

Desire and Serendipity

I will start out with Horace Walpole's characterization of serendipity: 'making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things they were not in quest of'.¹ I'd like to focus especially on the last phrase 'things they were not in quest of' and emphasize that this phrase goes beyond simply highlighting contingency, chance, accident, or happenstance. Serendipity – as I understand it – is not about finding by chance the solution to a problem or project with which one has been struggling. Instead, it is about finding an answer to a question one didn't even have. That is, not only the answer is new, but also the question, and insofar as one can align quest and desire, I'd suggest defining serendipity in our context as *finding something without desiring it*.

Since there are different conceptions of desire, I should perhaps specify that I tend to use desire in a transitive or teleological sense, that is, desire as desire for something. This is what serendipity seems to exclude, while it certainly allows for something of the order of a blind drive without fixed objects, though perhaps still with an aim: to find and discover something that is the occasion of pleasure in a general sense. I'll come back to this, but let me just say for now that for me there is a sense in which the expression 'to call on desire's serendipity' (which we have used in the description of our lecture series) shifts emphasis from desire to pleasure: from desiring and pursuing what we imagine to be a source of pleasure to wandering about aimlessly and discovering by chance possibilities of pleasure and satisfaction – pleasures, which we may then continue to desire, or also desires which we enjoy having.

Why would one valorize such chance experiences beyond desire? There are several reasons, and while especially in science one worries that desired results are delusions, in critical theory, there is the insight that desire cannot be the starting point of critique since it is not a given, innate essence, but socially determined or at least structured. Desire can thus be suspected to reproduce the social order even when it seems to resist or transgress this order. In other terms, there is a suspicion against liberalism's approach of starting with individuals and their desires in order to achieve a transformation of the social order.

It's a bit of a paranoid view,² and a counter-position could be that desire is not *fully* determined by the social order and that there is, for instance, something of the order of the body that can resist. This doesn't necessarily mean taking an essentializing view as one can consider the body to be (in)formed by chance relations, affects, etc. In fact, one can invoke

¹ Horace Walpole, letter to Sir Horace Mann, Arlington Street, Jan. 28, 1754. <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/4610/pg4610.html>. Cf. also Pek van Anandel and Danièle Bourcier, *De la sérendipité: dans la science, la technique, l'art et le droit; leçons de l'inattendu* (Paris: Hermann, 2013), p. 9: 'la capacité de découvrir, d'inventer, de créer ou d'imaginer quelque chose de nouveau sans l'avoir cherché, à l'occasion d'une observation surprenante qui a été expliquée correctement'. For further definitions, see <http://serendip.brynmawr.edu/serendip> (accessed 17 March 2015).

² In the sense of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You', in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham and London: Duke Univ Press, 2003), pp. 123-51.

serendipity here from the perspective of the social order, which finds desires ‘it’ wasn’t in quest of: the social order formed, constituted, and finds desires that it didn’t ‘desire’. Still, the suspicion remains that defining a quest – articulating a desire, however transformative it may be – remains bound to the order in which it is articulated and inadvertently tends to reproduce it.

Better then, perhaps, to embrace erring and encounter the unexpected without knowing and desiring it in advance. This is, in a way, the wager we have taken, here at the ICI Berlin, with our current core project *ERRANS*, which seeks to explore the potentials and risks of engaging in such errantry.³ To tease out the potential of errantry no doubt requires to be attuned to the unexpected and its opening up of possibilities – to exercise a kind of alert passivity or active receptivity. With these paradoxical formulations I’d like to approach immediately a risk that I see in the notion of serendipity, namely that it may resolve all-too quickly the paradoxes that it mobilizes. Why, I’d like to ask, does serendipity have such a seemingly self-evident positive connotation, being indeed also defined as a fortunate or even happy happenstance?

