



# Contingency traps: the role of form in creative processes

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## Abstract

Literary texts are already written before they get read, and they are therefore not subject to chance in the same way as encounters in everyday life. However, at the same time, these texts often manage to evoke a strong sense in readers that the events they read about could have turned out otherwise. I propose the notion of the “contingency trap” as a conceptual tool to address this theoretical challenge. This article addresses how authors deploy form in the creative process to integrate contingency in their texts and make it available to their readers in reading. Two interviews with Gwenaëlle Aubry about her essay *Saint Phalle* serve as the first case study, and her account is contrasted and compared with an analysis of Italo Calvino’s reflections on contingency in literary narrative with particular focus on his *Il Castello dei destini incrociati* (The Castle of Crossed Destinies, 1973). These authors’ insights into the creative process will then be complemented by research on cognitive processes related to literary creativity in order to sketch a more general theoretical understanding of how form works as a contingency trap.

**Keywords** Creativity · Contingency · Italo Calvino · Gwenaëlle Aubry · Special Issue · Theorising Chance

## Introduction: writing with tarot cards

Form is often considered to be a constraint for the creative process. A look into the creative process suggests, however, that form may instead be necessary to maintain a sense that things do not have to be the way they are, that is, a sense of contingency. Our investigation draws on how authors imagine the creative process (Italo Calvino) and how they remember it in an interview (Gwenaëlle Aubry). We begin November

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2021, at a performance at the Maison de la Poésie in Paris. Two women stand on stage. One is holding a deck of tarot cards, and the other one chooses a card. Declaring the name of the card to the audience, the author Gwenaëlle Aubry continues her performance of her essay *Saint Phalle* (2021a). This is more than a mere reading of the essay, not only because Aubry chooses to perform passages from her text together with an actress and musical accompaniment. The choice of the card, “tirage” in French, initiates the performance of the next passage. Chance and destiny, embodied in the deck of tarot cards, enters the stage.

In her essay, Aubry engages with the life and work of the artist Niki de Saint Phalle. Saint Phalle became famous through her “tirs,” where she would shoot, “tirer” in French, at balloons filled with paint in order to create patterns contingent on how the paint spatters. Towards the end of her life, Saint Phalle was commissioned to create the “Parco dei tarocchi” in Italy, where little inhabitable pavilions inspired by the arcana of the tarot deck are spread out in the landscape. Arcana, such as the “Tower,” “The Hanged Man” and “The Popess,” provide the structure along which we move through Saint Phalle’s life and creative work along with Aubry’s narrating voice in her essay *Saint Phalle*. Saint Phalle chooses chance as the ignition point in her creative work in both modes of the action of “tirer.”

During our first interview, Aubry explains the device of the tarot cards was the key to the structure of the essay:

Le livre a bifurqué et en même temps, je savais que cette bifurcation était essentiellement fidèle à la fois à la structure du livre et à la règle du ‘jeu.’ C’est à partir de là, en fait, que j’ai vraiment appliqué la règle du tir— la règle du tir, c’est à dire la grande règle du ‘jeu’ de Saint Phalle. (Aubry 2021b)

The book had forked in two directions simultaneously. I knew that this forking was essentially faithful to the structure of the book and the rule of the “game.” From this starting point, then, I have applied the rule of the shot in earnest—“la règle du tir,” which is the great rule of the “game” Saint Phalle plays.<sup>1</sup>

Drawing cards from a tarot deck, as well as presenting them in sequence to signal the starting points of sections in the essay, indicates a particular protocol for *Saint Phalle* in Aubry’s performance. It evokes chance, because the sequence of cards that get drawn is normally not fixed, but it also evokes destiny, because tarot cards are a cultural tool to render perceptible the path that life is going to take in the near and more distant future. The deck of tarot cards is the form that encodes chance and destiny in Aubry’s essay and makes reflections on contingency, that is, on what need not be, available to readers. Contingency is trapped in the structures, protocols and constraints of literary form—apparently annulled through the finalised written form, but still resonating from within it.

