

Stasis: The Creation and Exploration of Subjective Experiential Realities Through Hypnosis, Psychosynthesis and Interactive Digital Technology

R.D.Brown 1999

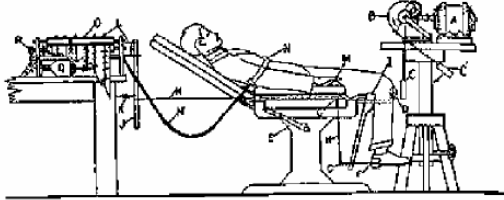


Illustration of experimental hypnosis to determine the differences between hypnosis and sleep, 1931. ¹

Stasis: The Project

'The combination of feeling and thought of high-tension leads to a higher form of psychic life. Thus in art we have already the first experiments in a language of the future. Art anticipates a psychic evolution and divines its future forms'.

R. Assagioli ²

This paper describes the background to the Stasis project with reference to virtual reality, the fourth dimension, hypnosis and psychosynthesis.

Virtual Reality and the Fourth Dimension

Over the last seven years I have explored the inter relationships of time, space and energy by creating interactive and time-based art works. The most recent of these has been Alembic, an interactive 'Virtual Reality' installation. The creation of this work, using the immaterial medium of VR, stemmed from the desire to create an abstract 3D experience of four dimensional forms.

Many of you will be familiar with the work of Duchamp who was similarly inspired by ideas of non-Euclidean space and an invisible higher dimension. A number of 20th century artists, including the Cubists, tried to represent alternative perceptions of form from multiple view points or the notion of time, either via painting or sculpture ³. Duchamp explored a variety of techniques, including painting on glass, the use of kinetics and installations as means of evoking higher spaces. I found myself struggling with physical media and, inspired by Boccioni's idea of dynamic form ⁴ and Kandinsky's idea of an immaterial medium of light ⁵, I turned to virtual reality as a means of expression. A previous background in programming enabled me to use this technology as an expressive medium, creating the illusion of form with the ability to transform such representations both in time and in response to the viewer.

Alembic ⁶ is the product of this work, conveying the idea of illusionary and responsive dynamic form, but also including references to alchemy and magic, placing the viewer in the position of creating his own unique reality challenging ideas of objectivity and thus scientific empiricism.

The idea of a fourth dimension, non-Euclidean space and Einstein's theory of relativity had a great impact on 20th century art and science⁷. However, even before the mathematic and philosophical speculations on space/time came into existence, various branches of 'non- science' such as theosophy and the Kabala discussed ideas of invisible spaces, labelling them as etheric, veiled or astral. Duchamp not only practised as an artist but was also familiar with the mathematics of the fourth dimension (Jouffret⁸), whilst Kandinsky and the scientist Sir William Crookes practised theosophy and were familiar with the writings of Madame Blavatsky⁹. It is this synthesis of ideologies represented by the 20th century notion of a fourth dimension which brought together the culturally opposed and disparate ideologies of art, science and mysticism.

The realisation and exhibition of *Alembic* with its questioning of our accepted notions of the representation of 3D space, encompassed in the term virtual reality, led me to focus on the perception of both real and virtual form, more recently experimenting with representations that convey qualities of life. We use the changing and responsiveness of form to determine whether something is alive or not. It appears that the appropriate use of illusion can bring out an empathy towards something that is not alive, even though it produces a resonance within us that evokes the appropriate emotional response.

The fourth dimension can be seen as a means of encapsulating ideas about space and time, including organic growth and decay found in life. It is difficult to mentally picture a fourth

Dimension where do we look and how can we perceive or conceive of a higher space?

Charles Hinton¹⁰ tried to produce a technique for this using coloured cubes, and Ouspensky¹¹ refers to the idea of a 'super-consciousness' enabling a higher form of perception, beyond causality and dualism. In the two-dimensional world of *Flatland*, Edwin Abbott¹² used analogy as a means of relating to higher dimensions.

Perhaps we must look inward and outward, physically and mentally, spatially and temporally to the micro and macrocosm, abolishing conventional ideas of causality, duality, time past, present and future. It is these ideas of consciousness and awareness, a continuing desire to explore further interpretations of the idea of a fourth dimension, that led to the hypnosis experiments I dabbled with in my youth.

