

## ON THE CREST OF A WAVE: A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE BBC'S HORIZON SPECIAL, PSYCHEDELIC SCIENCE

Simon G. Powell

ONE WOULD NOT EXPECT Britain's traditionally conservative and oft-staid BBC to screen a 50 minute film on the new wave of psychedelic research in humans. Yet, astonishingly enough, such a state of affairs recently came to pass. Before it aired on February 27th, 1997, *Psychedelic Science* was heavily featured in the media, even getting elaborate treatment in the *Radio Times*, a mass publication as institutionalised as the BBC itself. The *Times*, the *Guardian*, and the *Independent*, Britain's three leading broadsheets, all carried major pieces announcing the film.

Bill Eagles—the man who filmed and wrote the documentary—did a commendable job. We were treated to coverage of all the main scientists in the field along with colorful images and a rather lively ambient soundtrack. Perhaps the deliberately blurred interview shots were too contrived, yet the essential feel of the film was that of a highly effective PR job on behalf of the psychedelic science community.

At the outset, viewers were introduced to FDA spokesman Dr. Curtis Wright who came across as an amiable enough fellow. Speaking on behalf of the policy-makers who control what research options are available to scientists, Wright noted:

"It is very clear that there is a role for these [psychedelic] agents in the understanding of how the mind works," adding that "...there is also a role for them as potential ways to help people."

As an example of the first wave of therapeutic research, Drs. Abram Hoffer and Humphry Osmond were interviewed about their pioneering LSD work in the 50's in treating alcoholics. Hoffer spoke of how his team had hoped to give patients "one or two peak experiences" in order to help them break their addiction. We learn that some 2,000 patients were treated with about 50% of them achieving sobriety thereafter.

In a similar vein, smartly dressed and well-preserved Stanislav Grof detailed his work in Prague in 1967 where LSD was used to treat heroin addicts. The aim was to facilitate deep mystical experiences and the entry into consciousness of unconscious information so as to induce rehabilitation. Grof asserted that one third of his patients were treated successfully.

It became clear that therapy was not the only application for psychedelics. Yet another 60-something academic, Willis Harman, former Professor of Engineering at Stanford, explained how architects and designers of the Ph.D. type were given psychedelics in the early 60's as an aid to creativity. "Almost everybody...had a rise in creativity as measured by tests," said Harman. [Ed. Note: Willis Harman died January 30, 1997]

At this point, the public might have been wondering why the research stopped. The mood of the film suddenly changed as we learned via Hoffer and Grof how mainstream science rebelled against these strange new neurochemical tools. Hoffer and Osmond's research was undermined by badly replicated experiments which were carried out by other scientists who wished to verify their claims of LSD's therapeutic efficacy. Only this time patients were given excessive doses of LSD and were literally handcuffed to their beds.

There was no disguising Hoffer's despair at such a clumsy move by his peers. Grof also noted that the attempted inclusion of psychedelic drugs into mainstream psychotherapy and psychoanalysis was akin to moving from Newtonian to Quantum physics. No less than a paradigm shift was required.

But was there not more to the cessation of psychedelic research than that? Could a finger not be pointed, say, at one single individual? Especially if that individual, say, had recently departed this mortal coil?

Switch to a shot of a lanky dishevelled man lumbering across a snow-filled lawn in front of a large mansion. Of course, it is Millbrook and the man is infamous Tim Leary with his regrettable call for people to "drop out." The narrator explains how pills were given out willy-nilly to the youth populace in the 60's and how many a bad trip ensued which led, of course, to the banning of psychedelics in 1966. To drive the point home, we even see archive footage of demonic-looking LSD-user Charles Manson. However, refusing to linger on the downside of psychedelics, the film proceeded to the new improved variety of cautious psychedelic researcher.

First up is young, clean and lean physician Charles Grob. Ignoring his work with MDMA, the film focuses instead upon Grob's scientific investigations of Brazil's ayahuasca-using União do Vegetal Church. We see fascinating film taken inside a UDV Church whilst their ayahuasca ritual is in full swing. A row of large bubbling pots of ayahuasca "tea" stand at the front of the congregation. Average looking people, young and old alike, step forward and take the DMT-imbibed tea. They sit back and then let the visions come. This is a most civilised-looking ritual. Indeed, Grob explains the normalcy of UDV Church members, that these people are members of "Middle Brazil" as it were.

