

Serendipity – the unexpected and unexpected;
not catastrophe, but happenstance or even fortunate coincidence

Wundersame Entdeckung unerwarteter Glücksfall

Serendipity

... or: **Desire's Serendipity?**

Does serendipity *characterize* desire or *act upon* desire?

If serendipity acts upon desire, does this create desire's serendipity? Like a form of contagion?

One thing I'm sure about: serendipity is not desire acting. My wish here today is to strengthen our sense of desire's passivity. I want to engage with the possibility that something *happens to* desire, rather than always positioning desire as the centre of control.

Serendipity puts desire beyond comparison. It used to be fashionable to categorize desire—as lesbian, gay, hetero, asexual, and so on—and to view it as partaking in regular/regulated processes—such as heteronormative reproduction. Thanks to serendipity, desire contains errant chances.

Serendipity disturbs established patterns of desire. It disrupts the characterization of desire as a longing or lack, as a force bound to certain objects or goals. It undermines desire as a mode of appropriation.

Yet desire's serendipity is not an opponent of patterns. An erring from the expected path can only happen once patterns of desire have been developed.

How then does desire become *receptive* to serendipity?

Is it helpful to acknowledge that desire is not mechanically triggered by an object, but rather depends on processes of mediation? Desire mediated by objects or fantasies, accompanied by sensations. Think Jessica Benjamin's "Third," which triangulates the relation of desire's subject and object. Think desire "traveling in images," as Elspeth Probyn puts it. Think desire unfolding in "shared fantasy scenarios," as Teresa de Lauretis theorizes.

Are these mediating objects, fantasies, and sensations *agents of serendipity*, like Judith Butler's lesbian phallus? Or are the mediators listed above *landing sites for serendipity* rather than agents of serendipity? Like Judith Butler's lesbian phallus? Or should we better say that serendipity interferes in the *process* of mediation?

If serendipity does interfere in the process of mediation, does it call for, engage with, or derive from these processes? ... call "for", engage "with", derive "from" THAT, which we cannot control, which angers, and scares and fascinates us ... desire.

Let us perhaps conclude that serendipity neither materializes in the object nor figures as a subject.

With this statement, I am deliberately straying from serendipity's genealogy. The English term *serendipity* was first coined by Horace Walpole in the eighteenth century. The term was inspired by a sixteenth-century Italian retelling of a traditional Sri Lankan fairy tale. In this

tale, serendipity is linked to subjects (namely, princes). These princely subjects discover something that they haven't searched for. They are lucky but are also equipped with cleverness and sagacity. They are non-intentional and not in control. But they are nevertheless the centre of attention.

This genealogy points to “discovery” rather than “happenstance” in its explanation of serendipity. But how can we consider serendipity having agency without this agency becoming functionalized and without this agency taking on the form of a grammatical subject?

Which leads me to pose the question: May happenstance actively reconfigure relations of power and desire? Or does happenstance engage the Third and open up unexpected paths for objects, fantasies, and sensations that mediate power and desire? Indeed, one version of the early fairy tale suggests this latter option: it tells of a princess who is not primarily interested in a particular prince, but rather in a “rare object” or “wonder.” This Third, when brought to her, might (or might not) qualify the deliverer to become her spouse.

Being attentive to serendipity's genealogy brings forth its entanglement with Christian missionary enterprises, colonial power, and heteronormativity. Taking these contexts into account radically shifts the meaning of serendipity as “fortunate happenstance.” Rather than opening up a space for the other, or even alterity, this past associates serendipity with subjugation, domination, and exploitation. When we consider serendipity in relation to desire, what then comes into view is the repression, control, and regulation of sexuality through religious and political powers.

Therefore, some doubt seems appropriate concerning the adjective “fortunate” that accompanies “happenstance.” In order to face—and possibly rework—historical violence, one needs to ask specifically: What powers does serendipity connect with? Whose luck, whose joy, and whose profit appears on stage? Does somebody have to pay a price? Or is it possible that, once in a while, happenstance turns out fortunate, joyful, and empowering for all parties involved?

While erring through the historical and material-symbolic conditions of desiring practices, it seems that there is no promise or automatic optimism that serendipity disrupts and reconfigures the histories of violence that define its linguistic origin. Yet, understood as a subjectless agent, serendipity provokes a reconceptualization of desire. It undermines the simplified and hierarchized model of subject desires object/object desires to be desired.

Serendipity opens up desire for events and eventuality beyond intentionality and control. Serendipity aligns with desire in its destabilizing effects on the subject.

Desire's serendipity invites the other, the other in oneself, and the other of the other (... or, multiplicity). This invitation goes along with pleasure and pain, and thus holds the potential to incite queer socialities, as Elizabeth Povinelli suggests. As *shared jouissance*, the simultaneity of pleasure and pain acknowledges the fact that the histories of violence in desiring relationships cannot be denied, but only embraced as their asymmetric condition.

Antke Engel