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CHANCE AS EPISTEMOLOGY IN PAUL AUSTER'S FICTION: UNCERTAINTY AND NARRATIVE MEANING

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Abstract: *Paul Auster's fiction has long been associated with chance, randomness, and accident, which previous scholarship has largely examined as narrative motifs or formal devices shaping plot and character. While such studies establish the structural and aesthetic importance of chance, they rarely address its epistemological implications. This paper argues that chance in Auster's novels should be understood not merely as a motif, but as an epistemological principle through which reality is perceived, interpreted, and narrated in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Drawing on chaos and complexity theory, philosophies of contingency, urban studies, and contemporary identity theory, the paper reconceptualizes chance as a cognitive framework rather than a narrative technique. It proposes that Auster constructs an epistemology of uncertainty characterized by nonlinearity, indeterminacy, and the collapse of stable causality. Within this framework, the novels do not simply depict accidental events; they examine how individuals attempt to generate meaning, coherence, and identity in a contingent world. By elevating chance from motif to epistemological structure, this study offers a new theoretical model for interpreting Auster's fiction and contributes to broader debates theoretical.*

Keywords: Paul Auster, chance, epistemology, uncertainty, narrative meaning, postmodern fiction, contingency

1. INTRODUCTION

Paul Auster has long been recognized as the contemporary American writer most deeply involved in the motifs of chance, randomness, and accident. His fictional world is structured by ruptures in causal relationships, random encounters, and chance events that interrupt the logical flow of the plot. These motifs have been extensively studied in previous studies, in which "chance" has been identified as both an aesthetic device and a structural principle in Auster's narrative world. Researchers have showed that "chance" plays a decisive role in plot formation, character identity construction, and expression of a postmodern sensibility characterized by uncertainty and fragmentation.

Nevertheless, most existing studies, though incisive and valuable, still consider "chance" primarily as a narrative motif, a recurring pattern that contributes to the texture of Auster's text. What has not been fully theorized is the possibility of understanding "chance" not just as a motif, but as a distinct epistemological framework, a way of perception and construction of the world in the cultural context of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In other words, the "chance" in Auster's works can go beyond the scope of compositional technique to become a postmodern epistemology, grounded in the collapse of stable causality, the erosion of determinism, and the rise of contingency as the central principle of existence.

This gap becomes more and more apparent when Auster is placed in dialogue with wider academic discourses. His works strongly resonate with chaos theory and complexity theory, which question the linear model of causality; with the philosophy of contingency of Quentin Meillassoux, Ian Hacking, and Niklas Luhmann; with urban studies, which considers city as a space of random encounters; and with identity studies, which understands the self as an unstable, floating, and situational entity. However, these interdisciplinary connections have not yet been integrated into a unified analytical model.

Therefore, the profound epistemological and metaphysical implications of “chance” in Auster’s novels have not been adequately explored.

This paper aims to fill that gap by re-conceptualizing “chance” not only as an aesthetic or narrative feature, but also as a form of cognition which is a cognitive structure used to understand, interpret, and narrate the world. By elevating “chance” from motif to epistemological principle, the paper proposes that Auster can be seen as a writer who constructs an epistemology of uncertainty: a world that operates on uncertainty, nonlinearity, and unpredictability. Within this theoretical framework, Auster’s novels do not simply represent chance events; they examine how people seek meaning in a world where chance has become the new norm.

To clarify that argument, the study focuses on four questions:

1. *Is chance in Auster’s novels only an aesthetic device or can it be seen as an epistemological structure?*
2. *How do the concepts of chance – chaos – contingency interact to create a distinctive postmodern worldview in Auster’s works?*
3. *What narrative mechanisms does Auster use to express the inherent uncertainty of urban life, personal identity and modern history?*
4. *Can an “epistemology of chance” be constructed based on Auster’s narrative practice?*

By addressing these questions, the paper is expected to contribute a theoretical framework that synthesizes narratology, continental philosophy, chaos theory, and urban culture analysis. Thereby, the paper repositions Paul Auster not only as a writer of chance, but also as a thinker of possibility who uses fiction to offer profound reflections on how humans exist and create meaning in a world where certainty has collapsed and chance has become the fundamental condition of life.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The reconceptualization of “chance” as an epistemological model in Paul Auster’s novels requires an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that connects postmodern narratology with the philosophy of possibility, chaos theory, and urban culture analysis. This section presents four core theoretical groups that support the argument that “chance” in Auster’s novels functions not as a motif, but as a form of cognition.

