Techno Fantasies Should Not Be Realized



“As you can see, this car has been fully equipped with a complete line of extras designed with your mind in mind.”—Ralph Spoilsport of Ralph Spoilsport Motors pitching an insanely complex four-wheeled infotainment system to Babe in The Firesign Theatre’s “How Can You Be In Two Places At Once When You’re Not Anywhere At All.”

BY PATRICK O’GRADY

Someone using one of the smartest ideas to emerge from the 2010 International Consumer Electronics Show could soon be run over by someone using one of the dumbest. It seems Darwin was wrong after all.

The smart idea is Sanyo’s “eneloop” synergetic hybrid bike, which topped the Eco-Design and Sustainable Technology category in CES’ Best of Innovations competition. The dumb one is what *The New York Times* called the first wave of “infotainment systems” coming to an automobile near you sometime this year.

New dashboards from automakers like Audi and Ford, in partnership with technology companies like Nvidia and Harman, will include features common to the desktop PC, such as wireless Internet, large touch screens and high-definition video. Some observers, among them Michael Rayfield of Nvidia, which will be working with Audi, were waxing their digital boards and bellowing “Cowabunga!”

“Cars are going to become probably the most immersive consumer electronics device we have,” Rayfield told *The Times*. “In 2010, you will sit in these things, and it will be a totally different experience.”

Others were less effusive. Nicholas A. Ashford, a professor of technology and policy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, called this bid to take distracted driving to a whole new level “irresponsible at best and pernicious at worst.”

Antelope Freeway or Gomorrah Expressway? In this instance, satire beat reality to the punch by four decades. The Firesign Theatre envisioned this sort of rolling home away from home in its second album, “How Can You Be In Two Places At Once When You’re Not Anywhere At All,” released in 1969.

Barking, “Let’s just take a look inside your beautiful new home,” auto dealer Ralph Spoilsport leads Babe on a tour of a car today’s pitchmen would love—climate control (Winter Wonderland, Spring Fever, Indian Summer, Tropical Paradise), edible steering column, AM, FM and shortwave radio “for your trans-Atlantic driving pleasure,” remote-controlled TV (between the bar and the gun rack), bathroom and “factory air-conditioned air from our fully factory-equipped air-conditioned factory.”

The difference, of course, is that The Firesign Theatre’s car was both funny and fantastic. These new designs are neither.

Let’s Not Give This Baby a Spin On the Freeway. *The Times* says the tech and car companies promise not to lose sight of safety concerns while they search for what Ford’s Jim Buckowski called a “driving experience ... that’s very engaging.”

But this technology has leapt ahead of mandatory safety testing, as technology will. And while transportation secretary Ray LaHood vows to “speak out against” enhanced driver distraction, for now at least, *The Times* says, “drivers will bear much of the responsibility for limiting their use of these devices.”

Yeah, right. We’ve seen how well that works. You know how you can be in two places at once and not anywhere at all? By cycling down the shoulder of the ol’ Antelope Freeway a few hundred meters ahead of some ADHD teenager who just spilled his beer while trying to simultaneously surf for porn, check his e-mail and text his girlfriend from behind the wheel of his daddy’s brand-new Audi.