Hypnosis

When I was aged around 14, I came across a pamphlet entitled 'How to Hypnotise People' at a joke shop. The pamphlet was a little thin but did lead to reading serious medical books on the practice of hypnosis and before long I was practising the techniques on school friends. Three of us began experimenting amongst ourselves to find out what hypnosis could actually do. These included: making someone disappear by telling the hypnotised person that when he woke up, a person who was actually still in the room had left; causing a heat blister to appear by touching the subject with a cold pen top which he thought was a hot soldering iron; and posthypnotic suggestions such as falling asleep on command or becoming thirsty or itchy. Other experiments included regression and controlled astral projection. I left off hypnosis experiments for some time, feeling that I perhaps was not quite ready or mature enough to investigate the subject as seriously as it deserved. More recently hypnosis has been brought to the attention of the television viewing public by Paul McKenna, who featured on Radio 4 programme *Altered States*¹³.

Hypnosis tends to be viewed with suspicion by most people; they fear the loss of control associated with the practice, a fear perhaps confirmed by the use of hypnosis as a form of comical entertainment.

The fictional work *Svengali* by George Du Maurier in 1894 also set out the classical fear of the misuse of hypnosis for the control of one human by another for his own wicked ends.

Historically, hypnosis has been rejected by both the scientific and medical communities. Mesmer, in 1847, was frowned upon by the establishment as a fraudulent prankster for his practice of animal magnetism. When other magnetisers used this technique as a means of achieving pain-free surgery, the medical community was relieved when ether was discovered as a more scientific and reliable method of achieving anaesthesia.

I believe hypnosis to be a powerful, underrated and often misunderstood technique that may enable us to explore the inner mind, perhaps opening up avenues of understanding time and space and conceptualising of higher dimensions.

The practice of meditation shares much with hypnosis and is associated with transcendental states of mind. Both techniques utilise body relaxation and controlled breathing leading to a focused state of mind where the general flow of thought activity is quietened. The perception of time is lost in these states, where 20 minutes of 'real time' may be subjectively experienced as a couple of minutes, parallel to the loss of time awareness when we sleep.

Hypnosis enables powerful physiological changes to be induced, as if there are control mechanisms that we consciously do not have access to but which through hypnosis may be affected. Examples include altering visual perception, the senses of taste, smell and touch as well as being able to influence autonomous parts of the body such as the heart and stomach. In some ways hypnosis could be said to provide the perfect tool for creating the ultimate virtual reality.

Hypnosis is also used to help people with psychological problems. It is this area that I wish to ground my explorations. There is a danger that the use of hypnosis as an art form could simply be associated with the current populist trend of art-media sensationalism. I hope that Stasis will manage to tread a fine line between art, science and the mystical, resonating with the philosophical views as outlined by Ouspensky and more recently in the work of Roberto Assagioli in the form of Psychosynthesis. I wish to use some of these principles as a foundation for the Stasis project.

Psychosynthesis

'From the eternal - Out of the past - In the present - For the future'
(Roberto Assagioli)

Psychosynthesis was conceived by the Italian psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli (1888/1974) and represents an amalgam of psychotherapy techniques. A fundamental and distinguishing principle is the idea of an essential 'I' that is somehow beyond the idea of a single personality. Psychosynthesis recognises that we may have a set of personalities that are often in conflict and that a sense of inner harmony may be achieved by recognising these sub-personalities and getting them to work together.

'We are not unified. We often have the illusion of being so, because we do not have many bodies or many limbs, and because one hand does not fight with the other, but in our inner world this is actually the case - various personalities and sub-personalities struggle continuously with each other; impulses, desires, principles and aspirations are in continual tumult'

(R. Assagioli)

'One of the problems is identification with a sub personality as if this were the true 'I' or self. To undo this, a process of dis-identification is followed coupled with the training of will to undo any persistent habitual repetitive behaviours. A key aim is the realisation of the super consciousness, that level of the unconscious which generates all that is highest and most meaningful for a human being'.

(What is Psychosynthesis? The Psychosynthesis and Education Trust, London)

One of the techniques used in psychosynthesis is a set of visualisation exercises based on Initiated Symbolic Projection (ISP). It is this process that I wish to use as a basis for Stasis, which has the following form.