2.1. Chance in the modern and postmodern literature

The concept of “chance” in modern and postmodern literature does not appear alone, but is linked to a long tradition of uncertainty in fiction. The writers such as Mallarmé, Borges, Kafka and Beckett have considered chance as a tool to break the causal order, interrupt the plot and shake the subject’s position.

Paul Auster inherited this legacy but developed it further by making “chance” the pivot of the entire narrative structure. We find that the category of chance in Paul Auster’s novels:

- creates open-ended events
- leads characters into an uncertain area
- reveals the lack of foundation in the postmodern world
- breaks the illusion of the linearity of life

In the context of this paper, however, “chance” is extended from an aesthetic device to an epistemological one.

2.2. Chaos theory and complexity: Nonlinearity as a narrative logic

One of the most effective ways to understand Auster's "chance" mechanism is through chaos theory and complexity science that describe the world as a nonlinear system, sensitive to initial conditions, and driven by the chaotic-implicit-hidden paradigm.

Studies by Jones & Ells have pointed out that in The New York Trilogy, chance is only the surface of a deeper complex structure. Applying this logic to Auster's entire career allows us to see:

- chance events as "bifurcation points"
- character lives as nonlinear dynamic systems
- city as a "chaotic attractor"

In this model: Chance is not the absence of structure, but the structure itself.

This opens up the possibility of reading Auster as a writer of chaos, who simulates the disorder of the modern world through the mechanics of plot.

2.3. The theory of possibility in contemporary philosophy

The concept of contingency provides the philosophical basis for understanding Auster beyond the narrative plane. Philosophers such as Quentin Meillassoux, Ian Hacking, and Niklas Luhmann all see contingency as a fundamental principle of the contemporary world.

2.3.1. Meillassoux: Possibility as a determinism

Meillassoux states that the world is not governed by any immutable laws and uncertainty is inevitable. This fits with Auster's way of constructing events without apparent causes, and characters are faced with an irregular universe.

2.3.2. Hacking: The Taming of Chance

Hacking describes the rise of probability and statistics as modern man's way of "taming" uncertainty. Auster exposes the opposite of this process: a world where probability fails to tame life.

2.3.3 Luhmann: Social Systems and Possibility

Luhmann considers society as a system that operates on possibility—every choice has its counter-choice, and nothing is inevitable.

Auster's characters live in exactly that state: constantly pushed to unexpected turns, having to construct their own selves from uncertain choices.

2.4. Urban Studies: City as a chance generator

New York is not only the setting in Auster's novels but also the chance generator. Based on the studies by Petra Eckhard and Mark Brown, we can analyze the city in Auster's works as:

- a labyrinth of contingencies
- a place where paths, turns, errors and confusions become narrative dynamics
- a space that creates random encounters between unfamiliar subjects
- a "randomizing system" that impacts on character identity

This adds a spatial dimension to the epistemological analysis:

Chance in Auster's works is an integral mechanism of *postmodern urban life*.

2.5. Identity studies: the self as variable and incomplete

In Auster's works, the self has no stable ontological core; and it exists as:

- the result of a series of contingent events
- an open structure, constantly being redefined
- an entity disintegrated by urban experience and contingent history
- a "contingent selfhood"

The theoretical foundations of postmodern identity studies (Butler, Hall, Bauman) suggest that the self is constructed from contingent and unstable forces of interaction—just as Auster constructs his character.

