

**Steven Jobs (London: Little, Brown)**

**Book Review**

Author: Walter Issacson  
Reviewed by: Shiva Kumar Srinivasan  
Behavioral Sciences, IIPM Chennai, India  
sksrinivasan2008@hotmail.com

Walter Issacson invokes an interesting line from William Shakespeare's *Henry V* that could have served as a resonant title for this book. The line is: 'O for a Muse of fire that would ascend/The brightest heaven of invention'. This then should have been the title of the book: *The Brightest Heaven of Invention: A Biography of Steven Jobs*. I say that because the biographical details of Steven's life are well-known. No other contemporary entrepreneur has been covered as extensively in the business press as Jobs. What is really at stake in a book like this, or even in a review of such a book, is to *defamiliarize* Jobs (as the Russian formalists would put it in their theory of aesthetics); to make his life and thought process a bit strange, rather than attempt to merely summarize the main events of his life. 'Strangeness', as a number of literary critics have pointed out, including the legendary Harold Bloom, is what makes it possible to not only generate the trope of 'literariness', but make a resonant figure out of a myriad set of facts that constitute a human life; a truth that biographers will no doubt appreciate (Bloom, 2004). This is all the more important for a figure that has now become a *patron saint for entrepreneurs* in Silicon Valley and elsewhere. Issacson does a bit of both: he has not only interviewed a large number of people who were of consequence in the life of Steven Jobs, but has also attempted to find his own perspective on what makes Jobs different even by the high standards that we reserve for entrepreneurs. There is however some misunderstanding of what Steven Jobs actually represents. This confusion is related to his name: Jobs. This name is reduced to jobs with a lower case 'j' rather than be understood as representing the upper case 'J'. The latter is more of a symbol for the passion of the entrepreneur. There is a difference between 'providing jobs' for any number of people and performing in a way that will 'create jobs'. The main goal of an entrepreneur is not to merely provide jobs but to create high-value jobs. It is therefore important to retain Jobs as a symbol of the entrepreneurial process rather than use his name as an indicator for employment numbers in the economy. The phenomenon of so-called 'jobless-growth' should not be understood merely as growth without an increase in the number of jobs in the economy, but rather as growth without the creation of high-value jobs. There is a huge difference between creating genuine value in an economy and just shuffling unemployment numbers; the careers of important entrepreneurs like Steven Jobs should help us to appreciate the difference.

Creating high-value jobs means that the economy is poised to create new socio-economic space where none existed previously. It means that policy makers go beyond the assumption that the economy is a fixed pie or a shrinking pie. This can happen only if entrepreneurs are allowed to create economic value through the process of 'creative destruction' - albeit with some safety nets (Foster and Kaplan, 2001; McCraw, 2007). This process of constant upheavals and self-renewal in the economy is a process of accelerating the pace of convergence between different areas, disciplines, and discourses. What is it that makes Jobs unique when there is no lack of companies that can make world-class computers? The answer is that for Jobs a computer was not a functional object to process data but akin to a work of art. This was the Jobs differentiator: the insight that at the locus of convergence between 'humanities and electronics' there is a different kind of space to create objects of aesthetic delight. This aesthetic logic was first invoked in the revolutionary impact of the Apple Mac, but it was the same logic that was extended all the way from the iMac, to the iPod, and the iPad. While Jobs' passion for calligraphy from his younger years is well-known, what is easy to overlook is that this passion is not reducible to the invention of a graphic user interface in the Apple Mac; it should be understood rather as the aesthetic signature that subsumes his entire portfolio.

I think in order to make sense of Jobs; we need to read his personality and his products as an aesthetic creation. This process is more like a poet or a painter constantly fine-tuning his aesthetic consciousness to ensure that he does not run out of creativity, and that his aesthetic portfolio remains full of potential even as

he realizes as much of it as possible in historical time. One way of understanding the Jobs differentiator is to invoke the first of Harold Bloom's revisionary ratios in his theory of poetry; this ratio is termed 'clinamen'. Bloom defines this term as a 'creative swerve' that a poet makes in relation to his precursor whose text he feels did not go far enough. What is the right way for the poet or the creative artist to go? The answer is that the precursor should have swerved his creative trajectory in precisely the way in which the present poet is doing so. Jobs' aesthetic approach to computing and a range of electronic products makes precisely this kind of turn: it invokes a notion of the sublime within consumer electronics that previous forays in design had not made possible. Jobs' precursors could not subsume the 'functional' and the 'aesthetic' in the heady combination that makes an Apple product what it is. If we apply Bloomian poetics to design theory in computing and consumer electronics, we will find that it will help us to make sense of the aesthetics of Apple better than anything that I have encountered in the mainstream literature about Apple (Bloom, 1973, 1997; Bloom 1975, 2003). How else are we to explain that, as Issacson points out, Jobs' passion 'revolutionized six industries: personal computers, animated movies, music, phones, tablet computing, and digital publishing'. In addition to these industries, Jobs also helped to redesign retail stores and digital applications with the help of his 'daredevil engineers'. Unless we invoke Bloomian poetics, we will not be able to make sufficient sense of the *aesthetic turn in Jobs* that makes him, and the companies that he founded, unique.

Jobs knew that those who might want to emulate him would appreciate some guidance on how to forge an aesthetic approach to design on their own. Here then are a few explicit suggestions and comparisons that Jobs made on this topic. Jobs points out that each generation chooses its own object as a way of expressing its creativity. The chosen object for his generation, needless to say, was the 'computer'. But how could a functional object that is used for computing data become a cultural icon? Who were the people who could make this possible? Jobs explain that many members of his team who worked on the Mac, 'were poets and musicians'. This is not without historical precedent since the convergence between art and science produced great artists of the Renaissance like Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. What we need now is a revival of precisely that tradition, a meeting of the 'two cultures' (Snow, 1960), to ensure that the 'integration' of these faculties produces works of art that will bring endless joy to consumers. This is only possible when companies understand how to deploy their talents wisely. Here then to conclude is Jobs' 'take' on the Bloomian clinamen: 'We try to use the talents we do have to express our deep feelings, to show our appreciation of all the contributions that came before us, and to add something to that flow'. What is it that Jobs adds to that flow? That is the Lucretian swerve, the revisionary ratio, which captures the idea that the precursor did not do as well as he might have; hence the need for a corrective in the present. What Issacson brings out in this book is the need to understand Jobs as a symbol of constant self-renewal. That is his way of making Jobs useful for readers interested in the history of computing, consumer electronics, entrepreneurship, design, and at a remove, aesthetic theory as well.

## References

- Bloom, H. (1973, 1997). *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press), 14.
- Bloom, Harold (1975, 2003). *A Map of Misreading* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press), *passim*.
- Bloom, Harold (2004). *The Art of Reading Poetry* (New York: Perennial), *passim*.
- Foster, Richard and Kaplan, Sarah (2001). *Creative Destruction: From Built-to-Last to Built-to-Perform* (London and New York: Pearson Education).
- McCraw, Thomas (2007). *Prophet of Innovation: Joseph Schumpeter and Creative Destruction* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, Harvard).
- Snow, C. P. (1960). *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), *passim*.