

Master Blasters:
A contemplative essay on Smoldering Rubble and the Nature
of the Creative Process

Just when I was beginning to think that reality TV was unforgettingly soulless, I stumbled upon a programming bonbon known as “Master Blasters,” a show that briefly aired on the Sci-Fi network during that blissful television summer of 2005. The premise of the show was not complicated: have two teams of weekend engineers strap rocket engines to things like houses, cars, 900 lb lawn darts, or whatever, and try to launch them as far as possible through the rural Texas sky. These guys’—or maybe we should call them ‘contestants’—day jobs I imagined were as Harley mechanics, bartenders, truck drivers, pipe fitters, forklift operators, shop teachers, blue collar you-name-it, plus the occasional renegade BS degree holder. Now, I could relate to this kind of show because it set a simple task, like, “You and your buddies have a week to launch this Mini Cooper 1000 feet through those goal posts over there,” and I, as a viewer, didn’t have to worry about things such as alliances or dancing celebrities or team weight loss or really anything that didn’t lend itself to making a car *flying*. I felt better knowing that average people—not so different from myself—were thrown gauntlets like these—turn a car into a football—and through the magic of television had access to absurd things like military surplus rocket engines. There were no cash prizes, no vacation packages, no next rounds or anything like that because to watch a garden shed flying to an altitude of 1,300 feet then come crashing back to earth is pretty damn rewarding in-and-of itself (plus, most of the show’s budget must have been spent on explosives anyway, which was fine with me). I enjoyed seeing how serious the two teams got during the design phase of the project, with their dry erase boards covered with sketches of little cars flying through goalposts next to NASA-like trajectory calculations and weight objectives, twirling the ends of their mustaches, smoothing bandanas, cautiously uttering things like “Yep, I think it’s going to work,” and “Light ‘er up,” as they watched team members arc-weld “navigation” fins to the trunk-mounted engine housing.

It was rocket science and it wasn’t.

“Master Blasters” took me back to Fourth of July’s of my youth when Whistling Moon Traveler bottle rockets were bought by the hundreds and then taped, glued, wedged into anything that looked flight worthy. Many a GI-Joe met his end helplessly strapped to our artillery, pitching and yawing as rocket and payload skipped forward across the driveway, or on occasion when we became too ambitious, not even leaving the bottle, screeching upward an inch before settling back to report Joe’s doom a second later, plastic chunks hitting us and the house. The flight was important, but not as important as what damage was inflicted on the cargo, and what, if anything, was worth strapping to another Moon Traveler for further deconstruction. I’ve always found the word “report” a particularly interesting way to describe the explosion. Maybe this is worth returning to.

The first “Master Blasters” episode that I sat riveted through involved recreating the flight of Dorothy’s house from the film *The Wizard of Oz*. The teams were each given small structures about the size of a portable garden shed and the requisite high-power rocket engines. They scored points for the number of times they could rotate the house in the air, total altitude, deploying a parachute, and, bonus points for ejecting a Wicked Witch of the West mannequin. It proved to be a very ambiguous system of determining a “winner,” and I would argue that the competitive nature of the show was an ever-so-thinly veiled guise to allow for such nonsense to get underway in the first place. There was no winner. Of course, everyone could already see this from the start, and it really didn’t take away from the charm of the show in the slightest.

This show was undoubtedly pure pornography for pre-teen boys. The running joke as I saw it was that one objective of every launch was to return the vehicle back to the ground “safely” via parachute, which, I note, was not accomplished once in the four launches I viewed. Nor did it seem of great importance as the teams openly took satisfaction in their creations careening groundward toward a viscous, devastating impact and equally (if not more so) enjoying the post-flight hunting through the wreckage, giddily muttering things about “a lot of energy” being needed to turn a perfectly good UK sports car into the smoldering hunk of twisted metal now sitting before them. They were having *fun* doing this.

Let’s face it: some individuals have a need to blow things up. Their prehistoric ancestors were the monkeys who

invented new ways to fling feces harder, farther, and with more accuracy than the next guy. I'm suspicious that the Blasters' mechanical expertise was only developed to allow them access to rocket fuel. If, for instance, the show gave the teams crates of dynamite and told them to go *find* things to blow up, I believe the individuals on the show would have been just as happy. Who wouldn't be excited? Perhaps that would be too gratuitous, however, because we all know that *watching* something being blown up is not anywhere near as fun as *actually blowing it up yourself*, for some reason, and the viewership might become bitter at not having crates of dynamite of their own to experiment with. Thus the competition aspect of the show to keep people interested. If there was only one team trying to launch a house into the sky I would be hard pressed to justify my time spent watching such inanity. But with *two* teams, the days of the Cold War were summoned up, when there was a real sense of urgency, a sense of mission to beat the other guy's Mini Cooper through the goalposts or to land a house on the Wicked Witch of the West just to be the first to do so, nanner-nanner-boo-boo. The Cold War was when a successful rocket launch was something to celebrate, a triumph of technology, not, mind you, what the beer drinkers of Middle America did to pass the time waiting for football season to start.

