

# ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

**Book Review by Kevin Jones**

**Making Sense**

**Martin Stanton**

**Oxford. Phoenix Publishing House, ISBN 978-1-912691-55-5**

**ISSN: 2044-7221**

**Date of Publication: 16 March 2021**

**Citation:** Jones, K. (2021) Book Review: Making Sense by M. Stanton. *ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine* 12 (1). Available at: DOI 10.25602/GOLD.atol.v12i1.1501



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Are we being taken for a ride? Certainly. Stanton audaciously unzips and spills the traditions of radical psychoanalytic thought into the here and now, unleashing lines of flight from the vital forces of art, dream, humour and imagination into the therapeutic enterprise. Creating an 'incessant carnival of insane and inspired improvisation', (Chesterton 2007 in Beaumont 2020 p131) the book travels from the proverbial sublime to the ridiculous, but it is absolutely no joke. By taking the risk of 'joining a lineage of great works which mix up abstractions fit for an epic with fooleries not fit for a pantomime' (Chesterton 1909 in Beaumont 2020 p131) Stanton provides food for thought, puzzle and inspiration which will be welcomed by all therapists who are trying to make sense of a world that is increasingly out of order.

The book stokes a bonfire of the certainties, arguing the limits to the power of thought in understanding the thrills, spills and regressions of life. Instead, Stanton argues the importance of 'making sense' against the seductions of cognitive and instrumental reason. As an alternative, he gloriously reaffirms the twists and turns of free association, the spatial and temporal logics of the dream to help make sense of who we are and the lives we want to live.

Writing in a non-academic style he ironically mixes the everyday language of computing, social media and the self-help book alongside his idiosyncratic take on analytic and developmental theories in a series of highly original images and metaphor. Part fairy tale, part myth, here Odysseus jostles with a camel; a talking parrot and a flock of birds question the basis of instinct theory and the ambiguities of personal identity; Helen of Troy, Beatrice, a host of female muses and gender bending female Japanese Takarazuka theatre performers break free from the various man-oeuvres and stockades within which male desire would enclose them; a Chinese engineer/philosopher finds direction in life by inventing a lodestone magnetic compass but finds dreams point to his true direction home; and Dennis Potter and Orson Welles struggle with who is dreaming up whom in their authorial relationships with the women characters in their films. Stanton demonstrates a light touch that is equally at home with Greek, Chinese, Japanese and Welsh mythologies alongside the pleasures of the pinball machine as a metaphor for thought sparking randomly from buffer to buffer eventually plunging down into the space between helplessly flailing flippers; and the importance of full throated Karaoke in providing sublime soundtracks to the highs and lows of life.

If you are finding this all hard to swallow – it is! But I encourage you to read on. Stanton reminds us (p10 or thereabouts, I think) that although your preferred search engine will scatter a succession of red pins on the various themes, characters and locations in the book, the reassuring blue line of the direction finder will tangle and knot, unable to trip-advise on whether to walk, cycle or which bus, train or taxi to take. You will have to get down into the streets and follow your nose to make your way. ‘Making Sense’ will challenge and leave you with more questions than it answers but it will lead you down the slippery gristle of the umbilical cord and beyond the fluff in the navel of your dream.

The author of this imaginative tour de force, Martin Stanton, is a writer, teacher and psychoanalyst who both founded the first Centre for Psychoanalytic Studies at the University of Kent and founded and directed the Staff Counselling and Mediation service at University College London. He has been a visiting professor at the New School for Social Research in New York, Associate Research Fellow at the University of Cambridge and held senior clinical posts as a psychotherapist, counsellor and mediator within the NHS. As the author of several books including *Out of Order*, *Outside the Dream* and *Sandor Ferenczi, Reconsidering Active Intervention*, as well articles on art and aesthetics, he sparked the major revival of interest in the psychoanalytic work of Ferenczi and introduced the work of the French Psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche to the UK. ‘Making Sense’ grows out of his commitment to psychoanalysis and its engagement with the world outside of the institutional analytic context and the relationship between psychoanalytic thought, art making, language and the sensate body.

The roller coaster is the opening image, an example of how technology can be used to offer a managed experience of life’s thrills and spills, one that can be repeated again and again as long as you keep seated, follow the rules and fasten your seatbelts as instructed. The analogy is made with Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) which seeks to manage the highs and lows of experience through offering a set of charts, tick boxes, diagnostic categories and goals, technologies to shape the mind and offer a completed, socially sanctioned narrative of the ride of life. After the roller coaster stops, you get back on again and repeat the managed experience: but what if you come off the rails? Stanton invokes the ghost of Ronnie Laing as the uncanny double of the obsessional CBT technician, the

ubiquitous character of contemporary mental health services, to revive the radical alternative of supporting people on their journey through madness.

