

litmuspaper

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TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS



Chris McManus
Right Hand, Left Hand
2.15–3.15 pm/The Arena

Armand Leroi
Mutants?
4.30–5.30 pm/Pillar Room

Sue Nelson and Richard Hollingham
How to Clone the Perfect Blonde
6.15–7.15 pm/Pillar Room

Catherine Blackledge
The Story of V
9.30–10.30 pm/Drawing Room

Bad day on red rock, but Beagle 3 may bite back

by Adam Horovitz

Colin Pillinger breezed into Cheltenham yesterday to deliver what amounted to a plea for the continuation of the Beagle mission to Mars.

The dogged scientist, whose project disappeared into the red planet's atmosphere last Christmas, is an intriguing figure. He looks like Mr Badger from *The Wind in the Willows*, has the diffident demeanour of Mole, yet displays a distinctly Toadian "Poop Poop" attitude towards space exploration.

Pillinger gave a quick history of the mission and its failings. It came from humble beginnings – the first sketches were done on the back of a beer mat – and, aptly for a British mission, one reason it may have failed to land was the weather: "One of the longest dust storms on



If only the Beagle had landed.

Mars in 400 years," we were told.

Despite looking like novelty DVD packaging, Beagle 2 captured the public imagination; so Pillinger delivered his plea to a grassroots audience. Beagle 2 has entered the English language, with everyone from Robin Cook to football commentators referencing it ("Wolverhampton Wanderers were said to have had as much chance of beating

Manchester United as finding Beagle 2," said Pillinger, adding wryly, "Of course, Wolves won 1-nil.")

The website had more hits on Christmas Day than *Only Fools and Horses* had viewers; Beagle 2 became "science as soap opera". Of course it had to have a sticky end. But, like in all good soaps, it seems set to return in style in 2007 due to public demand. "It is inevitable that we're going to go [again], because people have the taste for it," said Pillinger. "One of the very few negative letters we received was from a man who appeared to have placed a large bet on Beagle 2 landing safely."

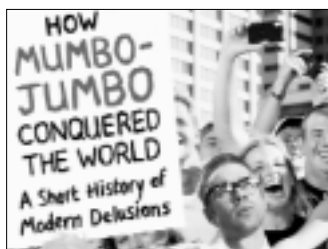
Brits in Space? Surely the best soap anyone could hope for. This time, let's hope it's done on a rope rather than a shoestring.

Mess with my mumbo?

by Jon Andriessen

In a précis of his relatively new book, *How Mumbo-Jumbo Conquered the World*, prophet-in-retrospect Francis Wheen looked back on the last 25 years and laughed. Debunking here and dismissing there, none but the staunchest of political, social and scientific thinking remained untarnished.

Wheen's preferred title was "A Brief History of Bollocks, with a nod in the direction of Hawking", emphasising his laid-back, parlour-game attitude to the subject. Looking like an excited little Yoda, Wheen explained how the pre-modernists had inadvertently ganged up with postmodernists in an attack upon modernity. Yes, from the rise of religious fanaticism in both East and West to the extremes of social liberalism, from chakra balancing and feng shui to the French intellec-



Fiddling with fact and fiction.

tual Jacques of Lacan and Derrida, Wheen exposed sloppy thinking with pick 'n' mix precision. "Did you manage to retain a belief in God?" he was asked. "I'm sorry," he replied, "I didn't actually have one in the first place."

With finesse and a touch of chirpy chappiness, Wheen did not leave us totally despondent about the next 25 years, but hoping for the best while preparing "for the worst". Better keep those crystals then.

Future car: from gear to eternity

by Sharon Kean

Apparently we all like cars yet don't want to see any more of them. Does the car have no future?

In keeping with the gender-specific flyers found in the Town Hall's toilets, the event saw a testosterone-fuelled Arena eager to get a preview of next season's motoring trends. They should not have been disappointed. *Top Gear's* test driver The Stig came face-to-face with a pair of car-sceptical transport researchers, who blamed the nation's obsession with in-car accessories for the lack of a future vision for the car.

When considering what the future might hold for the humble automobile, ideas of cleaner fuels and how to stop traffic jams were mentioned but far more interesting was Andrew Graves' idea that cars may become



End of the road for last year's model?

"mobile living rooms". He described the prospect of such "small refinements" as bank machines and shopping malls in cars.

The car as a communication tool was almost becoming realistic until Timandra Harkness, chairing, reminded everyone that the topic under discussion was "What the future of the car was NOT!" The end result was that the car's future, whatever it may be, probably lies in the hands of scientists and engineers rather than the social scientists who are forecasting its doom. I think some of the audience agreed.

