

# Making Sense

By Martin Stanton





# MAKING SENSE

**The Future Perfect Trilogy**  
*by Martin Stanton*

Making Sense  
Still Life  
Timeout

# MAKING SENSE

*Martin Stanton*



**PHOENIX**  
PUBLISHING HOUSE  
*firing the mind*

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*For Sarah*

*I am haunted by numberless islands, and many a Danaan shore,  
Where Time would surely forget us, and Sorrow come near us no more;*

*Soon far from the rose and the lily, and fret of the flames would we be,  
Were we only white birds, my beloved, buoyed out on the foam of the sea!*

—William Butler Yeats

## **DISCLAIMER**

The author has made full use of artistic licence throughout this work. Where 'real life' events and characters intrude, they become part of the rich tapestry of the author's rollercoaster narrative to live a separate existence within these pages which clearly diverges from the lived reality outside.

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*Martin Stanton*  
*Caux-et-Sauzens*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Martin Stanton** is a writer, teacher, and psychoanalyst. He studied at Dartford Grammar School, St Antony's College, Oxford, the University of Sussex, and the École normale supérieure in Paris. He founded the first Centre for Psychoanalytic Studies at the University of Kent in 1980. He has been a visiting professor at the New School for Social Research in New York City and an associate research fellow at the University of Cambridge. He founded and directed the Staff Counselling and Mediation Service at University College London in 2000, and has held senior clinical posts as a psychotherapist, counsellor, and mediator within the NHS. He has published numerous books and articles including *Outside the Dream* (which was reissued in 2014), *Sandor Ferenczi*, and *Out of Order*. A review of his life and work is available on Wikipedia ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin\\_Stanton](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Stanton)).



## SEATBELT SIGN

**W**e jump on board for a rollercoaster ride. There are the first moments of great expectation, when we climb vertically upwards. A brief pause when we reach the summit and take in the surrounding landscape. Then the sublime thrill—the rapture mixed with terror—when we plunge down towards the abyss. In the course of this short journey, we cross vast contrasting emotions. We rocket between despair and jubilation. We always know in the back of our mind that this is a constructed ride, and that an engineer has built in all the necessary health and safety regulations. We are certain that we will come to no harm in the end. Meanwhile we go right to the wire. We anticipate the thrill we will experience when we finally arrive at the edge of the precipice; and imagine the glorious sense of relief when we all survive.

The rollercoaster ride analogy encapsulates perfectly the way we use technology to make sense of the open-endedness, instability, and unpredictability of our life. We separate out the overwhelming experiences—the hairpin bends, the repetitive loops, and sheer drops when our thinking simply blacks out—then we engineer them into some short self-contained ride where we can confront all our rapture and terror in the security of advance knowledge. We can still shiver with involuntary thrill, but feel certain always that we will come out safely at the other end, with our feet back firmly on the ground.

But we notice that the rollercoaster always carries its statutory Fasten-Your-Seatbelt sign. We are warned in advance that the grim side of reality always underlies the pleasure of the ride. We are told not to lean out too far from the carriage; not to lose ourselves in the thrill side of life. We can fall over the precipice if we do not constantly reality-check, click ourselves comfortably into the observer seat, and plant our feet back firmly on the ground.

We must always remain firmly focused on the end in sight, and only unbuckle the seat belt when the sign says it is all right. The official Hollywood voiceover then warns us that too many repeat rides can seriously undermine our mental health. We are told that rollercoaster junkies lose their sense of balance in life—the sense of an outside objective ‘reality’ that runs alongside. They become addicted to cheap thrills. Alternatively, their ride ceases to carry any impact at all. It makes no more sense to them. They come out terminally bored. They are diagnosed as depressed and lose their independent sense of mind.

On the rollercoaster of life, all cross-overs between reality and fantasy are tightly technologically managed. The contraflow, clash, crash and annihilation are first hyped then engineered to disappear in the nick of time. Science is always seen to triumph in the end. We are left only with the memory of the seat belt and the official warning sign. The ‘crisis’ of inner reality—the shock, the terror, the thrill—is resolved by a structured return to an outside world where gravity reigns forever. The rollercoaster ride of life is designed only to last for a short while. If we stay too long or return too often, then the primal inner fantasy is progressively undermined. The live sense of thrill is blunted and closed down by the imposed objective reality of the whole exercise. All we have to realise is that the ride is only designed for amusement. It is a pastime. It always remains intentionally make-believe and unreal.