It seems clear that the discovery can be good or bad, have good or bad consequences. While it is important to emphasize this, there are ways to allow for such alternatives and still highlight the predominance of happy encounters. Within a radically immanent, (new) materialist post-subject perspective inspired by Spinoza as read by Deleuze,⁴ for instance, good encounters are recognized by their pleasure or joy and understood to increase power (in the sense of ‘potentia’ rather than ‘potestas’ – ‘Vermögen’ rather than ‘Macht’); they are therefore more stable, re-enforce themselves, and favour the emergence of powerful assemblages of activity. Bad encounters, by contrast, have less power to persist and are effectively avoided.

On the other hand, from a different perspective leaving more space for critical reflection, one may contest that random encounters naturally drift towards ever greater pleasure and power, as if guided by an ‘invisible hand’. One would be as suspicious of pleasure as a selection criterion as one was of desire.⁵ However on what basis can the judgment of a discovery be made if one does not want to re-introduce a notion of a strong subject following established norms?

The basic issue is perhaps the ‘talent’ of discovery, which definitions of serendipity often highlight and which seems to suggest that something more is required than just having an unexpected experience: the experience also needs to be actively turned into a discovery. Often, especially in scientific contexts, this means recognizing the unexpected as an answer to a project of which one is aware even if one wasn’t pursuing it. This can be important but will not get us out of the existing order. However, one can also imagine discovering something

³ <https://www.ici-berlin.org/errans/project-description/> (accessed: March 2015).

⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (New York: Zone Books, 1990 [1968]).

⁵ As pleasure appears less socially determined and constructable than desire, it seems indeed even more crucial and critical to ask about the social production not only of objects of pleasure but also of the very experience of pleasure.

that doesn't fit existing frameworks, categories, and distinctions, and that doesn't merely require their expansion, but something akin to what Thomas Kuhn calls a scientific revolution.⁶ Yet, the question remains whether the 'talent' of making such a discovery doesn't involve making the unexpected intelligible within the current order by identifying a quest or desire to which it provides an answer.

What I am getting at here is that the language of discovery in the notion of serendipity risks re-establishing teleological norms of productivity and progress. Indeed, it could seem that insisting on contingency and discoveries of what was not desired only temporarily suspends norms of productivity and progress in order to re-instate them even more forcefully. But I'd like to suggest that there is also a less paranoid – but not necessarily reparative – way of thinking about serendipity by focussing on the paradoxical pleasures this notion contains: what I mean is that an unexpected experience defying existing frameworks, categories, and distinctions can be expected to generate a paradoxical pleasure insofar as the experience also defies existing distinctions between pleasure and pain. To turn such an experience into a discovery by resolving the paradox through a narrative of conversion and progress from one organization of pleasure to another is a well-tested option (I'm thinking of the narrative paradigm of the *Bildungsroman*, for instance). However, it is not without alternatives and one could also speak of a 'discovery' when an intense, paradoxical experience is effectively communicated without being integrated into a known order (and by communication I don't necessarily mean in language, but also e.g. through affective contagion).

To conclude, I'd want to call on serendipity as the errant discovery of what's neither desired beforehand nor retroactively mobilized for a quest for productivity, growth, and progress. Instead, I'd want to call on serendipity as the errant discovery of pleasures that defy categories and distinctions, that therefore appear paradoxical and can form the basis for different organizations of pleasure, desire, and activity. What is discovered here is both an impasse and an opening – an impasse for actions guided by the pleasure principle, as well as an impasse of understanding and conceptualization, but at the same time an opening of different possibilities. As such, such errant discoveries can be understood as providing the ground for political negotiations without presupposing strong notions of active subjects guided by norms.

Christoph F.E. Holzhey

QUEER
institut für queer theorie

ici
BERLIN KULTURLABOR
INSTITUTE FOR CULTURAL INQUIRY

Roundtable Input Feb 04, 2015, ICI Berlin
desire_Transgresses_desire_Conserves_desire

⁶ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions: With an Introductory Essay by Ian Hacking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012 [1962]).