Clegg heads after infinite wisdom



To infinity and beyond....

by Brenda Read-Brown

If there were an infinite number of words in this article, you could double it and it would still be the same length. This is one example of the many paradoxes of infinity illustrated neatly and rapidly by Brian Clegg. These numerical quirks have puzzled mathematicians from Zeno onwards, driving one, Georg Cantor, to madness in an attempt to prove that there could be a set of numbers still greater than infinity. Clegg mercifully saved his audience from this fate by revealing that there was proof that this proposition could not be proved. Stay with me.

Racing through the history of mathematical thinking about this perplexing concept, Clegg shared with us his delight in the ambiguity at the centre of and beyond mathematical precision. With a sparing use of formulae but a touching faith in his audience's prior knowledge, he introduced us to Hilbert's Hotel – with enough rooms to accommodate an infinite set of Australian tourists – and Gabriel's Horn, a mathematically-defined shape with an infinite surface area (meaning it could never be painted) but a finite volume (so it could easily be filled with a pot of paint).

Clegg touched only briefly on the practical uses of infinity described initially by Newton, but given his enjoyment of the subject, it would have seemed churlish to ask more about these – and indeed, there was only one question from the audience. Perhaps there could only be one question – what exactly is infinity? Apparently, we'll never know.

Returning from the wasteland?

by Emma Brennan

Bolstered by two experts and a receptive audience, yesterday's Pillar Room debate on waste management soon came to life. Peter Jones from Biffa Waste Services and Julie Hill from the Green Alliance, introduced the problems facing the UK's rubbish industry.

With every person in the UK generating half a ton of household waste each year, our consumer society is being buried alive. So where does it all go? Currently 77% of rubbish is lost to "geological time" in landfill sites, 9% is incinerated and only a staggering 13% is recycled. This is "way below our European neighbours" said Peter Jones. At present, landfills are the cheapest method of disposal, costing £12 per ton – more than four times less than recycling. Along with incineration, landfill has a negative impact on the environment, and through the combustion/burial processes the resource material is lost.

"It is possible to recycle 60–70% of waste," explained Julie Hill, but the recycling methods are "currently complex and the technology is not, as yet, well developed". It boils down to the age-old problem



From landscape to landfill.

of supply and demand: as more manufacturers use recycled materials, more money and time will be pumped into the development of cheaper methods. So, as the Green Alliance asks: "How can we move towards a 'zero waste' society?"

They believe the best ways are to reduce consumption of materials and move towards sustainability by reusing and recycling. With the government's plan to impose a landfill tax on rubbish disposed of in landfill sites, it is time for manufacturers and consumers to address the issue of rubbish. The suggested tax will make landfill disposal as expensive as recycling, making it economically and environmentally sensible for us all to reuse and recycle.

Learning to eat your own words

by Chris Cundy

Synaesthesia, the rare condition in which two or more senses are connected, is a subject that has proved fascinating to the speakers involved in today's talk. Author John Harrison confessed that he was originally sceptical, and turned to it out of pure curiosity. Synaesthesia's importance, suggested UCL Institute's Jamie Ward, "is that it can open up the question: do we all experience the world in different ways?"

It is surely an important question, given the tremendous load of information digitally produced and reproduced around us today. We could even have all experienced this phenomenon in youth, but had it driven out by social coding. Individuality appears taboo; this was proven by fifteen out-of-the-closet accounts of synaesthesia today.

"Ten years ago most people hadn't heard of the subject," said Jamie Ward. One lady talked of being able to "taste" words. This came as a sort of confession – she revealed to us how, when asked if she was hungry at school, she would reply: "I'm full up with words."

We were offered a rare glimpse into something which has the power to see through our constructed, material world but we left in vagueness: "it isn't well understood" confessed Jamie Ward at the end.



INSIDE SCIENCE: When school groups were told: "We're going to heat up our peas!" they looked more than a little perplexed. MRC exhibitors Doug and Sharon – situated in the Discover Zone – were swapping chips and batter for washing-up liquid and saline as visitors removed the DNA from the Festival's finest mushy peas, causing quite a stir. Dig in kids! SK

THE DROID

A poster in the ladies' loos, advertising Festival events aimed specifically at women, was spotted yesterday by a Droid informant. The list includes The Science of Perfume, The Future of HRT and Little Angels: Coping with Troublesome Children. Is this simply a series of alternatives for football widows, or is there something more sinister going on? The Droid would like to know.