The Times (London)

**March** 4, 2016 Friday   
Edition 1;   
Scotland

No laughing matter: 'hippy crack' banishes traumatic**memories**  
  
**BYLINE:** Tom Whipple  
  
**SECTION:** NEWS; Pg. 29  
  
**LENGTH:** 415 words

Dimly, I am aware that I should be thinking about the horrific sexual assault I just watched. Or, if not that, about the guy getting his head brutally stoved in with a fire extinguisher.

Instead, I have a happier thought - about an extraordinarily funny joke that I should tell, perfect for the circumstances.

Five minutes later, when I remove the **nitrous oxide** feed and am able to speak, the joke has disappeared, dissolving like candy floss in my mind. But so too has the shock, bordering on **trauma,**that I had experienced before putting the gas mask on, after watching what was without doubt the most brutal film I have ever seen.

Scientists from University College London have conducted a study into whether **nitrous oxide**, the gas used as a painkiller by mothers in labour and as "hippy crack" by students at parties, could have another role: in stopping post-traumatic stress. The Times was invited to be one of its subjects.

For the study, published in the journal Psychological Medicine, 50 people were invited to watch excerpts from Irreversible, a French film. This was not a French film of the Amelieand-Gerard-Depardieu-trying-to-starta-country-chocolate-business kind, more of the extended-rape-scene-andcrushing-heads-like-watermelon kind. It was chosen specifically because it has been shown to induce flashbacks - unwanted recollections that "intrude" into people's consciousness.

Ravi Das, of UCL, was interested to learn whether the pattern of flashbacks would be different for those who took **nitrous oxide**.

It works by blocking the receptors that convert short-term **memory** into long-term **memory.** The idea behind the study was that by giving people gas just after a traumatic experience it could prevent those **memories** from becoming hardwired in the brain.

The research appears to confirm this.

Participants were followed for a week, and those who had had the **nitrous oxide** experienced a more rapid drop off in **memory** "intrusions" from the film. The Times experienced just one.

**Nitrous oxide** is well known for the tricks it plays with **memory.**

In A History of Western Philosophy, Bertrand Russell tells of a man who believed that when under the influence of laughing gas he had discovered the secret of the Universe. Russell writes that, "at last, with immense effort, he wrote down the secret. When completely recovered, he rushed to see what he had written. It was: 'A smell of petroleum prevails throughout'."

Which is all well and good but I'm still sure my joke was better than that.

**GRAPHIC:** The film Irreversible was shown in the study because of its horrific scenes