

Creativity and Contingency

Research Project

Karin Kukkonen (University of Oslo)

k.b.kukkonen@ilos.uio.no

What might happen but might just as well not come to pass, that is, the contingent, is integral to the ways in which writers try out elements of narrative, word choices, etc. A writer's "contingency plan" does not primarily aim to minimise the unexpected but to put it to productive use. In this project I investigate how literary authors work with contingency in the creative process and what strategies they deploy to shape possibilities. The project looks into historical representations of the creative process in literature, manuscript evidence and interviews with authors themselves.

At the beginning of modern authorship in Europe stand, among other institutions, the seventeenth-century salons. In these salons rules were devised for creative games that led, most famously, to La Rochefoucauld's maxims. However, these creative games also led to novel-length experiments, which can be found in the novels of Madeleine de Scudéry and the *Chroniques du samedi*, in the novels of Charles Sorel and his *Maison des jeux*, and in Rose-Charlotte de la Force's *Les jeux d'esprit*. This case study will be explored in the context of the ALEA project: (Con)figurations artificielles du hasard (2019-2021).

Link: Blog entry on the ALEA website. <https://hasard.hypotheses.org/3891>

Manuscripts similarly allow me to trace how authors work with contingency in the creative process. Frances Burney, for example, used little snippets of paper with individual lines to configure the dialogue of her tragedies. I have investigated this practice in the project *How the Novel Found its Feet* (OUP, 2019). Through the manuscripts, notebooks and correspondences available from Mary Shelley and Emile Zola, I will investigate related strategies for contingency and their place in sequences and protocols of writing. These contingency plans stand in dialogue with the modern organisation of knowledge in encyclopedias, experimental methods and bureaucratic rationalisation, which are reshaped by these authors in the creative process.

Interviews with living authors provide the third avenue of investigation. Authors writing in English, German, French and Norwegian will be interviewed. Here, writer's materials and epistemic protocols can be discussed with the authors themselves, exploring in particular the borderline between predicted and unpredicted possibilities in writers' contingency plans. My previous monograph *Probability Designs* (OUP, 2020) conceptualised the form of literary texts as a design for readers' predictions and probabilistic assessments. In *Creativity and Contingency*, I investigate the materials, protocols and practices that bring forth such probability designs. The project takes discussions of creativity in literary studies beyond debates about intentionality and genius, drawing on historically situated case studies and developing a more general theoretical model.