

Cultures of Chance: Accident, Error, and Catastrophe in Literature and Culture from 1960 to the Present

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Metaphors of chance and the accidental can be said to dominate the post-'45 period of literature and art. In a postwar period characterized by fragmentation, with a backdrop of the new science of uncertainty and the emergence of chaos theory, scientific and cultural disciplines move towards an interest in the competing forces of order and disorder. Indeed, postmodernism itself can be understood as part of this shift, as culture moves away from a modernist mourning for lost meaning and instead begins to articulate an affinity with indeterminism and uncertainty. Novels are broken up to become shuffleable; in the visual arts artists work with found objects, and with paint thrown randomly onto canvases; John Cage and Samuel Beckett let the accidental determine the precepts of their artistic composition.

In the period from 1960s to the present, then, chance and the accident become fundamental to cultural production, and this course will investigate the extent to which this is particularly true of post-1960 literature and literary theory. We will read texts that take aleatory precepts as central organizing factors (the shuffleable narrative of B.S. Johnson, the collage novels of Kathy Acker, the ludic experimentation of Nabokov and Calle, the collisions, crashes and catastrophes of Ballard and McCarthy) and explore concepts such as *jouissance* and the clinamen. In doing so we will discuss the extent to which the commonly held crisis of representation that seems to take place in this period is fundamentally a crisis of uncertainty, as Robert Coover writes: 'All of us today are keenly aware that we are undergoing a radical shift in sensibilities. We are no longer convinced of the *nature* of things, of design as justification. Everything seems itself random.'

Week 1: Introduction. Please read Samuel Beckett, *Lessness*. Images, music and text excerpts from a selection of artists/writers provided in class.

Week 2: aleatory narrative. B.S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates*

Week 3: Ludic literature. Please read Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*; images and text from Sophie Calle, *Double Game* provided in class, as the book is quite expensive!

Week 4: accidental texts. Please read J.G. Ballard, *Crash*; Kathy Acker, *Blood and Guts in High School*.

Week 5: 21st century Catastrophe. Please read Tom McCarthy, *Remainder*; Critical excerpts from Paul Virilio provided; William Basinski, *Disintegration Loops* [available on YouTube, please listen in advance]

Further Reading

Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (London: Hill & Wang, 1980)

Ross Chambers, *Loiterature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999)

Joseph M Conte, *Design and Debris: A Chaotics of Postmodern American Fiction* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2002)

Jacques Derrida, 'My Chances/Mes Chances: A Rendezvous with some Epicurean Stereophonies', in *Taking Chances: Derrida, Psychoanalysis and Literature*, eds. Joseph H Smith and William Kerrigan (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984)

Raymond Federman, *Critifiction: Postmodern Essays* (New York: SUNY Press, 1993)

Ross Hamilton, *Accident* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007)

Catherine Malabou, *The Ontology of the Accident* (London: Polity Press, 2012)

Jerry A. Varsava, *Contingent Meanings: Postmodern Fiction, Mimesis, and the Reader* (Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1990).

Paul Virilio, *The Original Accident* (London: Polity Press, 2005)