

## *Project Viola Ten, May – August 2017*



*(Left) Dr. Robert King, Dr. Maria Dempsey, Nurse Una Cronin. (Right) Dr. Christian Ryan, Dr. Gillian Murphy. Photo by Patricia Klich*

The *Project Viola Ten Experiments* were conducted at University College Cork between May and August 2017 as part of my interdisciplinary praxis in Theatre and Applied Psychology and in collaboration with faculty from the School of Applied Psychology and the School of Nursing. Although the purpose of *Project Viola Ten* was *ostensibly* to test the limits of my intuitive/telepathic abilities under strictly controlled conditions, the *actual* purpose was to test my ability *to fake such abilities* under seemingly impossible conditions. The objective of this experimental practice/performance was to “perform” a series of experiments.

Over the course of these 400+ trials with Zener cards,<sup>\*</sup> dice, and playing cards – conducted in three locations, over two days – I obtained results against chance *exceeding a-million-to-one* under strictly controlled laboratory conditions including:

- strip search conducted by a registered nurse
- blindfolding
- sound proofing
- two-way mirrors
- separate buildings

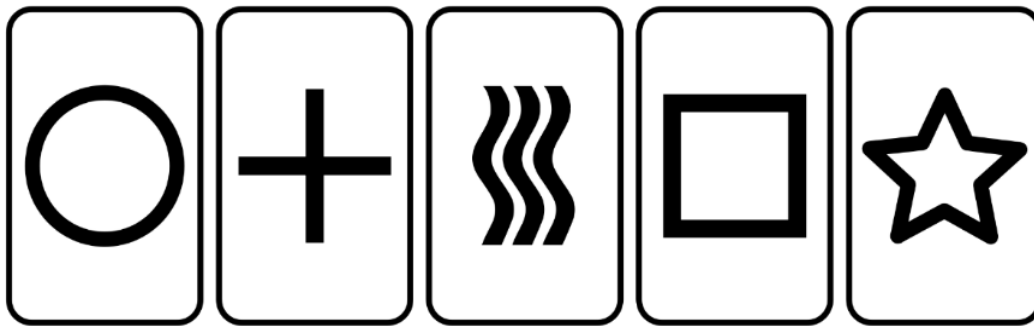
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<sup>\*</sup> Zener cards were designed in the 1930s by J.B. Rhine and Karl Zener at Duke University, for the purpose of testing for, what Rhine described as, Extrasensory Perception (ESP).

- isolation

Across the 400 trials with Zener cards which were statistically analysed, I was correct in 194 trials, versus the mean chance expectation of 80, yielding an extremely statistically significant hit rate of 48.5% versus the mean chance expectation of 20%. The details of the experimental conditions and the results obtained are located in the appendices.\* These experiments were further captured in a pseudo-promotional trailer for a non-existent documentary entitled *Project Viola Ten*,\* filmed and edited by colleague and fellow doctoral researcher Patricia Klich\* assisted by Maciek Klich.\*

*Zener shapes were designed in the 1930s at Duke University by Dr. J.B. Rhine and Dr. Karl Zener for the purpose of testing for, what Rhine described as, Extrasensory Perception (ESP). The shapes are: circle, cross, wavy lines, square, and star.*



The lead researcher of the *Project Viola Ten* experiments was Dr. Robert King from the School of Applied Psychology. He is a certified hypnotherapist with an amateur interest in, and basic knowledge of, conjuring and mentalism and has acted as a pastoral advisor since the commencement of my doctoral research. Following *Project Viola Ten*, Dr. King officially joined my advisory team as co-supervisor. Prior to, and during, the experiments I constantly asserted to

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\* 'Project Viola Ten Research SUBTEXT/METATEXT.' See appendices: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367>

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\* 'Biographies of Collaborators.' See appendices: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367>

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Dr. King that my techniques did not employ any conventional artifice or deception as such, and thus, could not be detected under any circumstances. Thus, I claimed, my techniques were essentially indistinguishable from telepathy as classically depicted. Such statements, however, were not true. From the outset, it was my intention to video document these testing sessions and use the footage in order to blur frames, establish credibility, and manipulate the reception of my subsequent public performances (particularly my nationally televised performance on *Ireland's Got Talent*).

Consequently, until now, all of my documentation regarding *Project Viola Ten* (with the exception of these pages) has been approached as an exercise in metatext and subtext; that is to say, an exercise in writing *as-if* I was truly capable of achieving – and had achieved – those laboratory results without deception. The intention of such documentation, therefore, was to use psychological tactics in order to obfuscate the physical deceptions which I had employed during the “experiments”; despite the fact that these experiments were designed specifically in order to rule out possibilities for fraud, collusion, and artifice.

By hiding my true intentions from everybody except my documentation crew, I engaged deeply with dark play and firmly adopted a wink-eye position. In preparing for *Project Viola Ten*, I extensively studied and wrote about parapsychological research, even obtaining certification in parapsychology through the University of Edinburgh,<sup>\*</sup> in an attempt to better understand the role which I was attempting to play. In conducting this extensive research, writing, and what might be called “character” study, I discovered, invented, presented, and defended many fascinating – and at times, convincing – perspectives and theories surrounding the subject of telepathy. In so doing, I went some distance toward becoming a shut-eye. However, my frequent employment of artifice prevented me from ever really losing sight of the fictional nature of my abilities.

By employing a continually rotating repertoire of techniques, I was able to work around restrictions, evade detection, and systematically cross-cancel the possibilities of each technique. This approach is reminiscent of the ‘tuned deck’ trick discussed previously by Daniel Dennett.<sup>1\*</sup>

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<sup>\*</sup> While parapsychological research in and of itself is widely considered to be pseudo-science, the historical study of parapsychology is a legitimate and fascinating topic.

