

# Computerised mumbo-jumbo

How to deal with your competitors — being a preliminary report on apparent success with an old technique brought up to date . . .

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In days gone by it was apparently possible, by making a clay or wax model figure of a particular individual and then sticking pins into the effigy, to inflict pain, suffering and even death on the person depicted. Despite advances in technology and science, and indeed armaments, we do not appear to have improved over sorcery with this rather subtle and elegant method of dealing with one's adversaries.

Modern society would appear to demand a contemporary approach to the problem and nowhere is the need more obvious than in the grove of Academe. The current means of dealing with one's "colleagues" (academic jargon for "competitors") are various and have been dealt with at length by C. P. Snow (*The Affair*, MacMillan, 1960), J. D. Watson

(*The Double Helix*, Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1968), A. Arblaster (*Academic Freedom*, Penguin, 1974), and others. Conflict rarely takes the form of physical violence; instead the norms are full-frontal verbal abuse, and wheeling and dealing behind the scenes in committees using character assassination, innuendo, slander, lies and the like. Despite the obvious depths which verbal effluent can reach, however, it is fundamentally "old hat" and lacks the spirit of the times. The pins in the effigy approach will obviously appeal to those who are clever with their hands. But what self-respecting, modern, sophisticated academic colleague would be afraid of a few pins and a lump of clay? And can we really be sure of the precision of their effects? Clearly the locus of the pins is of funda-

mental importance and if one is not careful it is possible that the effect induced may be one of mere "pins and needles", or even an alleviation of pain through "psychic acupuncture" rather than the infliction of actual physical harm. Still, the effigy approach must have some validity otherwise it would not have stood the test of time. Perhaps there is some way that it can be brought up to date? We think there is and this is what we set out to do.

Naturally, in Academe, nobody has any wish to inflict physical harm or even pain. That would be uncivilised. Instead the wish might be simply to destroy a colleague's experiments, get his articles rejected, ruin his reputation, or make him "go away". It was on this last goal which we chose to test out our theory with a pilot experiment. We selected as our subject a well-known figure in academic life from the lists of a professional society. We did not wish to bias our results, so the figure was chosen at random. We will not divulge his or her name as our experiment is still in progress and we do not want to contaminate our results by confounding variables. Instead, he or she will be referred to as "Dr X".

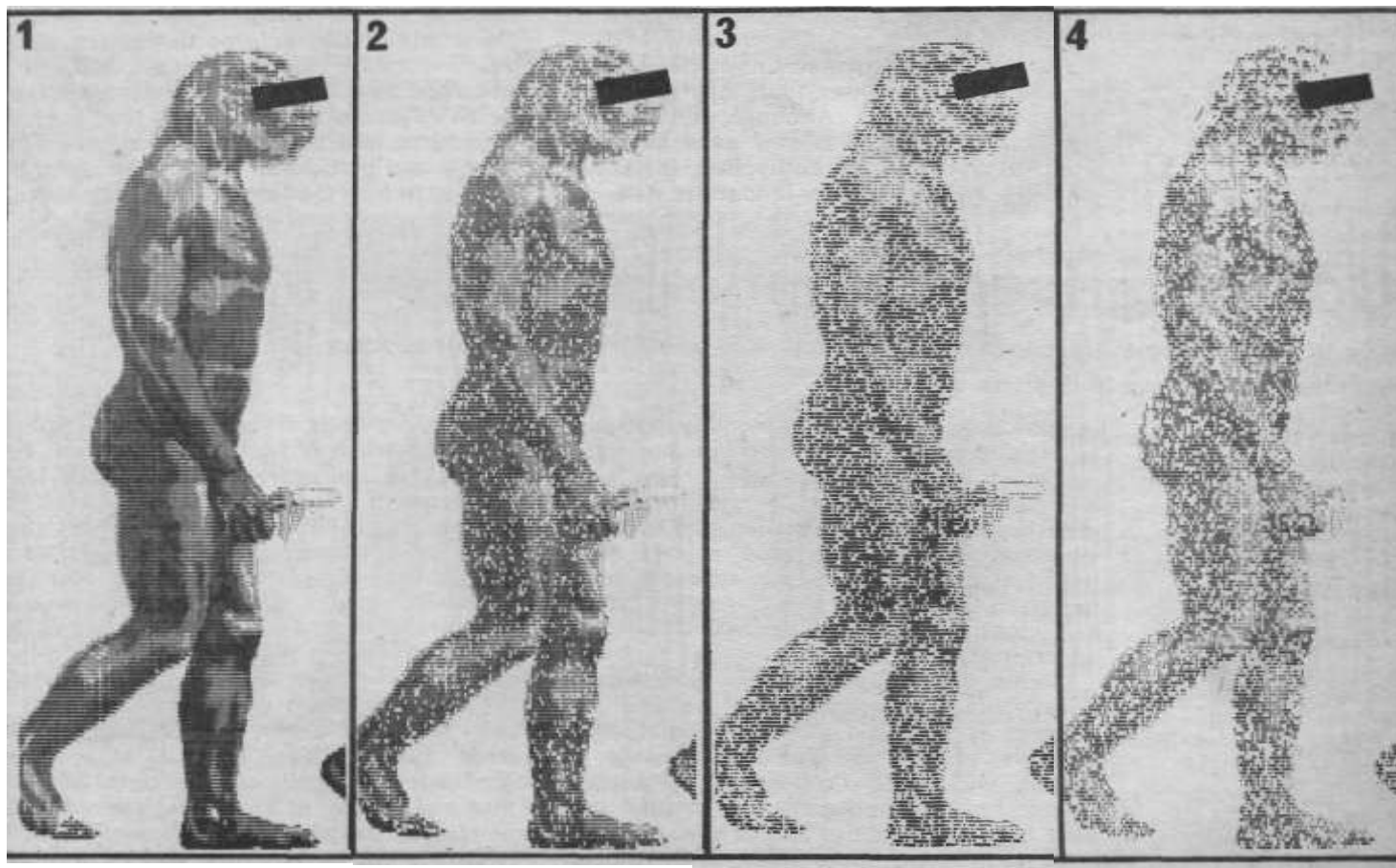
Now it is common knowledge that it is difficult to make academics "go away" (N. Smart, *Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 11 May, 1973). It is well known that students can usually be rusticated for the odd bit of "indecent", whereas vice-chancellors and the like need to be *grossly and persistently* indecent before any notice is taken by the powers that be. The aim of our pilot study was, then, to induce Dr X to disappear after

