



RODENT'S RAMBLES

INVASION

of the body snatchers

Look down, next time you visit the Library, into the pit at its heart. There they are, row upon row, computer screens with their attendants, each flickering at the other. Intense, concentrated, a tangible pulse of energy between human and machine. Students finishing their essays, checking their references? That is exactly what you are supposed to think. But does it not, even for a moment, remind you of something else? The similarity to Mission Control Houston or, for the older readers amongst you, Fighter Command War Room, is no accident. The ranks of operators in the pit are not students, they are LSE's cyber defence force, engaged in a continuous battle for the future of civilisation, an electronic shield against a new and terrible threat to academic life at the School, and beyond. Every key stroke is a blow in our struggle, every shift or return a move on the front line of cyber war against an enemy that threatens the entire structure of academic life as we know it. It is an old menace, but in a terrible new form.

Earlier versions were benign by comparison. Throughout the Middle Ages religious controversy was armed with forged papal bulls to swing ancient authority behind finely nuanced theological quibbles. The modern world has been just as inventive. *The Hitler Diaries*, Einstein's Second Theory – the frauds continued, and continue.

But the internet has raised the game several levels. It is no longer necessary to forge documents to construct false identities. There is a virus that will do it for you, or rather, to you. We are used to destructive worms and trojans, the Vikings and Visigoths that come storming into your computer and hack all your files to pieces with shouts of glee. But they are as nothing to the new peril. The Missionary Virus is quiet, almost delectable in its operation. It arrives with a smile, and may even offer to help you with an essay, an article, a report. It seeks not to destroy, but to construct, or rather to reconstruct. It is Bakunin in reverse: 'The urge to create is also a destructive urge.'

The Missionary Virus works on your virtual identity, all those things about you that the outside world knows: your publications, your personal web page, your cv, your smiling only-a-few-years-out-of-date photo. You won't know anything has happened until the puzzling compliments start coming in: the grateful acknowledgement of your generous donation to the Society for the Promotion of Creationist Biology; the enthusiastic correspondents praising your article in *Insurgent Fox Hunter*; the social worker complaining that your recipe for 'Charity Soup' in the supplement on poverty in Europe was not only patronising but, in both senses, tasteless; the journalist who greets you with

astounded delight at a conference, 'Not the Ronald Grossliger? The author of post-modern yoga for the 21st century manager? I so loved your piece in *Take Flight* magazine.'

The defence force in the Library pit are doing their best, but the Missionary Virus is clever, and is constantly mutating into new forms, quietly transforming identities, person by person, computer by computer, shaping our world into its own image. Before you know it, a new public identity has been shaped for you, and shaped in a form that violates every standard of intellect, taste, and sceptical humour which you ever thought distinguished you. So be very careful what you download, and be very alert for subtle changes in the opinions and arguments of your colleagues. Is that email from Professor Thirdway really from the person you have known for so long, or has he already been taken over, re-shaped, and re-launched? I have been warned that even this column is under constant attack, so read this message very carefully, because it may be the last genuine one you get, since the Missionary Virus is active and spreading, and in future '\$&£?'

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Rodney Barker