This theoretical framework allows the paper to:

- see “chance” as a structure of the world, not just of the text
- understand chance as a logic of the city, of the self, and of postmodern existence
- place Auster within a broader theoretical stream of uncertainty and nonlinearity
- construct the “epistemology of chance” as a new contribution to contemporary literature studies

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses an interdisciplinary methodology, combining narrative analysis, postmodern literary theory, the philosophy of possibility, and urban theory to reconceptualize “chance” as an epistemological model in Paul Auster’s novel. The method is designed to examine not only how “chance” appears in the text, but more importantly, its role in cognitive structure, self-construction, and fictional world formation. Three main groups of methods are used as follows:

3.1. Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis is used to explore:

1. **Event structure:** how accidental situations, mistakes, errors, or disasters motivate the plot;
2. **Character structure:** how characters are formed and transformed through random turns;
3. **Storytelling techniques:** linearity breaks, voice overs, repetition, separation of subject and narrator.

This method focuses on showing how Auster uses “chance” events as the organizing link of the entire narrative system. From there, the analysis of the plot progression will be linked to theories of non-linearity, chaos and uncertainty.

The main corpus chosen consists of four novels that represent typical forms of “chance”:

- City of Glass (1985)
- Moon Palace (1989)
- The Music of Chance (1990)
- The Book of Illusions (2002)

The choice of these texts stems from the fact that we examined the works and found that they contained the highest density of “chance” phenomena, and at the same time clearly demonstrated the shifts in the author’s postmodern thinking.

3.2. Interdisciplinary Hermeneutics

In order to elevate “chance” to an epistemological principle, the study uses a combined interpretive model:

3.2.1 Philosophy of contingency

Helps analyze how Auster’s world operates according to inevitability, non-causality and unpredictability (Meillassoux), as well as how the self exists in a state of constant choice and counter-choice (Luhmann).

3.2.2 Chaos theory/ complexity science

Used as a methodology to identify nonlinear structures, unexpected branches, chaotic bifurcation points and hidden patterns of organization hidden under the surface of chance.

3.2.3 Urban Studies

Analyzes how the city – particularly New York – functions as a site of contingency, where turns, lost tracks, unexpected encounters, and the dispersion of identities are shaped by the very structure of space.

3.2.4 Identity Studies

Helps explain how contingency shapes the self in a postmodern context, where identity is no longer stable but “contingent selfhood”.

Through an interdisciplinary interpretation, the study extends the scope of contingency from the aesthetic to the philosophical and cultural plane.

3.3. Conceptual/Theoretical Modeling

To answer the central question of the study - whether it is possible to form a model of “epistemology of chance” - the paper uses a three-step theoretical modeling technique:

3.3.1. Phenomenological extraction

From the novel texts, identify the forms of occurrence of “chance”:

- chance events,
- narrative disruptions,
- identity fractures,
- vanishing subject.

3.3.2. Functional abstraction

Relating these phenomena to philosophical and theoretical principles:

- chaos → nonlinearity, instability
- contingency → possibility, inevitability
- urbanity → chance encounter
- postmodernism → fragmentation, uncertainty

The result is to identify the role of “chance” on three levels:

- (1) Event-level,
- (2) Narrative-level,
- (3) Epistemic-level.

3.3.3. Building the “Epistemology of Chance”

The final model is designed as a three-tiered diagram or structure that shows how “chance”:

- world-building,
- self-building,
- knowledge-building.

The research method of the paper is designed to:

- analyze literary discourse based on the internal structure of narrative,
- dialogue with the system of contemporary philosophical theories,
- see chance in Auster as a cultural-intellectual phenomenon, not just literary,
- create the basis for forming a new theoretical model of “epistemology of chance”.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS: CHANCE AS NARRATIVE ENGINE AND COGNITIVE STRUCTURE

4.1. Chance as Narrative Engine:

4.1.1. *City of Glass*: wrong phone call and chain of narrative errors

In *City of Glass*, the entire plot starts from a wrong phone call. Daniel Quinn, a detective novelist under the pen name William Wilson, keeps receiving calls looking for... detective Paul Auster. He is not a detective, but in a moment of “looseness” of ego, he decides to identify himself as Auster and take on the task of “protecting” Peter Stillman from his crazy father.