So this book will journey us through the analogy of life as a rollercoaster ride. It never flatlines into a straightforward trip to a clear and obvious destination called Normality. It does not provide us with a neat set of assembly instructions, or a complete service manual with every component perfectly exploded and tagged with its appropriate explanatory line. Life never makes sense like that.

This book sets out to provide whatever helps us make sense on every section of the ride. Part travel-guide, part documentary, part self-help manual, part novel, part drama, part photograph album, part work of art, this book transmogrifies our sense-making exercise from joyful celebration of life

at the peak, to soulful lament when thinking collapses on its sharp downward incline. The book does whatever it can to provoke us to (re)think and (re)locate exactly where we stand when faced with such uncontrollable rollercoaster feelings. It stalls us, stirs us up, and grinds us to a halt. It loses all sense of logic. It baulks at the crossed path. We even begin to suspect that there might be a basic design fault in the whole thinking process. Thoughts do not help us recover or bounce back. They do not reset us back on the right track. So we consult the local therapist Sphinx on-site to bring fresh insight, to restore the basic compass setting, and to relaunch us on a new start. She advises us first to check our baggage, then to pan out across the horizon to sense where we are on the incoming tide. She says we must prepare for the ultimate life-class when the rollercoaster rolls back to base on time.

But there is no room for education in this godforsaken place. Knowledge at this juncture in our life story promotes no sense of return adventure. We have all become too paranoid. We are all too defensive. We cannot pan ourselves right out of here; or incorporate large sections of the population in an inner dialogue. We cannot even distinguish the ancient signs that point us straight back to Paradise. We see no more sense in any onward or backward journey. There is no clear exit or conclusive ending. So making sense here provides neither 'cure' nor 'enlightenment'. It indicates not therapy, not philosophy, not religion. The journey remains always simply an odyssey. It makes sense anew every day in its own improvised inspirational way. It does not rely on any archive or exhaustive catalogue of knowledge. It refuses point-blank to reconfigure itself into the ongoing history of a mistaken identity. It travels light, without quotes, free and easy, wherever inspiration may lead. It calls it a day when the music stops, the thinking stalls, or feeling runs out of steam.

It climbs back once more into the rollercoaster analogy. It fastens its seat belt. It leans back for an instant to contemplate the swallows as they swoop and shriek to pick up a sense of skyway. The rollercoaster carriage leaps back to life. It jerks and creaks exaggeratedly as it (re)starts.

## (PRE)CONCEPTION

**M**y life is not scripted to be a simple straightforward story. It does not follow a fixed plot, or pursue some direct narrative line, with all sorts of non-stop action and adventure guaranteed. I want this to be my unique story. It need only make sense to me. It does not have to head off anywhere in particular. All the storylines do not have to tie up together into some perfect knot. There is just me, and the purity of me, lying free in the open air as a baby to be. This is before the onset of meaning, or any need to make sense to anyone, including me. This is before the opening ceremony has begun. A purity and openness that can never be constructed or enclosed by thought. A sense that I do not know, but that lives forever latent within me, ready to jump into life at any moment. So close, but impossible to touch or catch with thought. I cannot ever define it, because it does not truly belong to me. It may stir up some longing for a perfect world, and hold me transfixed and bewildered by the thought that this perfect world might be the answer. But it is never the answer. It is far more simple than that. This is just my story.

So back to before the beginning. The starting line. The single storyline of a solitary stork, that carries me high in the bright blue cloudless sky, and heads off to Paradise. The Parousia, the Coming, or the Advent—the announcement and preparation of my arrival on this planet. All the preliminaries for my story. Quite a shock, a tad traumatic, I have to say,

in retrospect. My character, my ego, my role, and all the stage directions, are fully written up, filmed, photographed, painted, decorated, and set to music, even before I care to arrive. There is already a virtual seat, reserved under my name, Ego, which fills up with tons of invitations. It is upholstered to provide maximum comfort; and it is sprayed pink or blue, depending on whether I am pre-scripted to be a girl or boy. When the birth waters actually break, someone special is called on the scene to make sense of what happens next, and how best to get me into this booked seat. It could be my father or grandmother who moves things forward; or a trained labour-assistant, such as a doula—the Ancient Greek word for a female slave. Someone anyway who is cast in the role of selflessly providing sense (of direction) for others.

