



*Once invited to join Captain Beefheart's Magic Band, today Langdon Winner is possibly the only Beefheartian philosopher of technology around. Here he talks about, among other issues, Captain Amerika's state of mind regarding its abiding obsession with the technical imperative.*

# Having the technology

Langdon Winner, the American Philosopher of Technology, has over the last two decades carved out a unique place in his stated discipline. In his early work, 1977's *Autonomous Technology*, Winner investigated what he calls the logic of runaway or, as the title has it, 'autonomous technology'. Throughout this work his concerns return to the principle of technological limits. In recent years this concern has been expressed by turning his focus towards computerisation, the Science Wars and GM technology.

Winner comes from a perspective of technological pessimism, informed both by Lewis Mumford, and the currently forgotten French sociologist Jacques Ellul, whose overarching view of 'la Technique' was signally influential in the early sixties. Winner was also an early rock writer, with a particular soft spot for eco-dadaist Captain Beefheart. Perhaps his is the closest we will get to a Beefheartian philosophy of technology.

Ellul's book, *La Technique* translated as *The Technological Society* has been viewed as a tour de force in delineating how Western society has become party to the thrall of 'la technique', which he believes organises and orders modern humanity's entire existence. The work is a grim, all

embracing dystopian vision of the system and how technological society contains within it a logic of ever-increasing and totalising expansionism. This was, unsurprisingly, influential in activating the green Radical Technology movement in the sixties and seventies. 'La Technique's central concept may be "the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity...advocating the entire remaking of life and tolerating no judgement from without"'.

This theme of autonomous technology, out of control, is developed in Winner's work. It, 'follows its own exponential course, independent of human direction...It has fashioned an omnivorous world which obeys its own laws and which has renounced all tradition...Far from being controlled by the desired and rational ends of human beings, technology in a real sense now governs its own course, speed and direction.' Winner's prognosis may be gloomy, however it's a scenario which those involved in or advocating the green new media route need also to contemplate. How much can the green movement siphon off the technological developments it likes and feels it can make use of if these are only offcuts from the