Theorising chance and contingency is a challenge for literary studies. On the one hand, literary texts are already written before they get read, and they are therefore not subject to chance in the same way as encounters in everyday life. Only in the

<sup>1</sup> All translations are by Karin Kukkonen, unless otherwise noted. The interviews with Aubry (2021b, 2022) are not paginated.

performative context can Aubry actually make the sequence of the passages she reads contingent on the draw of the card. On the other hand, literary texts often manage to evoke a strong sense in readers that the events they read about could have turned out otherwise. I propose the notion of the “contingency trap” as a conceptual tool to address this theoretical challenge. I will approach chance from the angle of the creative process. At the moment of writing, narrative sequences in a novel, even the individual choice of words, are indeed contingent, that is, not pre-determined and not necessarily happening in a particular way, because authors can choose to re-write or change them before the novel goes into print. In this article, I will address how authors deploy form in the creative process to integrate contingency in their texts and make it available to their readers in reading. My two interviews with Gwenaëlle Aubry about her essay *Saint Phalle* (2021b, 2022) are my first case study. The interaction between the tarot deck and literary narrative is also explored in Italo Calvino’s reflections on contingency in *Il castello dei destini incrociati* (*The castle of crossed destinies*, 1973), which will furnish my second case study. Aubry only read Calvino after she made an initial draft for *Saint Phalle*, and as we shall see, they arrive at different ways to configure contingency through form. These authors’ insights into the creative process will then be complemented by research on cognitive processes related to literary creativity in order to sketch a more general theoretical understanding of how form works as a contingency trap.

## Image, organisation and creativity

Calvino deploys tarot cards in his *Castle of crossed destinies* as the starting point for a series of short narratives, told by travellers in said castle. The travellers start drawing tarot cards and placing them on the communal table in order to entertain themselves. Calvino chooses to present the entertainment with a twist, however. The travellers do not predict their futures through laying out the tarot cards but tell each other about their pasts. While cartomancy, that is, fortune-telling through playing cards, aims to predict the future in a mode as “predictable” as possible, based on a shared meaning, Calvino chooses to tease out the “maximum unpredictability” from these cards, as Maria Corti observes (“maximum d’imprévisibilité permis par les codes de la cartomancie”; 1973, p. 35). Indeed, Calvino repurposes the tarot cards as a combinatorial game to generate stories through the chance, or more precisely, the possibility of drawing one card rather than another.

The beginning of *The Castle* recalls the frame narrative, the “cornice” of Boccaccio’s *Decameron* or Marguerite de Navarre’s *Heptaméron*, posing as a novella collection. Calvino’s travellers start with a card that represents a figure. “Tutti notamo la somiglianza tra il suo viso e quella della figura [...] che con quella carta egli voleva dire ‘io’” (p. 8; We all note the resemblance between his face and that of the image [...] that, through this card, he wanted to say “I”). The cards become a tool of narration, replacing in fact the narrative voice through which the travellers would tell their stories. The narrators never say “I,” nor anything else for that matter, as these are not stories to be told, but to be assembled and “read out” by means of the cards.

The narrator features as an “interpreter of cards,” as Gretchen Busl puts it (2012, p. 811). Busl links *The castle of crossed destinies* not to the written tradition of the *Decameron* but to the shared project of oral storytelling, as conceptualised by Walter Benjamin in his essay “Der Erzähler.” Through such a reading of the cards, Busl writes, “Calvino manages to give the fixed novel a mutability, an infinitude of retelling and rewriting, that links it to folklore and oral storytelling” (p. 813). While “an infinitude of retelling and rewriting” certainly is a key feature in *The Castle*, it is not obvious that this depends on the orality of popular storytelling, because none of the storytellers says a word. As Gian Paolo Renello puts it, in *The Castle* “il mondo è indicibile” (The world is unspeakable; 2005, p. 216). Indeed, it appears to me that Calvino, who elsewhere certainly engages with oral storytelling traditions, here derives the effect of “multiplicity” of variants from the combinatory nature of the tarot cards that depends on their discrete nature as images. The images, as I will argue, have a particular role to play in Calvino’s reflection on the creative process.