But first of all, my Advent Sense-Maker (ASM) needs to locate all the cameras and the microphones well in advance, and fully alert and activate the social networks. Now, is this going to be a small private affair, a home birth, in which the main players remain relatively few, and include the already-publicised soon-to-be me, my mother, my father (with appropriate professional medical approval), the midwife, and the obstetrician? Or is this birth-event going to be right out there in the world, smack in the public eye, housed in the main maternity ward, or the delivery theatre, of the local hospital? Perhaps a small group of student doctors or midwives will attend as part of their training.

Now a crucial question jumps into my mind at this particular narrative turning: how can my ASM actually be sure to have opened up the right potential ego space for me to accommodate? How is it possible to know that I have been located in a place whence I can actually speak and begin to direct my life story? Obviously, my ego-seat has been upholstered and colour-matched. But what about the interior design, the electrics, the air-conditioning, and the central heating? Obviously, no one can check all this out with me personally, because I still remain a virtual space in this whole performance. Yes, indeed, I may well be the central act, the main subject, but I am not yet substantial enough in my own right/write, in the way that audio-visual directors or ghostwriters need me to be, to be able to play that major role that is already earmarked for me. Even the hypersensitive ‘ear’ in this analogy does not yet allow me any further embodiment—even in the form of some official announcement of my forthcoming Advent. Such an advance notice—or in the worst-case scenario, a warning—any cameo-clip of any kind might deeply trouble all middle-of-the-road common sense folk. It might stir some serious ghosts in the machine, and even provoke a

total shutdown. It might raise all those open-grave spooky questions about natural inheritance: the genetics of whom I may look like, whom my voice may resemble, my height or the colour of my hair, or which disease may have killed a past relative, and waits round the virtual corner for me. Or it might incite the return of the repressed actualised within reincarnation, which downloads automatically from another wiki-link, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Some other solitary stork, flying high in a cloudless blue sky, this time with a disembodied soul in its beak, may glide across the horizon, on the edge of some separate narrative dimension, in search of a suitably unoccupied ego space to set up house. All kinds of premonitory stuff like this can start to kick in. Severe weather warnings. High security alerts.



*Auf der Reise (On the Journey)*,  
German birth announcement  
card, 1903.

So there is no advance preview cameo-clip to announce my Advent. The public is not generally informed until me-as-foetus is judged safe and secure in my maternal space. My embryonic ego is still only observable as an inarticulate bump, which gradually comes to inflate the incline of my mother's belly. From the ASM's perspective, it is still primarily my mother's body, not my body. I can stretch and kick as much as I like inside her, but my ego cannot yet speak out directly to you. My ASM can still only envisage some potential embodied ego with some extrasensory help called ultrasound. It can predict already what size my brain and other vital organs are likely to be, and whether the newborn me will emerge

as female or male. But neither my ASM nor the ultrasound machine can predict how I will form my own impressions, or make my own first sense of things. Who can ever know even if, or how, I will feel or think; or whether I will be able to make any sense of this advent welcome-to-life performance? The ASM is right now just assuming how I may come to react; how I might form my first impressions; and how, in my own time, I might enter or assume my life centre stage, and then begin to recount to myself and others how my life passes. A big assumption. So, just to play safe, the ASM decides to keep meticulous, extensive, on-the-spot stage-notes, and snap lots of photographs, so that my newborn character—me—does not open with a mistake; or suddenly deflate with stage fright.

Now what actually comes to be, or is (born) in this Advent, in either the home or more public setting, opens my sense-making with a big enigmatic and potentially anxiety-provoking bang, in fact with a complete volcanic eruption. There is an explosion of pure joy and excitement at my arrival, and serene anticipation of all that life may bring me. Nothing will ever take those feelings away. The joy, excitement, and anticipation from others settles deep within me, and forms into an article of faith—a covenant—between me and my surrounding world. Whenever I find myself in the future troubled or in pain, when the world around me ceases to make any sense, I will return to this covenant space to celebrate my life; to recite to myself a poem for the love of others; to thank them for breathing life into my lungs; and for opening my eyes to the bright lights. I will repeat my original prayer to life—uttered with the first sound I launch into space and the first deep intake of breath—to the joy to be alive. My covenant tells me that there is always the space here for me to celebrate myself and my life. Keep all the doors and the windows open, and make sure that you always let in the fresh air and the bright sunlight.