<sup>1</sup> Dennett, Daniel. ‘Explaining the “Magic” of Consciousness.’ *Journal of Cultural and Evolutionary Psychology*. 1(1). 2003. p. 18.

<sup>\*</sup> See: ‘Philosophy/Cognitive Science.’

It is worth noting that my techniques were as social as they were physical. Manipulating the *conditions* of the testing was as critical as the cheating which took place within the tests. For instance, by producing a documentary of these testing sessions (ostensibly in order to “document” these experiments for academic purposes) my film crew and I were able to exert an unusual amount of influence over the testing conditions. This process of control began by providing personalized white lab coats for the researchers, suggesting that the lab coats would make the documentary look better. I consider *Project Viola Ten* – durational, manipulative, deceptive, and exceedingly complex – to be not only an example of deep and dark play, but the most “para” of all of my performances.

I describe these experiments as paraperformance, not only because they took place outside of conventional places and boundaries of performance – in locations such as laboratories, offices, dining rooms, and coffee shops, and during meetings, discussions, and “tests” – but also, because the goals of these performances extended beyond the moment of performance itself. For instance, I would normally have no incentive or interest in blurring the boundaries of a dinner conversation with Dr. King. Nevertheless, I did have an incentive to tamper with the public reception of various future performances including *Ireland’s Got Talent* and *Eddie Dean, Telepathy Rock Star: Smells Like Dean Spirit*.

Manipulating laboratory experiments and academic researchers is not only a staple of performances of mentalism\* but ethically dubious at best. With this in mind, I made an agreement with Dr. King prior to commencing *Project Viola Ten*. Despite my constant assertions that I was able to demonstrate a form of invisible communication virtually indistinguishable from telepathy – *without using artifice or deception* – Dr. King expressed his position that whether I was lying or telling the truth, the results could be interesting. Specifically, Dr. King expressed an interest in experiencing the way in which even a knowledgeable researcher in this area might be mis-lead or manipulated. Thus, he granted me permission to use any means within my control (including artifice and deception) to “prove” telepathy was possible within formal testing conditions. In return, I agreed that Dr. King could and should use any available means to disprove the psychic hypothesis.

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\* Anna Eva Fay, Daniel Dunglas Home, Florence Cook, Uri Geller, and James Randi’s project *Project Alpha*, all stand as prominent examples.

Naturally, I was concerned about potential negative impacts of this research on the credibility of Dr. King, who is both a friend and advocate. As part of our agreement, I offered to debrief Dr. King following the conclusion of the project on all of the techniques (deceptive or otherwise) which I had consciously employed in order to achieve my results. After the second round of testing, Dr. King and his team (Dr. Maria Dempsey, Dr. Christian Ryan, and Dr. Gillian Murphy) concluded that they were unable to disprove the psychic hypothesis. They were unable to detect fraud, and unable to create conditions in which I could not at least simulate telepathic ability. At that time, I met with Dr. King privately and fully debriefed him on the artifice, techniques, deception, social engineering, etc., which I had consciously employed, not only during the experimental session, but also *in the months leading up to these sessions*.

While, the specific nature of these techniques fall beyond the scope of this analysis, it is important to point out that my techniques not only *manipulated perception* in the manner of most conjuring techniques, but further concealed this artifice beneath a layer of *social manipulations* which I associate with the techniques of mentalism. *Project Viola Ten*, therefore, was pure mentalism.\* Dr. King claimed, in retrospect, that he found the entire experience to be enlightening and he and I continue to discuss the best way to frame this experience, and the lessons learned, for publication. These experiments ostensibly inquired about the nature of psychic phenomena, but in reality, sought to explore the nature of the performance of these imaginary phenomena.



*Three wise monkeys design by Luke Acevedo*

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\* Up until the debriefing session and exegesis.

VIOLA TEN is an anagram of the word OVALTINE, an American powdered chocolate drink popular in the US during the 1950s. Ovaltine is also famous for its high-profile sponsorship of the *Little Orphan Annie* radio program. In the cult classic film *A Christmas Story*, written by Jean Shephard and set in 1950s rural Indiana, the child protagonist Ralphie sends away for a membership to the *Little Orphan Annie Secret Society*. Each week, following the radio broadcast of the *Little Orphan Annie* program, the announcer of the show reads out an “urgent” encoded message for the members of the society.

When Ralphie’s secret decoder pin arrives, he is frantic to decode the message in order to help “save” Annie. Struggling desperately to find privacy in which to decode the secret message, Ralphie locks himself in the home’s only bathroom. Amidst protests of family members, he proceeds to decode the urgent message. After a scene of Hitchcockian suspense, the message is finally revealed: BE SURE TO DRINK YOUR OVALTINE. Ralphie’s response after reading the message: ‘A crummy commercial? Son of a bitch!’<sup>2</sup> This scene epitomizes the allure of desired secrets and the disillusionment which often accompanies the attainment of those (non) secrets. Philosopher Daniel Dennett has duly noted the ‘tell-tale pattern’ in parapsychological testing: ‘the more dramatic the claims, the more conclusive the demonstration of fraud.’<sup>3</sup>

### Works Cited:

*A Christmas Story*. Dir. Bob Clark. Writ. Jean Shepherd. 2008. Warner Home Video. Film.

Dennett, Daniel. ‘Explaining the Magic of Consciousness.’ *Journal of Cultural and Evolutionary Psychology*. Vol. 1. No. 1. 2003. Print.

Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith: Science, Miracles, and the Search for Supernatural Consolation*. Copernicus. 1996. Print.

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<sup>2</sup> *A Christmas Story*. Dir. Bob Clark. Writ. Jean Shepherd. 1983.

<sup>3</sup> Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith*. 1996. Forward by Daniel Dennett. p. x.