The subject is induced into a deep state of relaxation by suggestions of bodily weight and warmth whilst focusing on deep and regular breathing. This has the effect of producing a diminished consciousness of the outside world. The subject is then given what is called a symbol motive which acts like a centre for crystallisation for a specific type of vision which differs from mere images, daydreams or most phantasy, in that it possesses a clarity in form and content, a life of its own, and permits exact description. This vision is determined largely subjectively and consciously and is termed as being autochthonous.

Each motive will evoke a subjective experience which may be influenced by deep and unconscious thoughts. For instance, difficulties in imagining a meadow and experiencing a dusty and arid space a psychotherapist could then use to explore the unconscious forces at work in influencing what should be a positive and calming place to envision.

Below is a set of example symbol motives (taken from *Psychosynthesis: A Manual of Principles and Techniques*), which the subject is asked to visualise, perhaps with suggestions of additional sensations such as sound, touch and smell.

1. A meadow-with the connotations of a safe happy childhood place.
2. Climbing a mountain, overcoming obstacles to reach a plateau, a place where one can see things in perspective.
3. Following the course of a stream, indicative of energy and passage through life.
4. A house/home containing:
 - 4.1 A friend-sense of well-being or significant aspects of friendship relationships- or uncovering problematic relationships.
 - 4.2 A picture book-significant imagery-childhood.
5. Ideal Personality-same sex-all the characteristics that one would hope to have/be like/admire-part of a will exercise.
6. Interpersonal relationships via animals: Mother-cow, Father bull or elephant-method of seeing relationships via animal characteristics - humour.
7. Sexuality: male-rose unfolding; female-getting a lift from a stranger in a car on a road.
8. Pool of water in a swamp-expressing darker suppressed elements of the psyche.
9. Waiting for a figure to emerge from a cave-wise person, powerful mystical figure-sage, witch, soothsayer etc.
10. Eruption of a volcano-life force-sexual energy, libido.
11. The lion-figure of strength-how strong the self is viewed.

Stasis would be realised by the playing of digitised audio hypnotic commands and visualisation exercises under computer control. The computer monitors the subject using a bio-feedback interface and is programmed to deliver the appropriate suggestive techniques in response to the physical and mental state of the subject. Suitable interfacing would also allow the subject to be able to navigate through various hypnogogic worlds.

The benefits of digital hypnosis includes the generation of Ericksonian-like¹⁴ techniques of confusion by multiple and rapid suggestions, the continual, automated and monitored assessment of the patient's hypnotic state and the ability to deliver commands that are both repeatable and are as prolonged as necessary to achieve a deep state of hypnosis..

I am researching the possible dangers of automated hypnosis and the use of the above motives for the Stasis project by consulting with qualified counsellors and psychotherapists.

A prototype of Stasis was demonstrated at the Reframing Consciousness conference, Newport, Gwent in August 1998.

References

- 1 Image taken from <<http://www.tranceworks.com/history.htm>>
- 2 Assagioli Roberto. 1975. Psychosynthesis: A Manual of Principles and Techniques. London. Turnstone.
- 3 Henderson, L.H. 1983. The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art. UK. Princeton University Press. pp. 117-163.
- 4 [3] p. 111.
- 5 Ringbom, Sixten. 1970. The Sounding Cosmos, Finland, Abo Akademi.
- 6 Alembic website <<http://www.mimetics.com/vur/alembic.html> >
- 7 [3] pp. 3-43.
- 8 [3] p. 72.
- 9 Blavatsky, Helena Petronava, 1888. Isis Unveiled: A Master-key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Technology. New York. J.W. Bouton.
- 10 Hinton, Charles Howard. 1888. A New Era of Thought. London. Swan Sonnenschein & Co.
- 11 Ouspensky P.D. 1923, 1982. Tertium Organum. UK. Kegan Paul, Random House.
- 12 Abbott, Edwin Abbott. 1884. Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions by a Square. London. Seely & Co.
- 13 Altered States. 7.30 pm, 28/2/98. BBC Radio 4.
- 14 Waxman, David. 1989. Hartland's Medical and Dental Hypnosis. London. Bailliere Tindall, pp. 259-265.

This article was written whilst Research Fellow at the Royal College of Art, Computer Related Design Research. I practise as a creator of experiential works that explore the self and our relationship to and understanding of time, space and energy. As part of the creative process I seek to combine the conventionally disparate disciplines of art, science and mysticism. London, 1999.