Aubry’s book-length essay *Saint Phalle* does not have any images, even though it engages with a visual artist. As she says in one of our interviews, Aubry chooses instead a verbal alternative: “Il fallait– c’était l’un des enjeux artistiques du livre– trouver un équivalent littéraire de son langage optique. Il fallait que ce soient les mots, la phrase, les rythmes qui suscitent les images.” (2021b; I needed to find a literary equivalent to her optical language—the artistic stakes lay there for me. It was necessary that it was the words, sentences, rhythms that created these images). When reflecting on her creative process more generally, Aubry underlines that she does not move immediately to language, however.

Ils sont construits, mais c’est une construction très ouverte, pleine de trous et de blancs. Ça dépend pour chaque livre, mais j’aurai par exemple, pour tel chapitre de *La Folie Elisa*: ‘Ariane. Jeux avec Peter. L’île et la rue.’ Quelques mots, des couleurs, des motifs, mais rien d’écrit. Je n’ai pas de bâti, juste une architecture sans assemblage [...] Et justement, j’ai besoin d’écrire de façon linéaire et continue parce que je sais que quelque chose va se tisser, se tramer, qui n’était pas d’emblée construit [...] On sait que le livre va exister parce que vient un moment où ce qu’on a écrit acquiert sa propre puissance de propulsion. (Aubry 2021b)

These are constructed, but in a very open mode of construction, full of holes and gaps. It depends on the individual book, but for example for the chapter in *La Folie Elisa*, I had the following note. “Ariane. Games with Peter. The island and the road.” Some words, colours, motifs but nothing written out. I do not have buildings, just an architecture that still needs to be assembled [...] And I exactly have need to write in a linear and sustained fashion because I know that something will weave itself, will emplot itself, which was not constructed straightaway [...] One knows that the book will come into existence because a moment comes when what one has written gains its proper propulsive drive.

Aubry does not write immediately, putting her thoughts into words, but instead collects and constructs an “architecture” with notes and ideas. The writing process, then, proceeds chapter by chapter. Aubry does not stress the combinatory nature of the

multiple possible stories, as Calvino does, but describes a rather organic process. The writing itself develops, according to Aubry, its own propulsion, that she describes as “ballistic” elsewhere in the interview. This process is linear and no longer tied to the discrete notes that make up elements of the architecture.

Even though both authors approach the creative process rather differently, images serve to suspend verbalisation for both of them. Calvino chooses to begin his narrative from the images of the tarot cards—even his narrators do not verbalise their own stories. It is only on the level of the main narration of the cornice constellation that Calvino puts these stories into words. Aubry begins with an “architecture” of concepts, colours and notes, or indeed the arrangement of sculptures in a park, well before she moves into the writing process.

Putting things into words has an effect on many other cognitive processes. It seems that you remember a face worse if you are asked to describe in words immediately when you see it (Schooler & Engstler-Schooler, 1990; Schooler, 2014). Your memory for taste is similarly distorted if you need to verbalise the sense impression (Melcher & Schooler, 1996), as is spatial orientation (Fiore & Schooler, 2002). And, particularly relevant for creativity, if you need to narrate your thoughts while attempting to find a solution to a problem, your solution will be less innovative (Schooler et al., 1993). Jonathan Schooler, the psychologist behind many of these studies, explains such “verbal overshadowing” through the different kinds of memory at play. Verbalisation commits a sense impression to memory, which may be less accurate than our memory for taste or for images. If we need to “think out loud” while solving a problem, “verbal overshadowing” ties creative cognition to the linguistic track.

For writers like Calvino and Aubry, verbal overshadowing might mean that the fluidity and richness of visual and other impressions in the early phases of the creative process would be unduly limited by putting them into words instead of tarot cards, sketches or loose architectures. Indeed, Schooler et al. (1993) suggest that insight processes are particularly impaired by verbalisation, and that participants are unable to verbalise thought just before the “sudden reorganisation” of an aha-moment of insight. Both Calvino’s posthoc aesthetisation of his vision of the creative process and Aubry’s reflections on her writing point in this direction. What then, is the role of images in the creative process beyond the suspension of verbalisation? The evidence suggests configuring images enables the organisation of variants, which eventually prepares the emergence of form.

