Cary Grant on Acid

And Other Stories from the LSD Studies of Dr. Oscar Janiger

By John Whalen
The morning in April 1962, Cary Grant swallowed four tiny blue pills of lysergic acid diethylamide — LSD. Incredibly, it was the 58-year-old actor’s 72nd acid trip under the supervision of a psychiatrist. Grant relaxed on a plush couch and sipped coffee as the drug began to take effect. During the five-hour session, his running commentary was captured on a small tape recorder for later transcription: “I was noting the growing intensity of light in the room,” he recalled at one point, “and at short intervals as I shut my eyes, visions appeared to me. I seemed to be in a world of healthy, chubby little babies’ legs and diapers, and smeared blood, a sort of general menstrual activity taking place. It did not repel me as such thoughts used to.”

Hardly the suave re Dante associated with the star of His Girl Friday and North by Northwest. But as the aging movie idol had already stated in bold public endorsements of the experimental drug, LSD had a way of stripping away cultivated veneers and forcing one to confront unguarded, often unpleasant, emotions. Grant was grateful for his LSD therapy — over the course of a decade, he’d drop acid more than 100 times. Among other benefits, he credited LSD with helping him control his drinking and come to terms with unresolved conflicts about his parents.

“When I first began experimentation,” he said on that sunny spring morning, “the drug seemed to loosen deeper fears, as sleep does a nightmare. I had horrifying experiences as participant and spectator, but, with each session, became happier, both while experiencing the drug and in periods between. I feel better and feel certain there is curative power in the drug itself.”

Grant was just one of hundreds of citizens in the Los Angeles region who participated during the 1950s and early 1960s in unprecedented academic studies of the then-newly developed psychodelic. In just a few short years, of course, LSD would become a chemical taboo, the notorious “hippie psychedelic” vilified by the media.

Charlotte-based Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies is conducting a follow-up study of people who took part in legal LSD studies 35 years ago.

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advocacy group based in Mecklenburg County, that has lobbied the FDA to approve medical studies of marijuana, MDMA and LSD. Funded via academic grants and the support of its 1,600 members, who include a number of prominent research scientists, the organization describes its purpose as “working to assist psychedelic researchers around the world to design, obtain government approval, fund, conduct and report on psychedelic research in humans.”

“Janiger’s study was crucially important,” says Rick Doblin, a Harvard-trained social scientist and founder of MAPS. “Because it was working to describe what LSD does in a neutral, non-controversial context, in relatively healthy non-patients.”

Other studies conducted worldwide before the ban tended to focus on the use of LSD in treating disorders such as chronic alcoholism, sexual neuroses, criminal psychopathology, phobias, depressive states and compulsive syndromes. But Janiger’s subjects were average, middle-to-upper-class, healthy adults with no pre-existing mental or physical problems. As Doblin puts it: “The subjects of Janiger’s experiment break all the stereotypes about LSD users, since they are now in their 60s or older and took LSD before it was controversial. So the follow-up study is like a time capsule back to an era before the drug war. And it gives us a view of what LSD research could be again, if we can get past the biases and just see this drug more unemotionally, as a tool.”

In those days, long before the acid underground surfaced in San Francisco as the drug of choice for the “hippie generation,” a number of men in Janiger’s office that everyone could benefit from a good dosage.

“Just a few healthy magnums of LSD in the Beverly Hills reser...”

[The doctor] had suggested that I listen to some music while the drug was still effective. I am a composer and pianist, and I have never before been so strongly affected by music as I was then. I played the piano for approximately 40 minutes. I felt that I had played extremely well and possibly with more musical insight than before. I played along with the theme that Chopin Fantasia would have had no difficulty as a master of the keyboard.

Days, and remembered it perfectly and without flaws. A few days after the experiment I again attempted to play this piece and found that I had retained it completely. I would sometimes be interested in repeating the experiment and recording some improvisations while under the influence of the pills.” — Andre Previn

This afternoon Dr. Oscar Janiger and his wife, Kathleen Delaney, are lunching in their comfortable book-lined home in Santa Monica with a group of Hollywood screenwriters who hope to explore the social history of LSD into a feature film. In fact, the number of acid contracts deposited at leading talent agencies, producers and film companies by movie stars, has increased dramatically in recent months.

Flash forward 35 years to a very different time in a very different world. In many ways, science has finally caught up with LSD. Given recent advances in our understanding of neurochemistry — the complex chemical pathways that drive human thought, emotions and behavior — many researchers believe that LSD could become a valuable tool in further unraveling the mysteries of the human brain. What’s more, they say, the drug’s startling, if underappreciated, efficacy in the treatment of alcoholism, drug addiction and a whole range of psychiatric disorders beg for renewed research. Yet after decades in legal limbo, LSD remains a sociopolitical pariah. Though research on animals has continued, little more than a dozen human subjects have participated in studies since the late 60s, and no new research has been published since the early 70s.