Structurally, this is a “bifurcation point”:

- Quinn can hang up the phone, return to his own life → the plot ends immediately.
- His saying “Yes, this is Auster” is a chance, not prepared by any clear psychobiographical background, but sets in motion the entire chain of events that follows: following Stillman, getting lost in Manhattan, being haunted by the movements of others, and finally the disintegration of his own ego.

Instead of a logical investigation process like a classic detective novel, the story slides along with errors: Quinn follows the wrong person, fails to understand Stillman’s behavior, and never “solves” the case. Thus, chance here is not only an “interesting opening scene”, but also the principle of plot organization: every turning point is a contingency twist, pushing the character into a situation that is increasingly out of control. Importantly, if we read according to the logic of chaos, we see that Auster deliberately shows that the entire plot system is built on initial errors – like a nonlinear dynamic system in which small disturbances at the input completely deviate the trajectory.

4.1.2. *Moon Palace*: unexpected legacy and a series of chance encounters

In *Moon Palace*, Marco Fogg’s life is also triggered by an initial chance: the death of his uncle, Victor, and an amount of inheritance that is just enough for a dissolute life for a few years. Fogg decides not to work, and lives only by selling his belongings, reading books, and wandering. Money gradually runs out, and he slides from his Manhattan apartment to *homelessness in Central Park*.

The chain of key events is marked by chance:

- Fogg meets Kitty Wu and Zimmer in a nearly homeless context: he is saved by friends from starving in the park, a chance encounter between a homeless person and other urban people.
- Later, Zimmer introduces Fogg to work as a reader, taking care of Mr. Effing, a mysterious old painter. This job coincidentally connects Fogg to his own family history that is something he is completely unaware of.
- Blood ties, family history, personal identity, etc., do not appear through the logic of active investigation but through a series of chance events – encounters – coincidences.

Here, Auster shows that biography does not operate in a linear order of “self-discovery”, but rather as a graph of chance events: an uncle dies unexpectedly → an inheritance → a decision to live a life of abandonment → homelessness → a chance encounter → an unexpected job → the revelation of family origins.

Chance thus becomes the organization of life, not just of the plot.

4.1.3. *The Music of Chance*: meeting “Jackpot” and the leap into nothingness

From the opening page of *The Music of Chance*, Nashe, a firefighter who quit his job, “for one whole year he did nothing but drive, traveling back and forth across America”. This came from an unexpected legacy from his estranged father, and then a series of ill-considered decisions: taking his child to Minnesota, leaving him there, and then hitting the road.

A crucial chance occurred when he happened to meet Jack Pozzi (who called himself Jackpot), a gambler who needed capital to play a “sure bet” poker game. At that moment, according to the narrative, Nashe “had nothing left to lose” and jumped into the game. This encounter was completely unplanned: Nashe may not have stopped, may not have talked, but he saw “a last chance to do something for himself” in Pozzi, which is a weak but sufficient reason to trigger the tragedy.

From here, the entire plot operates as a consequence of two chances:

1. the inheritance from the father who abandoned him,
2. the meeting with Pozzi.

The losing hand → the huge debt → the sentence of “labor to build a stone wall” for Flower and Stone → the tragic end. Notably, the causal logic here is not a moral logic (punishment for greed), but almost a pure probability logic: in life, playing with chance, sometimes you win, sometimes you lose.

The “Music of Chance” in the novel is the melody of uncertain events where the character has almost no control over anything but small, immediate choices.

4.1.4. *The Book of Illusions*: accident, disappearance, and accidentally watching a movie

In *The Book of Illusions*, David Zimmer falls into a deep depression after his wife and child die in a plane crash, which is a purely chance event, without prediction, without “meaning” in the moral sense. He is on the verge of suicide, until one night, he accidentally turns on the TV and watches a silent movie by Hector Mann. Fascinated by Hector’s face, walk, and comedy, Zimmer begins to watch the rest of Hector’s films, writes a book about him – and that pulls him back from the abyss.

