

Thanatos, Metonymy, Chaosis: Falling into Serendipity

Serendipitous epistemologies and economies of serendipity

To enter the epistemological dimension: one cannot plan with serendipity. But somehow one can count on it. Serendipity won't serve a defined objective. It won't fulfil a strategy. Still, it somehow reliably happens when the unexpected turns into an event.

Of course, in the broad discursive horizon, there is a very prominent narrative of serendipity: Darwin's theory that describes evolution as a non-teleological process, as a system of contingency. But in the narratives of discoveries, serendipities are mostly presented as exceptional. To offer quite different examples: the invasion of America and the creation of penicillin, LSD, and Viagra.

The first example especially demonstrates that serendipity doesn't automatically produce subversion. The invasion of America was the starting point for a long and violent history of colonisation. Serendipity might contest such powerful notions as causality, narrative linearity, and rational methodology, but in its ambiguous effects, it can equally prove useful for conservative forces. It might produce medicine like penicillin and substances like LSD that rocks reality psychedelically, but it can also create a pharmacopornographic icon like Viagra and open up new sexual battlefields. Serendipitous effects may be multiple, but they are certainly not always already subversive.

To shift to the history of capitalism: how does the serendipitous fit into capitalist logics? Serendipity doesn't seem to follow the capitalist narrative of progression. At the same time, serendipity contradicts the idea of materialist dialectics. Yet it appears as if capitalism has forsaken the idea of producing a grand narrative about itself. In this regard, serendipity might fit perfectly into a neoliberal narrative.

For instance, can we believe in the serendipity of Viagra, or is it just another entrepreneurial myth—a well-composed marketing strategy? And isn't it serendipitous to buy a commodity that you didn't even know you needed? Furthermore, serendipity can be useful for entrepreneurial ideas of creative knowledge and competitive intelligence, as well as for adventurous business ventures and the accumulation of unexpected surplus value. Thus, the question becomes how can we use the idea of serendipity without risking a fall into a discourse of neoliberal social Darwinism, where flexibility, mobility, adaptability are essential for the entrepreneurial self? Maybe the answer relies simply on the only solid ideological statement neoliberalism seems to make: that there is no alternative to neoliberalism.

Somatic serendipity and fetishistic desire

Serendipity might be understood as an epistemological concept that undermines grand narratives of research, capitalism, and desire. It does not evoke notions of totality, unity, and wholeness. It does not try to follow a business plan or fulfil a fixed research objective. Rather, it guides us associatively from one unexpected discovery to another. Hence, serendipity works in a metonymical mode, and it proceeds metonymically without referring to wholeness.

How can we think serendipity as a metonymic operation in the light of desire? Desiring can also be defined as metonymic. The most prominent example of this line of thinking is Jacques Lacan, who grasped desire in the signifying chain of metonymies. Yet, leaving aside his canonical model of desire, I follow another theoretical strand that focuses on desire as *in itself* fetishistic. According to this body of work, desire attaches itself less to the whole of a person, and more to a detail that evokes an endless chain of associations without inevitably signifying. In this sense, desire undoes the fictional wholeness of the desired other. It undermines the idea of a bodily unity, of an imaginary morphology of wholeness. In desiring the body's unity is being undone, thus, somatic serendipity is operating. If desire attaches itself in a fetishistic way, the imaginary bodily unity falls apart in the appearance of an assemblage.

In this perspective, serendipity operates as a modality of desire. Desire in its serendipitous mode is the desire that doesn't fit into the frame, that doesn't follow the libido economic line. As Félix Guattari states, Lacan's signifier chains desire to linearity, reducing it to discursive articulations. But if desire is not reducible to discursive articulations, it manifests in multiple ways that cannot be captured in modes of causality, linearity, or teleology. Hence, desire and serendipity play with the dynamics of contingency and opacity.

To return to the question of capitalism: If neoliberalism claims that there is no alternative to itself, what happens to desire in its serendipitous mode? What happens to the desire for contingent futurity and for open futures?

Thanatos and chaosmosis

In the end of his writing on *Chaosmosis*, Guattari states that there are two options to envision futurity. One option is to state that the game will always already be lost. The other option is to believe that everything can start all over again, that the world can be constructed in other dimensions. Hence, for Guattari, there are two ways of figuring the future: a nihilistic way and a chaosmotic, or serendipitous, way. There is the choice between mechanical certainty and creative uncertainty, as Guattari puts it.

The causality of the eternal return follows Freud's idea of the thanatological repetition. In contrast, the contingency of creative uncertainty is driven by machines of desire. Guattari juxtaposes the circular causality of the death drive on one hand and the chaosmotic contingency of serendipity on the other. But in my perspective, it might also be the unpleasant or even painful surprise of the death drive that embraces serendipity. In this perspective, the death drive can be understood as a destructive, a deconstructive force that enables the fetishistic desire to fragment, to deharmonize unity and coherence, and thus to evoke creative uncertainty.

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