Some of LSD’s latter-day defenders now believe that for “acid science” to move forward, LSD must first be rehabilitated in the public mind. And that may be pinning their hopes on a new follow-up study of Janiger’s classic experiments, conducted between 1954 and 1962. By interviewing the people who participated in the original study (many of whom are now in their 60s, 70s and 80s), researchers hope to show that, by and large, the original human guinea pigs suffered negative long-term effects as a result of their LSD dosings. And — shocking as it may sound — many may have benefited from the experience.

The prime force behind the follow-up study, to be completed later this year, is the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS), a nonprofit research and treatment group...
enclosed backyard, he installed a garden, to give his experimental trippers a safe outdoor haven to explore. “So many of the studies prior to mine were done in hospital rooms, restricted environments,” Janiger recalls, “and I thought that my study might be benefited by a naturalistic environment.”

Though Janiger held an associate professorship in the Psychology Department at the California College of Medicine (now UC-Irvine), he funded the study himself by charging a $20 fee for the experience. Sandoz Laboratories, the Swiss pharmaceutical company that “discovered” LSD, supplied the drug free of charge. In return, Janiger agreed to keep Sandoz informed about the results of his experiments. Unlike many other researchers and major universities, he never accepted funding — covert or overt — from the CIA or the military.

“My goal was simply to find out what LSD does to people under uniform conditions,” Janiger says, especially how it changes perception and personality. Over the course of a decade, he would also study a number of related issues, including the drug’s effect on artistic creativity.

Janiger’s approach to LSD research was influenced by his own experience with the drug. It was in early 1954 that he had first tried acid, procured legally from Sandoz Laboratories by a friend. “That first experience shook me up completely,” Janiger recalls. “It was extraordinary — so powerful and so interesting. I was of course struck by how LSD works to change your reality around. From a psychiatric point of view, it was a marvelous instrument to learn more about the mind.”

Each of Janiger’s volunteers was prescreened for obvious mental or physical disturbances. If they passed, they were given LSD in the morning and allowed to do whatever they wanted for the rest of the day — listen to music, walk in the garden, draw or paint, etc. A designated “babysitter” was a constant but unobtrusive presence, there to see to a subject’s physical comfort.

At the end of the experience — and sometimes during — Janiger’s subjects were provided with a tape recorder or stenographer so that they could record their impressions while the images were still fresh in their minds. If they were asked to fill out a questionnaire that contained queries such as “What single event or insight, if any, during the LSD experience would you consider to have been of the greatest meaning to you?” and “What changes, if any, have taken place in your sense of values?” Janiger broke these reports down into a series of descriptive statements about the experience. By the end of the study, Janiger was able to distill the quintessential LSD experience: The drug altered the user’s perception of time, it came in waves; it made colors seem more intense; it induced the sensation that all elements of the world were organically connected in some way.

Says Janiger, “That clarified a great many things in my own mind. I began to see what I think is the core of the LSD experience — the state of the experience as opposed to the content of the experience. Up until then, that distinction had never been made with LSD. Some people said LSD was a religious experience, or a birth experience. But that was the content of their experience; for others it might not be either of these things.”

Lysergic acid diethylamide had been around since 1938, when Dr. Albert Hofmann formulated the first dose at Sandoz. Hofmann was experimenting with derivatives of ergot, a rye fungus, in an attempt to develop a circulatory stimulant. Instead, what he discovered in his 25th attempt (the official name of the drug would become LSD-25) was a substance of extremely peculiar qualities.

The story of the first acid trip ever is now famous. Hofmann unknowingly absorbed the experimental compound through his fingers. “As I lay in a dazed condition with eyes closed,” he would recall, “there surged up from me a succession of fantastic, rapidly changing imagery of a striking reality and depth, alternating with a vivid, kaleidoscopic display of colors.” Two days later, Hofmann deliberately swallowed a miniscule 250 micrograms (a millionth of an ounce), which launched him on an even more dramatic head trip. “I had great difficulty in speaking coherently,” he’d later say of that session. He managed to ride his bicycle home, but was soon enduring the world’s first bad trip, wondering if he was going insane: “I thought I had died. My ‘ego’ was suspended somewhere in space, and I saw my body lying dead on the sofa.”

LSD was not soon to fade from view. Continued on page 20
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returned to the realm of pleasant hallucinations. So began the era of academic experimentation with LSD, and much of this, and most of LSD, was done with LSD. Among the more promising results were studies in which LSD was given in high doses to children suffering from schizophrenia. This study, reported for a group of young autistic children, "the vocabularies of several of the children increased after LSD." What's more, several seemed to be attempting to form words or watch words and even to speak; many seemed to comprehend speech for the first time. "The autistic children all "appeared flushed, bright-eyed and unusually interested in the environment."