Calvino’s *Castle of crossed destinies* points towards two aspects of the creative process which are often considered separately: image and organisation. The images lie at the bottom of the story. It is from the visual similarities (in the case of the narrators) and from the associations that certain cards evoke (in the case of narrative events) that these stories unfold.<sup>2</sup> We see a similar tendency towards placing images

<sup>2</sup> Calvino had been commissioned to write the text as an accompaniment to the unique Visconti deck of tarot cards represented on the pages of the novel, as he writes in his preface (2015, vi), so it is not surprising that these stories appear to emerge from the cards. However, Calvino then also goes on to write a second part with “The tavern of crossed destinies,” repeating the same process with the commonplace Marseille deck of tarot cards figuring major narratives of world literature, including Faust, Hamlet and Parsifal. (Indeed, Calvino even had a third iteration planned with “The motel of crossed destinies,” where the images would be taken from comics; see Calvino, 2015a, p. xi).

at the origin of narrative also in other authors. Aubry, as indicated in the opening to this article, finds the “règle du tir,” encoded in the tarot cards, which gives shape to the essay *Saint Phalle*. In our first interview, she also recalls that she needed a formal constraint to give shape to her novel *La folie Elisa* (2018). “Si on n’invente pas une forme nouvelle, on n’ouvre pas sa propre porte dans le réel. On n’a pas sa clef, on n’a pas sa prise, on n’a pas sa saisie. Et il se trouve qu’Elisa est l’anagramme, le palindrome, même, du mot ‘asile’.” (2021b. If one does not invent a new form, one does not open one’s personal door to the real. One does not have one’s key, one does not have a hold, one does not have one’s grip. And it turns out that Elisa is the anagram, even the palindrome [sic] of the word “asylum.”) The formal element of shifting the letters enables Aubry to entwine setting, characters and a conceptual structure for the novel as a whole. That process, however, is only possible once you see the words as images on a page whose elements, the letters, can be reconfigured.

The order of the images is significant as well, and in Calvino it emerges from the ways in which the cards are placed on the table. In the process of laying the cards on the table, the interpretation of each card limits the interpretation of the following cards because they need to be read in the frame of the developing story, as Emma Kalafenos points out (2003, p. 52; see also Corti, 1973, p. 44). For Kalafenos, it “demonstrates the polysemy of the image and the effect of who is viewing on what is seen” (2003, p. 56). Indeed, the tarot cards could be considered as precursors to the sparser structure that Calvino presents for *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore* (*If on a winter’s night a traveller*; 1979) in his essay “Comment j’ai écrit un de mes livres” (1983; “How I have written one of my books”). Here, Calvino reproduces a series of Greimasian squares revealing the conceptual structure behind each chapter in the novel. The mechanism itself is outlined in a visual structure in the arrangement of multiple Greimasian squares (see Greimas 1976). Ten years after *The castle of crossed destinies*, Calvino generalises narrative order and abstracts from the images. Even though Berkman (2017) rightly points out that on the basis of existing manuscript evidence it is not likely that this sequence was decided *before* Calvino started the writing process, it is clear that an underlying mechanism that unfolds in a quasi-cybernetic way underlies Calvino’s imagination of the creative process.

Through “Comment j’ai écrit...” Calvino inscribes his novel into the theoretical context of the Oulipo experiments and French structuralism and which, I would add, suited his imagination of the creative process and the importance of form as a combinatorial tool particularly well. Like the Oulipian essay, *The castle of crossed destinies* is a “construction génétique *a posteriori*” (a posthoc genetic construction; Berkman, 2017, p. 182). The images on the tarot cards themselves are polysemous and only gain limited meaning as they are integrated into a narrative sequence. However, the semantic potential of the images also opens again when the next story begins. The collective nature of the narrative situation in *The Castle* invites re-using the cards and ascribing a different meaning to them. The tarot cards turn into a combinatorial game through the discrete nature of the images and the ways in which they can be ordered and reordered in multiple narratives. Aubry’s performance works similarly as a posthoc “genesis” of *Saint Phalle*, where she enacts the multiple possible trajectories across the “Parco dei tarocchi” which structures the essay through the drawing of tarot cards.