committing an act of indecency commensurate with his position in the academic hierarchy. Having decided on the modus operandi, we looked around for a suitable tool for implementing it. We chose the computer because of its speed and the precision of its controlling ability. In particular, we chose the CDC 7600, as this was the most powerful university machine available.

### Mid-streak with banana

The indecent act was simulated by manually digitising Dr X in mid-streak holding a banana, and then inputting the data to the computer: This process is not painful and, as the subject is not thought to be sub-human, does not require a Home Office licence. The result is shown in Figure 1 as it was produced on the lineprinter. The eyes have been blacked out to preserve anonymity. The next step was to simulate the vanishing aspect. To do this, a special programme was written which at each pass over the data extracted a random and increasing percentage of Dr X's person using the "Stark Trek" technique. The results of this procedure can be seen in Figures 2 to 8, where Dr X's streak is seen to slowly dissolve.

This is only a preliminary report and our results so far are far from conclusive, but we wish to communicate this new approach to an old problem to the scientific community at this early stage because of its intrinsic interest and to stop anyone else beating us into print. Dr X has been observed closely now for several weeks and we have to admit that despite simulating his dissolution a number of times, he is still very visible and



present. At first glance this may look like defeat for the new procedure. However, careful scrutiny of our daily observations has revealed an interesting fact. Dr X is now wearing statistically fewer clothes ( $F = 4.71$ ; d. f. = 1, 48;  $P < 0.5$ ). We take this as tentative support for our theories. It may be alleged by jealous colleagues that our success so far is merely due to a change in the weather. This we strongly deny. Still, clearly it is early days yet and our sample is admittedly rather a small one. Even if we are entirely successful, replication on other subjects by other workers with other goals is desirable before the general validity of this method can be firmly established.

It is possible that the Stark Trek technique is not the best procedure to simulate Dr X's dissolution. Another possible technique is based on sine waves of alternating contrast and increasing frequency, used until the figure merges with the background.