Even more dramatic were the successes during the 1950s and 1960s in treating chronic alcoholics at Hollywood Hospital in British Columbia and at Spring Grove State Hospital in Baltimore. After ingesting relatively large doses of LSD (up to 800 micrograms, in some cases) and undergoing directed therapy, about half of all patients were able to remain sober or to drink much less, according to pioneers Bernard Arnson and Humphrey Osmond. Often a few of the patients were taken off the antipsychotics. This seems to be a universal statistic for LSD therapy," they reported.

Exactly how LSD worked for alcoholics, heroin addicts and schizophrenic children remains something of a mystery. In fact, to this day scientists know little about how LSD interacts with the human brain on a neurological level. The drug can have profound effects on the brain for a relatively short period of several months, disappearing at first. This short half-life of the drug suggests that the hours of hallucinations and consciousness-warping experienced by acid eaters is due not to the drug itself, but to some medium- or long-term neurological chain of events unleashed by LSD.

Research on animals has suggested that LSD stimulates the serotonin receptors in the brain, the same neurological connections that Prozac and other new antidepressants drugs zero in on. That drug that stimulates a serotonin receptor should effect changes in consciousness and perception is the thing that we don't actually know," says David Nichols, founder of the Heffter Research Institute, a nonprofit group that funds and conducts clinical studies of psychoactive substances.

After decades of experimentation—clinical and otherwise—it's clear that LSD's effects on individuals vary widely. A person's response depends not only on his or her mental state or "set," but also on a multitude of other factors, including the setting in which the drug is taken, the influence of others in the room and the immediate cultural climate. For instance, during the late 1960s, after the frenzy of hyperbolic media reports on the dangers of LSD, the number of illegal users experiencing the proverbial "bad trip" multiplied. Many observers suspected a direct relationship between the upswing in "bummers" and the advent of acid scare stories. (The fact that the doses available then were often more than twice as high as today's street-grade doses may also account for the higher incidence of bad trips.)

Undoubtedly, LSD's unpredictable nature has a lot to do with why it became so controversial so quickly, and why it was never fully accepted as a worthy addition to the store of mainstream psychiatric tools.

I thought I was the quickest the quickest the quickest mind alive and the quickest with words but words come up with changes, these changes are beyond words, beyond words. While I repeated these words I felt the waves of pleasure like those of the most acute pleasure of lovemaking... I felt the impossibility to tell the secret of life because the secret of life was metamorphosis, transmission, and it happened too quickly, too subtly. — Anaïs Nin

I never saw my work as being therapeutic," Janiger says. "I was only concerned with the study of LSD. I think, however, we made some ancillary discoveries." One such discovery involved a painfully shy firefighter. "Although he was a very pleasant, intelligent man, he was extremely shy and sort of a shut-in personality. He could never mix with people because of... an inhibition about being in spontaneous social gatherings," Janiger gave the man "a good deal of LSD" for a period of several months. By the end of that period, "his personality had changed markedly," says Janiger. "He became very affable and quite a man of public affairs, going out and talking to the people. Even after he was stopped taking LSD, he remained extroverted."

Janiger also experimented with LSD's effects on pain, a common symptom of mental illness. Would LSD produce in users a similar state? "We did an experiment where a fellow had his tooth pulled while under LSD, but without any other anesthetic," Janiger recalls. "One dentist at UCLA pulled the tooth and the subject didn't flinch, didn't protest, didn't say so much as blink.

"I had the choice of doing a lot of little experiments like that," says Janiger. "I knew that the days of LSD research would eventually come to an end. The burden of riches was so great, I wanted to open up as many new possibilities as I could."

Perhaps the most interesting side experiment evolved from the fact that Janiger's volunteers tended to reflect the cultural foment of Los Angeles. "Several of the professional artists who used to hang out at Janiger's lab worked on creating the little literature of the beatniks," says Janiger. "There was a single artist who didn't think they had had some kind of revelation.

The data from the art study are particularly rich, says Janiger. "It remains for someone highly gifted as an artist to critique the information on LSD and to develop a theory in terms of terms of perception and the creative and artistic processes and that opens up the whole issue of whether or not drugs can fire up your imagination in terms of writing and poetry."

After taking LSD at Janiger's office, the writer Anaïs Nin developed her own theory about the drug's effects, and wrote: "I could find correlations into the LSD imagery". She later incorporated her rough notes, which Janiger has saved in her plenary files, into an essay included in The Diary of Anaïs Nin. "I could find correlations into the LSD imagery" she wrote. "I could find the sources of the image of a past dreams, in reading, in memories of travel, in actual experience, such as the one I had once in Paris when I was so excited by life that I felt I was not touching the ground, I felt I was sliding a few inches away from the sidewalk. Therefore, I felt, the chemical did not reveal an unknown world. What it did was to shut out the quotidian world... as an interference and leave you alone with your dreams and fantasies and memories. In this way it made easier to gain access to the subconscious.