Meanwhile, Hector Mann himself “disappeared” years ago, presumed dead, but actually living in seclusion. Zimmer’s receiving a letter inviting him to meet Hector is another chance event:

- the letter arrives just as Zimmer has finished writing the book,
- there is no previous active line of investigation,
- the entire meeting and discovery of Hector’s secret is based on the logic of chance.

The plot structure is thus a series of saving chance events: a random accident destroys the old life, a random TV image opens a new life, an unexpected letter allows Zimmer to reconstruct Hector Mann’s history – and at the same time reconstruct his own.

4.2. Contingent Selfhood: The self as a product of chance

A recurring pattern emerges from the four novels:

The self does not have a fixed essence, but is constructed from chance turns.

- Quinn becomes a “detective” simply by picking up a phone and giving his name. From there, his self gradually disintegrates and dissolves in the city, until it is no longer clear who he is.
- Nashe goes from being a firefighter to a streetwalker, then a prisoner building a wall, all because of an inheritance and a chance encounter.
- Marco Fogg drifts from student, nephew, homeless person, caregiver, writer – his self changing according to the chance encounters with others.
- David Zimmer goes from being a desperate scholar to Hector Mann’s biographer, and finally the person who brings this story to readers, all because of a chance encounter with a late-night movie.

Common ground: the self in Auster’s works is not defined by “deep nature”, but by trajectory: each chance event pushes characters into a new “version” of themselves. This is the true spirit of “contingent selfhood”:

- Who I am ← depends on the chain of what has happened to me, and the small choices I make at each turning point.

This fits with the philosophy of contingency: the self does not have to be what it is; it could have been completely different, had the initial chance events gone a little awry.

4.3. Urban Contingency: The city as a chance generator

In *City of Glass* and *Moon Palace*, New York appears as a space of uncertainty:

- Quinn loses his way as he follows Stillman on the Manhattan grid; each turn is a random choice, and he gradually “dissolves” in the maze of streets. The city is not a static backdrop, but an endless network of paths, where every step can lead to loss.
- Fogg lives homeless in Central Park, sinking into a “limbo state” where the boundaries between civilization and wilderness, order and chaos are blurred. His rescue, meeting Zimmer, and then entering Effing’s story, etc., are all urban encounters, impossible to plan.

In *The Music of Chance*, the dominant space is the freeways, the suburbs, the Flower and Stone’s estate. Although not entirely urban, it is still a post-industrial infrastructure, a network of roads, movements, non-places. The very act of “wandering the streets” and accidentally meeting Pozzi represents a post-urban logic: human life is determined by random interactions on the network of space – infrastructure.

Thus, the city and road infrastructure in Auster's novels can be seen as "urban randomizers", spatial systems that constantly create:

- opportunities to meet strangers,
- unexpected events,
- unpredictable turns.

City/road not only "contains" characters, but also functions as a chance generator.

4.4. Epistemology of Chance: Chance as limits and structure of knowledge

The deepest layer of "chance" in Auster's works lies not in plot or character, but in the way knowledge operates in the fictional world:

1. There is no omniscient knowledge: No narrator knows the "whole truth". In *City of Glass*, the Stillman case is not solved, Quinn disappears; in *The Book of Illusions*, many details of Hector Mann's life remain conjecture, obscured.
2. Investigation always leads to gaps: The deeper the investigator (Quinn, Zimmer) goes, the more gaps, contradictions, and blind spots are discovered. Knowledge *increases* but certainty *decreases*.
3. Tragedy arises from trying to impose order on uncertainty: Quinn tries to read Stillman's journey as a secret message and self-destructs; Nashe tries to "play the sure bet" and is drowned; Flower and Stone attempt to turn two people into "monument workers" – and the whole system collapses.

Here we see an epistemology of chance deployed in narrative practice:

- The world is contingent: everything could have been otherwise.
- Knowledge is always a posteriori, subsequent, and powerless in the face of fundamental uncertainty.
- Fiction does not "explain" the world but simulates its ultimate inexplicability.