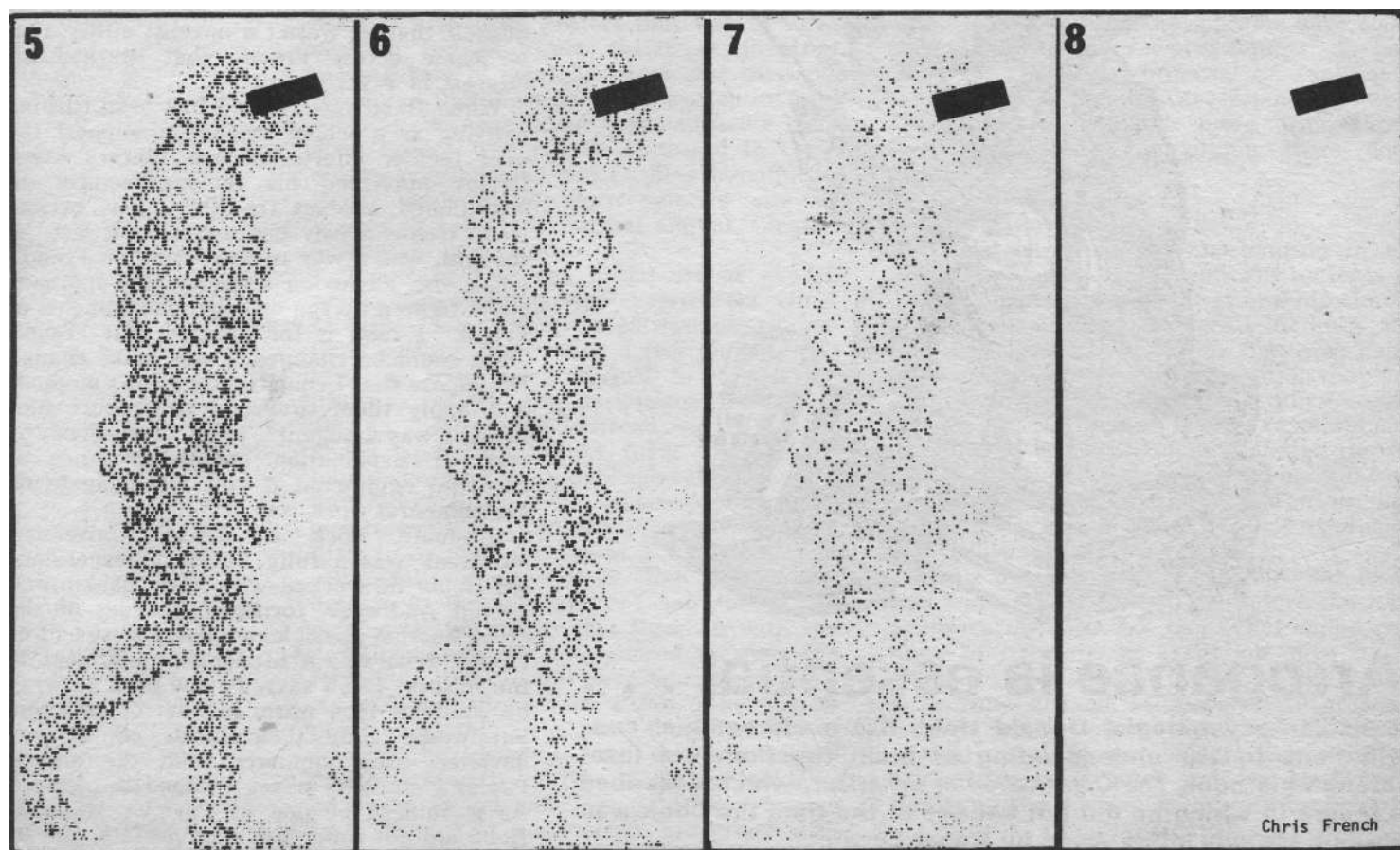
As we see it, the most valuable aspect of this research is the new avenues of parapsychological research which it appears to open up. There is no sign that superstition is decreasing and Gustav Jahoda (*The Psychology of Superstition*, Penguin, 1969) argues that it is here to stay. If this is so then its updating and modernisation is relevant and pressing. Raudive (*Breakthrough*, Smythe, 1971) has already asserted that voices of the dead will mysteriously appear on blank recording tape after an "electronic séance"; the reverse of the well-known "Watergate effect" where voices of the living inexplicably vanish from tapes. It is possible that in the future we may see storage-scope

or refresh-display crystal balls, and computerised Ouija-boards. Computers already classify finger prints and it would appear to be a small step before they are programmed to read palms and tell fortunes. The day of the on-line witch, on-line fairground gypsy, and even real-time exorcist cannot be far off.

If our experiment into what we have tentatively called "kinopsychesis" (contrast with "psychokinesis") should finally be successful and replicated, then this will give fresh impetus and encouragement to pure research in this extended field of parapsychology. At the same time the full practical implications of the technique as far as academics are concerned should not be overlooked. At the very least, we can already report from personal experience the intense cathartic relief felt by the author on simulating a colleague's dissolution. Similar therapy is practised in Japan, where workers daily beat dummies of their bosses with bamboo sticks.

Our pilot experiment appears, then, to have the useful side-effect of increasing contentment and thereby perhaps stimulating academic productivity. Data in support of this particular hypothesis is still being collected. Speculatively, it may be that we also have here a potential solution to the financial crisis now facing today's universities. Our technique, if widely used, might lead to considerable savings in university salary bills by "encouraging" even tenured lecturers to vanish. Clearly the possibility of such an important practical use of this present research must not be dismissed before it has been seriously examined.

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