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Letters

Blurry beauty?

"Average Attractions" (SN: 5/12/90, p.298) overlooks alternative explanations for students' selection of composite faces as more attractive than real individual faces. In particular, the process by which the composites were generated seems to average out a lot of fine detail: The more faces included in the composite, the blurrier the resulting photo.

Hollywood filmmakers have been using a similar trick for decades, softening the focus in those romantic closeups to make their stars seem more attractive. Is this because defocusing makes a face look more "average," or simply because it hides the small imperfec-



Composite image by Judith H. Langlois

tions — the misplaced hairs, the pimples and crow's feet — that detract from beauty?

Or is the causality the other way around? Have the students in the Langlois/Roggman study been conditioned by years of movie-going to associate blurriness with beauty? Perhaps "averageness" is a red herring. We won't know for sure until the study is repeated with the sharpness of the images controlled.

*Gregory P. Kusnick
Sonora, Calif.*

The beautiful computer-generated faces created by Langlois and Roggman are not "average." If this were true, the vast majority of people who lie near the center of the bell-shaped curve for the normal distribution would possess breathtaking beauty. Rather, Langlois and Roggman are inadvertently using a technique I developed in 1974 for forming the intersection of sets that are multivalued rather than Boolean. In other words, it is as if they had created beautiful people by cloning them from DNA obtained from 32 different donors.

The correct interpretation of their findings is that Caucasians find other humans attractive if they are also Caucasians, but mongrel Caucasians rather than purebreds. This is adaptive for the same reason that most human cultures prohibit intermarriage between first-degree relatives: It eliminates the expression of genetic defects that are coded by autosomal recessive genes.

*Allen D. Allen
Director of Research
Biomedical Sciences Division
Algorithms, Inc.
Northridge, Calif.*

The finding that averaging out facial constructions produces a face that most people find attractive is interesting, but it is scarcely new. At least one earlier study involving the superimposing of photographs reached an identical conclusion. My memory tells me it

Letters continued on p.45

This Week

- 36 'Weak' Memories Make Strong Comeback
- 36 Deep-sea muds hold tight to 'hot' elements
- 37 Synthetic superdiamonds beat nature's best
- 37 PMS study pans popular prescription
- 38 Natural sedatives linked to brain disorder
- 38 Protons and antiprotons held in the balance
- 39 Hanford's fallout: Increased thyroid risks
- 39 Shuttle may soon fly, but Hubble stays dim

Research Notes

- 46 Behavior
- 46 Earth Sciences
- 47 Physical Sciences
- 47 Science & Society

Articles

- 40 The Fall of the Forest

Cover: An intentionally lit fire consumes a virgin patch of rain forest in the Brazilian state of Pará. Recent studies of tree burning and cutting throughout South America, Asia and Africa indicate that the world's tropical forests face an even greater threat than scientists and policymakers thought. (Photo: Loren McIntyre)

- 42 The Ticking Link



Departments

- 35 Letters

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Letters continued from p.35

was somewhere over a quarter-century ago.
 Warner Clements
 Beverly Hills, Calif.

Articles noting the increased attractiveness of composite photographs were published in 1878 by British scientist Francis Galton and in 1886 by U.S. psychologist John T. Stoddard. Their observations have not been pursued systematically until now, according to Judith Langlois.

— B. Bower

Popular culture presaged the Langlois/Roggman finding. There was a 1957 movie and song, "Bernardine" (sung by Pat Boone), in which some college guys, as a prank, enter a composite photo in a beauty contest. The composite wins (we now have a scientific recognition of why), and they must come up with the girl. As the song says:

Bernardine, Bernardine,

You're a little bit like every girl I've ever seen;

Your separate parts are not unknown,

but the way you assemble 'em's all your own.

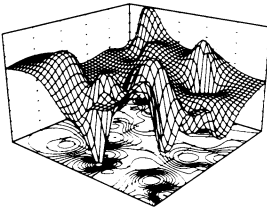
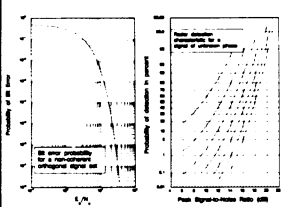
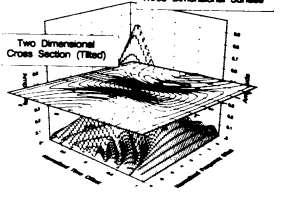
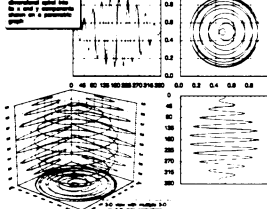
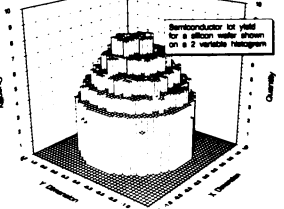
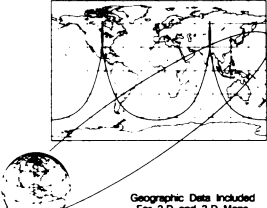
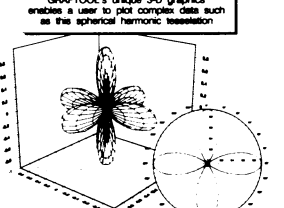
Charles Kluepfel


Bloomfield, N.J.

CORRECTION

According to the American Cancer Society, the general incidence of mesothelioma in the U.S. population is not one in 10,000 as reported in "More jobs linked to asbestos hazards" (SN: 6/16/90, p.373). Available statistics indicate that roughly 1.1 cases are diagnosed annually among every 100,000 U.S. white males, usually between the ages of 40 to 60.

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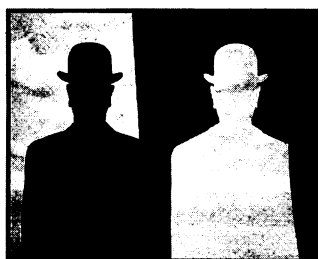
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MARTIN GARDNER



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