Though she never admitted it publicly, Nin's access to her inner life was dramatically augmented by LSD. According to author and

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was once something of an acid queen.
Parry's late husband, Parry Bivens, a pioneer scuba diver, inventor, medical doctor, chemist and drug experimenter, is the man who introduced Janiger to LSD, after obtaining a mail-order supply from Sandoz Laboratories. An accomplished pioneer diver in his own right, Parry graced the cover of Sports Illustrated in 1955 and worked as an actress and underwater stunt double in Hollywood, standing in for Sophia Loren and co-starring with Lloyd Bridges in TV's Sea Hunt. She describes her two dozen acid sessions of the mid-1950s as "happy trips — joyful." She credits LSD with helping her to appreciate the intricacies and interconnectedness and beauty of life in the "underwater world." After her first several sessions, she became a volunteer babysitter for Janiger's subjects. She hasn't taken any drugs since then, and feels no need to try LSD again.

Sixty-nine-year-old Loring Ware says that his six to eight doses of LSD in Janiger's office opened his eyes to "the world around me, but with some of the veil taken away that I didn't even know were there." Before those experiences, Ware was following what he felt to be an uninspiring career path as a technical illustrator. "LSD made me feel better about my job," he says. "I recognized the essential meaninglessness of my job." Subsequently, Ware switched careers and became a radio announcer. Though he hasn't had much experience with other drugs other than "a little pot in the 1960s" — he believes that LSD "should be incorporated into some kind of rite of passage for young people, so they enter into adulthood with an understanding of the broadness of life, instead of becoming little cogs in a machine."

Ernest Pipes, 71, was one of eight Unitarian ministers who dropped acid in Janiger's office in the late 1950s. Now retired, Pipes says he was disappointed with his trip only because it wasn't a transcendental experience. "As it turned out," he recalls, "each of us had a very different experience — some went very deeply into a state of transcendent ecstasy, others did not. I had an intensified aura and visual experience, but I was unable to surrender fully to the effects of the drug in that setting." Pausing a moment, he adds, "But I have always regretted that I was not transported more effectively into altered states of consciousness, and thus enabled to be in touch with other dimensions of reality." An inclination to "break wind" was inhibited by the fear that it might turn into a multi-dimensional farts past, reverberating uncontrollably through the cornet." — Philosopher Alan Watts

By the early 1960s, it was apparent that the era of inwards journeys — or at least legal ones — was fast approaching an end. LSD had seeped into the underground youth culture, and the forces of prohibition were already in play. Long before LSD was outlawed, Sandoz, under international pressure, cut off researchers' access to the drug.

And what of LSD's reputed perils? "A lot of the so-called dangers were hyperbole exaggerated by the press and misunderstood by science," says Ronald Siegel, who has studied psychopharmacological agents at UCLA for nearly 30 years. The claim that LSD causes genetic damage, for one, turned out to be inaccurate. "In fact," Siegel continues, "the drug doesn't present a lot of toxic dangers to individuals, simply because the dose that turns them on and the dose that kills them are so far apart."

According to Janiger, researchers themselves are partly responsible for the drug's fall from grace. "LSD didn't pan out as an acceptable therapeutic drug for one reason," he says. "Researchers didn't realize the exploitive nature of the drug. You can't manipulate it as skillfully as you would like. It's like atomic energy — it's relatively easy to make a bomb with it, but much harder to safely drive an engine and make light with it. And with LSD, we didn't have the chance to experiment and fully establish how to make it do positive, useful things." So acid has continued to hang in limbo, says Siegel. "Because LSD carries with it so much political baggage, it has become extremely difficult to gain approval for new studies."

For researchers hoping to resume LSD studies with human subjects, progress on the regulatory front has been excruciatingly slow. Since the early 1970s, only a dozen or so people have participated in LSD-research trials, and those were continuations of projects approved before the ban. Last year, Richard Yensen, a pioneering LSD researcher and psychologist in Baltimore, was ready to administer 499 doses of LSD to down-and-out alcoholics and drug addicts in a resumption of his work begun in the early 60s at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center. But early this year, the FDA put the study on "clinical hold," demanding that Yensen revise his research and safety protocols. Yensen says he has no idea why the FDA suddenly hit the brakes, but he suspects that a recent Esquire magazine story publicizing his obscure research sparked government regulators.

Other planned research projects with hallucinogens have hit similar regulatory obstacles. Rick Dobin of MAPS denies that charge, at least in the sense that he's lobbying for LSD to be sold over the counter like cigarettes and alcohol. Yet he admits that "the attitude of many legal and law enforcement agencies to LSD, more likely than not in special-ly licensed centers to specially licensed therapists."
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