Any worry that the viewer might have that ayahuasca is harmful to health is swiftly dealt with by Grob as he explains the various physiological and psychological tests that he and his col-

leagues have carried out on long-term ayahuasca users which have shown no detrimental effects. We are even repeatedly informed about how ayahuasca improves social conduct and how it stops drug use, especially the use of alcohol. Grob muses whether such a socially-bonding wholly natural botanical medicine/sacrament such as ayahuasca might in some way be integrated into Western culture.

Eagles next pays a visit to Rick Strassman who is interviewed in what looks like his garden with conifer trees waving majestically behind him. His two year struggle to get permission to undertake human-based studies with pure DMT is documented, Strassman coming across as a bit of a hero.

FDA spokesman Wright remembers the events that led up to the granting of permission to begin research with DMT. Over authoritarian shots of police motorcyclists and American flags, Wright recalls the day the FDA met to debate Strassman's controversial study application. It was a fateful day, but, as Wright explains, such a cautious approach has worked well enough since it is apparent that human-based hallucinogen studies can be undertaken without detriment to those subjects involved.

Dr. Deborah Mash and her research with ibogaine was also treated in depth in the film. Mash explains how ibogaine can be used to break cocaine habits although, as with ayahuasca, we do not learn much about the actual phenomenology induced by ibogaine—suffice it to say that patients experience transformative insights into themselves which can break their patterns of addiction.

The single flaw in the film lay in what British psychiatrist Dr. Karl Jansen had to say with regard to the neurochemical modus operandi of psychedelic drugs. According to Jansen:

"Psychedelics can block the transmission of messages from the outside world to the inside... by selectively blocking the action of chemical messengers."

Jansen then talks of a "vacuum" being created in the mind and that Nature abhors a vacuum such that the mind generates its own perceptions.

This is a rather poor account of one of the most important psychological issues raised by entheogenic agents. The literature shows us that far from simply blocking neuronal firing activity, psychedelics can increase firing patterns in certain areas of the brain (such as the locus coeruleus), and that this increase in information processing might underly the feelings of more enhanced perception reported by many psychedelic users.

Towards the end of the film, the viewer is informed that LSD has never been more popular amongst the high school population. However this is not discussed any further and we are left in a quandary. For although the film makes it clear that scientific research can be done and that we can gain salient medical and neurophilosophical knowledge from these substances, the fact that some are used recreationally anyway ruins any notion that science is the only enterprise validly equipped to deal with them.

In a sense, the film makes it appear as if the scientific community is a modern priesthood, that it should only be under the guidance of science that an individual be allowed to ingest a psychedelic. Many grown adults would argue that it is a personal choice and, for that matter, that shamans have employed psychedelic plants for millennia without recourse to state control. But

since all parties can probably agree that risk reduction and technique are the most important factors mediating effective and constructive use, then perhaps the greatest lesson to be learned from the film is from the UDV Church who seem to have successfully integrated ayahuasca into Brazilian culture with full approval from the Brazilian government.

Whatever the case, the last word goes to Abram Hoffer who ended the film by comparing the cessation of psychedelic science to a Rip Van Winkle-like sleep. Hoffer expressed his delight that "...old Rip Van Winkle is waking up." The film was itself evidence for this welcome process. •

## DR. KARL JANSEN

### COMMENTS:

*"Sasha Shulgin and other persons primarily identified with MDMA were omitted (from Psychedelic Science), as was all reference to MDMA. This was a politically necessary step because of the hysteria which now surrounds this drug in the U.K. It is impossible to make any positive statements about the drug in public without calls for one's resignation which resemble the true spirit of McCarthyism more than any other aspect of the so-called "war on drugs" in the U.K. to date.*

*The situation with respect to LSD is in fact quite calm in the media at present, although huge jail sentences continue to be handed down routinely in LSD cases. Psychedelic Science has already attracted a great deal of negative criticism and demands for cuts from the BBC legal department, who have viewed the program as much too positive about drugs. Excluding MDMA at least avoids the number one hysteria producer in the U.K.*

*It is unfortunate that my comments about sensory input being shut off were edited in such a way as to appear as if they refer to psychedelic drugs such as LSD. In fact, in the original interview these comments were made with respect to ketamine, in which I have a special interest. LSD, psilocybin and mescaline can sometimes lead to a sensory deluge and even greater engagement with the environment than usual. Ketamine, by blocking glutamate transmission, can result in complete dissociation from the environment."*