Homer's *Odyssey*, appears as the main metaphor driving the narrative of *Making Sense*. However, the story of Odysseus and his travels away from and back toward home is bent, split and broken open to release its cast of mythological characters into the modern world. Their adventures and misadventures illuminate both the historical contingency of the images and stories with which we pre-package experience to help us face our vulnerabilities in life, and the possibility of new stories contributing to creating change.

Appropriately enough it begins with an image of the stork, flying through a noxious looking green cloud, to deliver a baby in swaddling clothes. The infant is dropped into the stage set of its familial and social context, which is already providing backdrops, stage directions and various stories that may or may not provide the right sort of space from which the infant can direct their own life story. The family, harmonising its part in counterpoint to the basso profundo of Althusser's ensemble of ideological state apparatus, provide a lifelong series of voice overs, acceptable selfie images and pre scripted scenarios that will help draw a line between what is 'me' and what is 'not-me'. Despite this overwhelming mis-en-scene, Stanton argues that as the stork parachutes the infant in, the infant enjoys a moment of 'purity and openness that can never be constructed or enclosed by thought'. This moment of potential freedom is also reinforced by the assumption that the joy and anticipation of others at the infants birth will settle deep within the self and provide a covenant, an article of faith between infant and the world when life goes off the rails or takes a nosedive. Lucky the infant that is born into such a space, but Stanton leaves the question begging of what happens when the infant is not so welcomed into the world.

The therapist too, can be called upon to provide a preformed voiceover at life's tricky moments, provide prepacked explanations to guarantee that clients are sutured to dominant paradigms of healthy development and desirable life goals. Stanton, keeping to his own word, has made his own sense of psychoanalytic theory to imaginatively rework the usual suspects of id, ego and super ego to describe the infant's development of its internal 'Advent Sense Maker' from the in-pouring of impressions through the bodily senses and babel of competing voices which seek to give it advice. He evokes the larva of the Caddis fly, which creates a protective covering from debris on the bottom of the

rivers where it lives, to create a hard cocoon inside which it can develop into an adult. The artist Hubert Duprat placed Caddis larva in the bottom of a tank in which he had left small bits of broken jewellery and documented the larva as they constructed their cocoons from it. Duprat's images, reproduced in the book, show the resultant cocoons as an apt metaphor for the bricolage from which we create our own unique and jewel like identities from what we find around us and what is provided by the drift of the currents.

The caddis fly is of course the preferred bait for anglers to catch the elusive trout and via a detour through Schubert's Lieder 'The Trout', with its intimations of angling as a metaphor for the relationships between the sexes, we reach an analysis of 'Auld Lang Syne'. Famous as a blueprint for key moments of transition in life the song sets the stage for a discussion of the anxieties and uncertainties that arise in the transition from adolescence to adulthood for men and women. In an intriguing shift from first footing on the doorsteps of Scotland to a small Welsh village the relationship between a predominately silent Welsh Bard, Ifor, and his female helper Gwen, provokes a Suzanna and the Elders type scene in which the adolescent desires of the village boys are staged. In thrall to their own sexual curiosity and desire, and without guidance from the silent father figure of Ifor, the boys indulge a series of intrusive and objectifying fantasies about Gwen's beautiful naked figure. For the boys the effect is that they cannot be curious about Gwen as a person but only as a projected figure of pornographic fantasy for the fulfilment of their sexual desire. In despair at how her beauty becomes a barrier behind which she is invisible and beyond which men do not reach to ask what she feels, or about who she is, Gwen turns to the radio 1 DJ Fearne Cotton.

In a monologue directed at Fearne, who hosts a talk-in radio show for couples who are at a crossroads in the life of their relationships, Gwen gives voice to her despair until Fearne's quiet listening allows Gwen to let rip a cathartic scream, the top note of which morphs into Bjork singing 'Its oh so quiet'. The scene shifts again, this time to the odyssey and the impact of sexual difference on the relationships between men and women as experienced by Helen of Troy. Like Gwen, she experiences the isolation of being placed on a pedestal behind the screen of beauty, of being the occasion for male rivalries which ignore her own desire. The different subject positions allocated by men to women, the life model, the muse, the sexual or maternal woman, locate men's need to use women to make sense of their own desire and to allay their anxieties about achieving one of the

pre-scripted desired goals of life, to fall in love. While joking about what an older male like him can possibly have to say about women, Stanton nevertheless provides an image of Beatrice, muse of the Italian poet Dante, singing her own song inspired by the birds of the dawn chorus alongside a plea for a revolutionary form of love based on equality between the sexes.

