

## Everybody's having a gas



Laughing gas in the car park, author's own photograph 2018

Its 6.00am on Thursday morning in the car park of a redbrick housing estate in central London. An empty car parking bay is strewn with over fifty small, metallic gas canisters, a couple of deflated party balloons, an empty packet of Capri Sun and a crushed bottle of Lilt.

Synthesisable since the late eighteenth century, the sensations afforded by Nitrous oxide have, from the outset, given the odourless substance a particular utility in medicine and light surgery. The sequestration of pain is not, however, the only affordance of the gas. Along with the numbing sensation, which starts at the extremities and works its way inwards with each breath, also comes a conspicuously brief, yet intense, rush of giddy euphoria. The more hedonic sensations are the reason nitrous oxide has colloquially become known as 'laughing gas'. They are also precisely the sensations that draw young Londoners to park benches and car parks around the London to imbibe cannister after cannister throughout the city's long summer evenings.

By my memory, young Londoners have been doing gas-en-masse, recreationally, for about fifteen years. The first nitrous balloons I saw were bobbing around between the Hoxton fins and electro-clash synths of early-noughties Shoreditch. In the last three to four years, however, nitrous oxide use has soared to become the UK's second favourite recreational drug (ref).

While a relatively novel use of the substance on this corner of the Atlantic, the hedonic potential of laughing gas has been a big part of its history on the oceans north-western seaboard. In the United States – where ‘nitrous’ was adopted by medical practitioners earlier and more widely than in the UK – the line between the pharmaceutical and recreational was murky long before Demi Moore’s [‘whippet parties’](#) made tabloid news. (Killoran, 2012). In one of the earliest films to be shot at in Thomas Edison’s famous ‘Black Maria’ Studio, in 1895, the ‘The Dentist Scene’ features a Dr Colton demonstratively applying nitrous oxide to his patient prior to the removal of a tooth. While ostensibly an educational film, the laughter of the patient, who has a tooth notionally removed in the film, was the main attraction. When the film was remade in 1907 as [‘Laughing Gas’](#), there was an explicit emphasis on the contagious laughter of the dental patient as she left the surgery and made her way through the subway (Porter, 1907). This was followed five years later by a Charlie Chaplin film, also titled ‘Laughing Gas’ (Chaplin, 1914). Not much later came the Betty Boop’s short [‘Ha Ha Ha’](#), after which, the joy of huffing anaesthetic air has featured everywhere from Bugs Bunny through Hammer Horror to Seinfeld.

In its earliest representations, the chuckles triggered in the dentist’s chair escapes the confines of the surgery and spread riotously through an urban landscape, so that in the end everybody in the city is laughing. Therein laughing gas, like early twentieth century cinema, offers a brief numbing sensation for early twentieth century pain. And herein lies the source of the dizzying vapour’s twenty-first century popularity, an explanation as to the metastasis of adolescent giggles across the park benches and playgrounds of British cities. That is, the laughter and euphoria nitrous oxide induces are not really different affects. Rather, as the philosopher Schopenhauer might have it, laughter and euphoria are merely evidence of the brief alleviation of pain. Laughing gas is a straight forward, cheap and very effective, analgesic for the chronic pain of inner city life.

The immediate problem with laughing gas, as local government see it, is not the negligible risk that young people pose to themselves. Of course, there have been associated injuries and deaths. Repeatedly starving the brain of oxygen over the course of hours isn’t exactly going to sharpen anyone’s faculties. Moreover, on at least one occasion, an unlucky individual has erroneously tried inhaling laughing gas directly from a cannister as opposed to from a valve or a balloon as most users do. The gas, which cools rapidly as it is decompressed, readily freezes respiratory passages. Despite these incidents, the social problem of laughing gas is not really the gas itself. Compared to many psychoactive compounds, or even alcohol, both the supply and consumption of the gas is relatively harmless. The problem, rather, is primarily one of litter and noise.

Such behaviour is easily framed as ‘anti-social’. Yet, at the same time, however, nitrous oxide consumption is evidently also at the heart of the explicitly social activities that bind some of London’s young people together. Colourful balloons pumped full of dizzying sweet providing a cheap analgesic that mitigates their collective pain.

The fact that nitrous oxide use is increasing in the UK is, however, particularly notable for the fact the increase usage is in spite of the 2016 Psychoactive Substances act, rolled out in 2016 by the then Home Secretary, Theresa May; a performative bit of legislation developed the wake of a series stories about untested synthetic drugs such as 'spice', 'bath salts' and 'plant food' driving 'zombie' like addicts to acts of cannibalism. The blanket ban, ostensibly destined to quash the proliferation of unpredictable synthetic compounds, also criminalised laughing gas and its users. Only, the ban (if that what it was ever intended to be) has not worked. Not least, the law has been thwarted by the fact that nitrous oxide has a great many uses beyond recreation. Notable amongst these is the suitability of the sweetish tasting gas for pushing whipped cream out of dispensers, for which it comes packaged in handy, pocket sized gas canisters (in the US, Whip-Its).

And, as such, the parts of the city that play home to the night time economy, along with anywhere young people shoot the breeze are still peppered with street corner vendors of 'gas'. "£3.50 a pop, two for a fiver". And when these street corner vendors run out, they simply get a 're-up' from Amazon or Ebay. East London is at the heart of this supply line, with layer after layer of metallic canisters squashed into the turf of its parks, or squashed into the grills of drains.

from the chilli's eye view

Capsicum is the genus of plant known colloquially as peppers. Bursting with flavour, and often heat, these fruity spices are also redolent with sociological potential. There is for instance a sociological story to be told – from the chilli's eye view – of Western capitalism's colonial origins; the Peruvian berry having been scattered across all points of the Atlantic triangle and beyond, to the profit of European traders. There is a related sociological story to be told about the relationship between the historical European hunger for spice, and the contemporary desire amidst an omnivorous majoritarian culture for what bell hooks refers to as 'eating the other'. But then, in pinning down a working notion of self and other, a sociological attention might also note changes to majoritarian cultures of the world as well as the bodies that constitute them. Over the last thirty years, for instance, hot sauce has truly crossed over into the main aisle of British and North American supermarkets. There is an important sociological story to be told of the networks of immigrant entrepreneurs, importers, exporters, their families and their customers, that made this possible. And, beneath all of these stories, is a story about the sensations that suffuse everyday life and the work they do in shaping individuals and interactions between them. What, we might ask, is the sociological significance, of a very particular sensation? In this case, the burning, tingling feeling in the around the lips and tongue?