## Combinatory games and variants

More and more narrators lay down their cards in Calvino's *The castle of crossed destinies*, building on previous sequences and expanding their own series, until a tapestry of tarot cards emerges on the table. The same cards are integrated into at least two sequences, acquiring different meanings and different associations, as they are repurposed for another story. The last story then places the two final cards in the middle of this tapestry. These are the “Madman” and the “Moon.” Calvino thereby positions Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* in the centre of the narrative weave, because Orlando famously goes mad and because Astolfo needs to travel to the moon in order to retrieve Orlando's wits from there. Maria Vittoria Pugliese calls the offer for structuration made by *Orlando furioso* “la funzione Ariosto” (2008, p. 106). Ariosto's famously complex threading of multiple narrative strands in *Orlando furioso* is realised through his central position in *The castle of crossed destinies*. Berkman identifies it as a “clinamen,” “a deviation from the strict consequences of a restriction” (*Oulipo Compendium*, qtd. in Berkman, 2020, p. 256). The open structure of Ariosto comes to “destabilise [Calvino's] geometrical structure” (p. 265). The choice also reflects, of course, the role that Ariosto has for Calvino's own development as a writer.<sup>3</sup>

The story of Orlando in *The Castle* is followed by the final “Tutte le altre storie,” when the entire tarot deck has already been placed on the table, and new narrators can only choose which card sequence to follow. As Renello remarks, “una volta compreso il meccanismo che regola la costruzione del testo, ogni altra storia è automaticamente e virtualmente presente” (Once the mechanism that rules the construction of the text has been understood, every other story is automatically and virtually present; p. 212). At the moment when the first card is laid, in other words, the construction begins and every possible story comes into virtual existence as “the” story is built. As Calvino himself writes, “All'esterno infatti non si danno né racconto né destini” (p. 106; Outside [of the tarot cards] actually neither narrative nor destinies are available”). Certain formal containments are necessary for a narrative, but these then also provide the structure within which all possible stories are entailed.

Authors can continue to play through contingency in narrative after the creative process has been completed by signalling alternative developments. In *The castle of crossed destinies*, Calvino chooses repetition with a difference as his strategy to explore alternative developments. He adds a second tarot sequence with “The tavern of crossed Destinies.” In his presentation of *The Castle*, Calvino writes about the impossibility to free himself from the interpellation of the narrative's possibilities before it goes into print. “Se mi decido a pubblicare *La taverna dei destini incrociati* è soprattutto per liberarmene. Ancora adesso, col libro in bozze, continuo a rimetterci le mani, a smontarlo, a riscriverlo. Solo quando il volume sarà stampato ne resterò fuori una volta per tutte, spero.” (p. xi. If I decide to publish *The tavern of crossed destinies*, it is mostly to free myself from it. Even now, when I have the proofs, I

<sup>3</sup> Starting from the *I nostri antenati* trilogy, Calvino engages in a dialogue with the Renaissance writer which culminates in his re-telling of the *Orlando furioso*. For overviews of Calvino's engagement with Ariosto, see Verdino, 1987 and McLaughlin, 2013.

continue to lay hands on it, to dismantle it, to rewrite it. Only when the volume will be printed will I remain outside of it once for all, I hope.)

The first stories in “The Tavern” foreground the multiple interpretations of the individual tarot cards. Then, the stories themselves establish multiplicity through reciprocity. The “Storia dell’indeciso” (The story of the undecided one) leads to the observation “Tu non scegliendo hai impedito la mia scelta” (p. 65; Because you didn’t make a choice, you prevented me from making my choice). In “Due storie in cui si cerca e ci si perde” (Two stories where one searches and where one loses), we read: “Le due storie rischiano continuamente d’inciampare l’una nell’altra, se non se ne mette in chiaro il meccanismo” (p. 93; The two stories continually run the risk of tripping one over the other, if one does not clear up its mechanism). The danger that one story will collapse into another is always there because one story always develops in reciprocity to all the other stories that are not getting told. Teresa de Laurentis suggests in her essay on Calvino that he constantly needs to find “the possibilities not realised, the elements latent in the system and not utilised” (1975, p. 423) because in this respect his poetics and his politics coincide. The multiple repetitions in *The castle of crossed destinies* bear witness to this assessment. It is quite clear, however, that Calvino is not only concerned with multiplying possibilities but also with the challenge of how to manage this multiplicity in his essays on writing as a combinatory system (see Pugliese, 2008, pp. 102–103).