This detail really made my skin goose-bumpy: to launch the Mini Coopers the teams were provided two rocket engines each, identical to those used to fire *cruise missiles*. Cruise *f-ing* missiles. Green-dot-in-black-night Gulf War type shit. Who exactly do you talk to to get these things? Did they fall off a truck? Was this show even legal? The Blasters got everything except the bomb, which to some team members I'm sure was a bit of a letdown. But they welded those things to their cars and away they went. The launch ramp was an equally impressive feat of pointless architecture. It rose about sixty feet in the air, dwarfing everything else on the flat Texas farmland, making it that much more obscene. The Blaster teams surveyed it, agreeing, "Gawd it's big! Heh heh!" And either that or howling were the only two possible responses, admittedly.

What I found most interesting about the show was the urge to create and destroy simultaneously. The desire to rise above the pull of gravity, to defy the gods, to soar on high, to

accomplish a goal, and, the need to lay waste to what made that possible. To smash something up in the process. To squander, to expend. To render useless. To start fires in the name of experimentation. Why do we laugh when Letterman throws watermelons off rooftops? Because he takes order and creates chaos, with an oh-so-essential dash of pre-impact anticipation. In bottle rocket terms, it's the delightfully wrought moment between screech and bang. The report. Chaos from order is an illogical progression and we cannot look away, because for a bent instant we are in the presence of beauty.

The Blasters' create/destroy arc identically matched the flight of whatever object it was being launched that week: the cameras captured the fire burning as the lawn dart took off, breaking free of groundly constraints with aerospace aspirations silhouetted for a moment against a blue sky full of possibilities, peaking in flight, then burning out, nose tipping down as its speed slowed and gravity reclaimed its grip on the projectile, tipping back towards Mother Earth, parachute deployed incorrectly flapping uselessly behind, the only mystery remaining being that of how big a crater was going to be made and how many fire extinguishers were going to be needed to subdue the flaming wreckage that attempt. What a beautiful thing it was. This, to me, was high art. At least when the images spoke for themselves.

Many artists have said that the creative process is one of illumination, shedding light onto what is hidden. Perhaps this essay isn't solely about creativity; perhaps it's about fire, too. For early man who ventured deep into caves to draw pictures of successful hunts on the walls, not only did fire provide charred sticks to mark with, but also the light to guide the way. This flickering light must have been what made his creations dance with life, a vision far different from the well-lit photographs we find in anthropology textbooks.

But the glow that creates and illuminates will also destroy. Heaven help the cave-venturing Paleolithic shaman, for example, who didn't pack enough nice dry wood: the orange glow of light with its blue base and white hot center, almost invisible, that turned his torch to carbon inch by inch as it crept down towards his hand, needing to be transferred to another stick maybe every half-hour or so. How important it was, that glow, to show the way in and to guide the way out. How magic it must have seemed. Fire is, by modern

definition, “a rapid, exothermic oxidation of a combustible substance,” but how, we must ask, does that explanation do the mystery of fire *justice*? Heraclitus, the Greek philosopher who pointed out that you can’t step in the same river twice, believed fire to be the underlying substance of the universe. In his own words, “[t]he world was created by neither gods nor men, but was, is, and will be eternally living fire, regularly becoming ignited and regularly becoming extinguished.”

Again, the Blasters. They didn’t paint on cave walls, but on our television screens. Their chosen medium of smoke and flames was perhaps the most elemental of all, showing what could never have been seen without them: a wonderful articulation of creation through destruction. Their goal was to show us that beautiful insanity exists in our world: that pointlessness on a grand scale verges on the profound. The Blasters knew that there couldn’t be illumination without something turning black, released from its current state, spent of its potential, given back to chaos. Be it Mini Cooper or charred twig, perhaps art must set something free. To realize one possibility is to destroy another, and vice versa. Aether is born from ashes. Artist Damien Hirst was harshly criticized in 2001 for describing the attacks on the World Trade Center as being “visually stunning,” among other things, and that the hijackers needed to be congratulated “for achieving something that nobody would have ever thought possible.” This is not a comfortable equation to draw up. What I like to think he was saying is that art lives in war, and war lives in art, and we are now forced to rethink the tools we use for each. The planes weren’t used as weapons; the images of the planes were used as weapons. The terrorists who took those pictures were given awards, and the artists who flew those planes are dead.

The Sci-Fi Network didn’t feel as strongly about Master Blasters as I did. As far as television shows go, it was extremely short-lived. It’s criminal, in my opinion, that only four episodes aired. Rumor has it that a fifth episode exists locked in a vault somewhere in the network’s basement, an episode in which the two blasters teams engage an epic battle between a pair of missile launching golf carts. We can only guess what *that* must have been like.

I imagine the night the network execs pulled the plug on the Blasters and I see many bandana-wearing, Harley-riding Blasters sitting around in their kitchens with a phone receiver pressed to one ear, cigarette hanging between their fingers, being told the bad news, all the while in the back of their minds thinking how, when they go to clean out their lockers, they plan to snag one of those relatively new socket sets or the other team's acetylene torch, which was much nicer than the one they had at home. I bet they all wanted to cry and hug and ask each other if life was going to be possible without flying houses and cruise missile engines and golf carts that traveled four hundred miles per hour, but, more realistically, all they probably did was take a long drag on their cigarettes, flick the glowing butts across the room into the sink, and rasp to the Blaster on the other end of the line, "Well, it was good while it lasted."