It is at this level that Auster steps out of his position as "writer of chance" and becomes an experimenter in a new understanding of the postmodern world:

A world no longer secured by any necessary foundation; there remain only provisional structures, provisional selves, and provisional stories connected by chance.

5. CONCLUSION

The analysis presented in this paper shows that "chance" in Paul Auster's novels goes far beyond the realm of a narrative technique or a thematic decoration. Through a close reading of four works, *City of Glass*, *Moon Palace*, *The Music of Chance*, and *The Book of Illusions*, combined with approaches from chaos theory, philosophy of possibility, urban studies, and postmodern identity theory, the study asserts that "chance" operates as an epistemological structure, a fundamental way of perceiving and making sense of the world. Auster's novels reveal a universe not guided by stability, consistency, or determinism, but by the inherent uncertainty, unpredictability, and openness of all events.

In Auster's fictional universe, chance operates simultaneously on three levels. At the event level, it triggers decisive plot twists such as mistaken phone calls, unexpected inheritances, chance encounters, or sudden accidents that set in motion chains of consequences that the characters cannot foresee or control. At the narrative level, chance disrupts linearity, disrupts causality, and creates fragmented, open structures that resist any attempt to close up meaning. At the epistemic level, chance becomes the principle governing how knowledge is formed, limited, and shaken: the character's quest for meaning is only to be confronted with the unknowability of the world, the incompleteness of understanding, and the inevitable gaps in story, memory, and self.

These three layers of operation form what the paper calls an "epistemology of chance", a model of cognition that reflects the nature of postmodern existence. In Auster's world, the self is a possible entity, the city is a machine that creates unpredictability, and the understanding of a story is always provisional and incomplete. Auster does not merely depict contingency; he constructs worlds where contingency becomes a central condition of existence and cognition. His novels thus open up a subtle philosophical reflection on the crisis of faith in the late twentieth century, resonating with broader cultural anxieties

about the fragility of identity, the instability of social systems, and the decline of deterministic models of the world.

The theoretical model proposed in this paper contributes to the study of Auster by offering a comprehensive and interdisciplinary analytical framework that is capable of explaining not only how chance organizes plot and character, but also how it restructures perception, knowledge, and meaning. Furthermore, understanding “chance” as an epistemological force opens up new approaches to the study of postmodern and post-postmodern literature.

Open Research Directions

This study suggests several potential directions for comparison:

Comparing Auster and Haruki Murakami:

Both writers envision the self as a floating and possible entity, shaped by mysterious events and surreal interruptions. A comparative study could clarify how Western and East Asian cultural traditions differ in their conceptions of contingency, particularly in relation to urban loneliness, metaphysical insecurity, and the permeable boundary between reality and the unconscious.

Comparing Auster and Vu Trong Phung:

- Vu Trong Phung’s *So Do** operates on urban contingency and social chaos to critique colonial modernity. Comparing the two authors could reveal two models of “urban contingency”:
- a satirical-parodic type (modernized Vietnam in the early 20th century),
- an existential-metaphysical type (America in the late 20th century). This comparative perspective can enrich understandings of how chance reflects socio-economic change in different forms of modernity.

Auster and contemporary narratives of uncertainty

Chance can be seen as the logic of narrative in the context of global uncertainty, migration, technological instability, and the risk society (Beck). This places Auster in dialogue with discourses of insecurity and instability in the modern world.

Epistemology of chance in movies and digital narratives:

Many contemporary visual narratives, such as Charlie Kaufman’s films or nonlinear games, also operate within the logic of contingency. Extending the model to multimedia narratives will test its interdisciplinary applicability.

Our paper confirms that Paul Auster is not only a writer of chance, but also an author who is creating a new way of thinking about epistemology, identity, and reality in an age defined by uncertainty. Chance reading as an epistemological principle allows us to better understand both Auster’s artistic project and the broader cultural-cognitive conditions that his novels powerfully express.

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