It is the images and the cards that enable Calvino to translate such a combinatory system into a literary narrative. The images on the cards anchor individual narrators (through the initial card) and their stories (through the cards that follow). The cards can be included in multiple narratives but, because they are discrete physical objects, they remain distinct enough to remain recognisable as variants. *The castle of crossed destinies* does not use the cards and their images as illustrations but as a reminder of the suspension of verbalisation that made the narrative experiment possible.

Reflecting on the comparison between *Saint Phalle* and Calvino’s *Castle*, Aubry remarks

Là, c’était différent: d’abord, parce que je ne me suis pas donné toutes les cartes mais seulement celles déjà tirées par Saint Phalle; ensuite, parce que j’ai opéré une sélection entre elles— un tri dans le tir; enfin, parce que l’histoire ou les histoires— la contrainte du réel— leur préexistaient, même si je ne voulais pas (surtout pas) organiser le matériau biographique et iconographique selon un ordre chronologique. (2022)

For me, this was different, first, because I did not take all the cards but only those already drawn from the deck by Saint Phalle; then, because I worked with a selection from these cards, a sorting of the shot; and finally, because the story or the stories—the constraint of the real—pre-existed them, even if I (certainly) didn’t want to organise the biographical and visual material along a chronological order.

The materials from Saint Phalle’s life, as well as Aubry’s own biography, supply a pre-existing selection of “stories,” but also these retain contingency through the possibility of variants, because they could have happened otherwise.



Mais ce qui, cette fois, a surgi, c'est le réel, sous la forme brutale de l'événement: la mort de mon grand-père, puis de ma grand-mère [...] Cette double effraction du réel—cette double irruption du hasard—, j'ai choisi de l'intégrer au livre. J'ai laissé bifurquer les sentiers du Jardin, j'ai tiré des cartes qui n'étaient pas prévues: *La Mort, Le Pendu, et le Fou*. Et, les tirant, je les ai jouées. (2022)

Yet what had risen to the surface in this case, was the real, in the brutal shape of an event: the death of my grand-father, and then of my grand-mother [...] The real was breaking and entering twice—chance was intervening twice—and I chose to integrate it into the book. I allowed the paths in the garden to fork, and I drew cards I hadn't foreseen: Death, The Hanged Man and the Madman. And, as I drew them, I played them.

Aubry also thinks in variants. The contingency of life leads her to shape the form of her essay. The preliminary, contingent mode of order gets encoded in the visual affordances of the tarot deck, and she maintains this element of contingency in the final form of the essay, as *Saint Phalle* draws attention to the greater arcana through chapter headings and through narrating a walk through the tarot park across different narrative levels and points in time. Form is necessary for contingency to come into its own in literary texts, as Aubry says:

D'où l'importance, à l'échelle de la construction, du jeu et de la variation formelle: ils ne répondent pas à un impératif formaliste mais au besoin de laisser place à l'événement, à la rupture ou, aussi bien, à l'inacceptable *en tant que tels*, au lieu d'en faire le maillon d'un récit linéaire ou d'une narration bien ordonnée. (2022)

The importance of play and formal variation on the level of construction comes from there: these do not respond to a formalist imperative but to the need to leave space for the event, for the rupture or, just as well, the inacceptable *as they are*, instead of turning them into a link in a linear story or a well-ordered narrative.

The traces of chance are embedded in the formal organisation of order, breaks and variation. For contingency to be perceptible in literary narrative, the narrative needs to be constructed for “formal variation,” without closing down possibility space completely.