The problems inevitably start with all those preliminary assumptions written into my Advent by my ASM. The assumptions are backed up by a whole host of internal organisers, audio-visual directors, and ghostwriters (preliminarily cast by others in the auxiliary role of my superego), and their preparatory work is assumed to download automatically in me at birth. It is to a large extent already envisaged and pre-scripted how the newborn me will proceed through the opening birth experience and emerge triumphantly at the other end. There will already be millions of snapshots on file, taken by everyone involved in the opening welcome-to-life performance, that will be catalogued online for me to select—when I am able actually to perform the right ‘click’—to enable this new me to make full sense of what

has just happened—and even to review later what might have been missed. It is assumed that I will go through this sense-making in my own good time, at some convenient flash point, afterwards. It is assumed too that I will look at, translate, and interpret these photographs in exactly the same way as everyone else (following the stage directions of the selected internal organisers, audio-visual directors, and ghostwriters).

So the transfer of overall direction from the ASM to me featuring as a newborn baby, is not automatic, not problem-free, not seamless. A newborn baby does not emerge confident, focused, coordinated, and in control. It is generally understood that a newborn baby is likely to be overwhelmed by all those stage-directions mentally noted by their carers, or recorded somewhere in the wings. A huge opening, excited sense of expectation rolls in like a white-crested wave from the great unknown out there, but I have nothing switched on or operational in my mind to be able to interpret it, or to work out how to reply, or to establish what on earth to do—other than holler, screech, and scream. I can only first follow the ASM's storyline—and duly suck at the breast or bottle when it is placed in front of me; or undergo a nappy change when it happens; or accept and enjoy it when I am immersed in warm bath water once again. It would be great if these first steps in life could make synchronised sense for all of us—me, my parents, and the ASM—including the mythical stork, and that Principal Design Director in the sky, each of whom is variously pre-scripted to open this narrative in the first place. But this is never actually the case. Something else has to kick-start my mind into action and enable a vital connection to be made between my ego, fully potentially pre-scripted as it is, and the surrounding unfolding drama.

Now it would be great—and here begins my legendary mistake—if my ego could remain in the star-role throughout, stay centre stage, heroically overcome all limitations, and conquer all upcoming adversity. But to do this, my ego must first successfully perform an essential internal transfer: it must begin to flesh out. Whatever may seem to be going on exclusively in my mind—following the tight schedule proposed by my ASM—now has to spread right out and actively take over my whole body. I must now become fully sensate—or start to make sense throughout my body. My ego must climb into its skin, become aware of its whole body surface, and assume the overall direction. It has to climb into the driver's seat, and take over at the wheel. I need a new integral sense of stage control to comply with the scenery or costume changes. I can then respond to a new sensation of cold

across my hand by removing it from the icy water. Or later I can hit back at another player, fully mindful of the actual impression my blow might make. So my newborn ego must generate an extra supplementary level of sense across its skin, through which it can both draw and maintain a clear boundary between me and other egos. This allows me to trace out some free space for myself onstage, where I can eventually develop a sense of intimacy in my new role as me. I can both greenhouse and cultivate emergent (hyper) sensitive shoots, which in due course can grow into psychosensual pleasure zones or cultural hotspots.

To cut a long, overgrown story short—to sever my elongated umbilicus—this central character, my ego, played by me, not only loses its opening lines, but also has no equipment installed in its mind to make sense or identify with the part named me. Me cannot just wander round central stage and mimic whatever the ASM or the stagehands happen to dictate. Me wants to be the part—a great existential problem for all potential actors. Me wants to get into and under the skin of the character in order to make sense of the role, and really feel the part. Me wants to be the business, the real thing, the genuine article. Me wants to generate the words within myself, give them my own inflection, make my own personal private sense of them, improvise, and sweep them along the sentence in my own direction. Me wants to be the sole author and director in my own head. But this character is already established and written in and out of the story. Me has seen the part specification, and me has already auditioned for it. Take a look at all those press clichés and cameo-clips. All me has to do now is identify with them. Look, it is all written down. Wherever it says ‘ego’ on the page or screen, just walk over cross-stage to that place and speak from it. I know that it is not yet my speak, and ‘ego’ is not necessarily the name I would choose to occupy, but give it a chance. You—the reflective side of me—will see. One day, I will not even realise that someone else designed this language way before the Advent, and gave it a substructure, a grammar, and set lines in which you—the reflective side of me—might make some sense to them (everyone else). It will not matter any more whether it is authentically real, your true story, exclusively scripted by you, in your personal character role as me or (my) ego. To say ‘I’ or ‘me’ will become second nature to you.

To help me get into role, and identify with my character, the directorial crew come up with an amazing piece of kit to facilitate my newborn progress along the odyssey, this journey of (self-)discovery: they invent the reflective mirror. Now mirrors do occur naturally. Obsidian, for example,