The structure of the book enacts the process of sense making in the act of reading, forcing the reader to work through the free associative and dream like shifts between different locations in space and history. Frequent confusions of pronoun emphasise the potential for one character to be speaking, or inhabiting, several different subject positions at a time, and single characters might contain the kaleidoscopic condensation of several different characteristics and identifications. Time in the book's narrative mirrors that of analytical time, where the present takes us back to the past and then forward to the future in the Freudian effect of afterwardsness. The reinterpretation of the meaning of events in the past so that they erupt in the NOW of the present resists the closure of meaning. The future perfect tense, imagining looking back from the future at an expected to be completed action in the past, further destabilizes the fixed meaning of the present tense of narrative, keeping the present in tension with the future. The images, small but well produced, enter into a productive relation with the text commenting, illustrating or suggesting different meanings and as sensual entities in their own right.

The Bezoar stone provides an unlikely clue to making sense of the shifts and turns of this unpredictable text. Produced from undigested materials in the stomachs' of camels and other animals, the Bezoar is regurgitated and redigested several times until the ball is no longer nutritious, at which point it is finally expelled from the animal as a smooth stone. The materials involved in each period of digestion can be seen in the ball and the process stands as a remarkably visceral reworking of remembering, repeating and working through.

Although the book is in a straightforward way challenging to follow, there are areas of experience in the rollercoaster of life where the book is not making sense. Written on several different levels, colloquial, poetic, theoretical, I wondered if people would understand the dense reworking and development of analytic theory – the software running in the background? Would it also be unreasonable to suggest that there is a risk

of throwing out baby reason with the bath water and that the straw-person of CBT evoked here might deserve a more nuanced discussion - TBC?

The book critiques the effects of patriarchy on men and women, champions the independence of women and explores the fluidity of subject positions from which men and women can speak. However, the seats in the rollercoaster seem to be almost exclusively reserved for straight men and women. The front cover image captures something of the variety of textures and feel of images in the book but the woman holding an apple under the gaze of a parrot reinforces old tropes of sexuality and women - and why is it a naked woman and not a man? There was no making sense of the homoerotic, lesbian or gay, bisexual or trans experience. Nor a sense of wonder, curiosity, stirrings of envy perhaps for other enjoyments and no desire to make sense of sexuality in a non hetero normative world – what other Caddis configurations of equality and sexuality might we imagine in the future perfect? Similarly, sense making is framed in whiteness (whitesense?) - where are the black nudes to take their place alongside Bonnard's sensual images of Marie and of Beatrice by Dante Gabriel Rossetti or the front cover nude? Alongside the welcome references to Chinese and Japanese culture, was it not possible to similarly include writings and ideas based on black and diasporic experiences, the imagining of an afro futurist perfect sense? There are references to working class origins and 'the miners' which feel mainly nostalgic, not erupting into the NOW in a moment of afterwardsness to illuminate contemporary working class identities, or dreams of a future perfect socialist society. I've artificially isolated these three areas here when in reality all three are intimately bound, irrevocably interrelated. I anticipate these issues being re-digested and coughed up in the bezoar stone, the next volume of the trilogy mentioned in the text, a future perfect space to look back on these issues.

As I reader, in relation to the text, I felt in the position of a therapist being presented with masses of material, the unpredictable chaos of free association, the roots and rhizomes spreading between manifest and latent contents of the dream generating new material which meets recurring themes representing themselves in new forms, configurations and meanings to be remembered, repeated and worked through. As a reader, like a therapist, how are we to make sense of all this – poised, not reaching for the readymade, preformed, too quick answers, open to the questions being posed by the text, the frustrations of a text posing but not answering questions?

I enjoyed and can recommend the book for a number of reasons. It reads like a modernist novel that uses its form to bring to life therapeutic and philosophical issues in a series of dazzling images outside the genre of the academic case study. It reaffirms core psychodynamic and psychoanalytic concepts of free association and the dream in the context of public debate and health services dominated by the logics of austerity, psychology and CBT. In the current chaos of the pandemic and the immediate and pressing questions it raises, we are reminded that there will be no quick answers to the psychological consequences of the virus. Perhaps, rather than rushing too quickly to making sense, we need to respect and give time to the process of sense making among individuals, groups and communities.

### **About the Author**

Kevin Jones is currently a Senior Lecturer in Art Psychotherapy at Goldsmiths College, having recently finished his term as Head of Department for Social Therapeutic and Community Studies (STaCS) and previously been Head of Therapeutic Studies STaCS. He is also a Psychoanalytical Psychotherapist in private practice.

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