## Conclusion: active readers, probability designs and contingency traps

In this article, I proposed to introduce the notion of the “Contingency Trap” to conceptualise how form plays a role in the creative process through mental imagery. Forms provide constraints in the creative process. Such constraints can be considered productive in the sense of providing a frame within which creativity can unfold (as in the case of Calvino's tarots or Aubry's “rule of the shot”), or they break an established pattern as a *clinamen* (as in the case of Calvino's insertion of Ariosto's *Orlando* or

in Aubry's choice of an anagram to shape the plot in *La Folie Elisa*). The traditional understanding of form in literary studies as a limitation may give the impression that form is the element of the literary text that overwrites the state of contingency in which we find the world. It would then be the kind of mousetrap that kills the mouse. However, as our investigation into the creative process has shown, form works rather as the kind of mousetrap where chance is contained and constrained, but where a sense of contingency survives. Calvino and Aubry present two different ways for thinking about contingency in the writing process. Calvino foregrounds the variants of points of contingent development in his reflections on textual genesis, while Aubry maintains contingency in form in a writing process that becomes much more linear.

We have discussed a number of traces of visuality and variants in the form of the literary text with Calvino and Aubry. These can be understood as elements of the texts' "probability designs" (see Kukkonen, 2020). Readers' sense of probability can interpret everything, top-down, from pre-existing expectations (so-called perceptual inferences). It can also, however, engage in bottom-up scoping processes for what would be good probabilities to understand a given text (so-called epistemic active inferences). Literary narratives arguably draw on both kinds of inferences, as is evidenced by genre conventions but also by the phenomenon that texts appear different to us on re-reading. Arguably, this is because the form leaves enough space for new bottom-up scoping processes, paying attention to unexpected elements of the narrative and configuring new patterns in its probability designs. These scoping expeditions let the contingent into form.

Neither the psychological research I presented nor the self-reflections of literary authors are conclusive evidence, but they may help us in theorising the role of chance from the point of view of the creative process. The sketch that emerges is the following: Images suspend verbalisation. It appears that they also facilitate mental imagery and its impact both on the invention of new narrative possibilities and their shaping into the form of the narrative that eventually gets written. Pamiero et al. (2016) in an overview of research on creativity and mental imagery identify three aspects of creative writing that are related to mental imagery: vividness of description (corresponding to ancient ideas of *energeia*), originality and narrative structures. The latter two played a large role in our discussions of novel combinatory games in Calvino and Aubry. Other studies more specifically suggest how mental imagery may go together with originality of option and narrative structures. Moulton and Kosslyn (2009) propose mental imagery as the key mental resource for a "second-order simulation" that "imitates the processes that change content as well as the content itself" (p. 1276). Mental imagery enables constructing what-if scenarios where abstract structures are not only imagined but also mentally manipulated. These correspond to the scoping operations of "epistemic active inferences" described for texts as probability designs. Through the use of pen and paper, these abstract structures or forms can then be sketched down. Flower and Hayes (1981, 1984) offer a series of suggestive studies on the interface between mental imagery, structural intuition and plans for the writing process. As mental imagery decays quickly (try keeping an image fixed in your mind for as little as 10 seconds to experience this effect), pen and paper are a means to transfer mental images to a more lasting medium. During the writing process, then,

these sketches can work as a dynamic analogue of the conceptual development in form, and they also provide a “cognitive map” for the text to be written.

Calvino and Aubry both draw on visual qualities when referring to the role of form in their writing, even though their creative process appear to unfold quite differently. Besides the tarot cards, Calvino imagines the structure of the Château d’If in “The count of Montecristo” (Calvino 1967/2020) and the Greimasian square in *If on a winter’s night a traveller*, while Aubry foregrounds the visual quality of words with anagrams and graffiti print types in *La folie Elisa*. These visual elements enable thinking to remain flexible in the creative process. Calvino and Aubry choose to translate that verbal suspension also into the final form of their texts. The tarot cards in Calvino and the “tirs” in Aubry foreground such epistemic active inferences, inviting readers explicitly to embark on scoping processes for new sources of probability. Form, we may conclude, can be designed as a non-lethal contingency trap. And, when readers open a book, contingency can be released.

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