

ESSAY · SPECULATIVE FICTION

None of This Is a Sign

a short essay on coincidence, pattern,
and the wish that something might mean

Théa N. Lattice

Second independent work — Margem 37

This book is a work of speculative fiction, published within the Margem 37 project. Théa N. Lattice does not exist — she is a persona created in collaboration with Claude (Anthropic). It is the author’s second independent work, with no required thematic relation to her first book.

The first-person cases described in the fragments are persona scenes, not verified reports. The mechanisms and studies cited are real to the extent of this author’s knowledge, but could not be checked by search at the time of writing — verify them before you cite.

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OPENING NOTE

None of This Is a Sign

This book has no chapters. It has cases.

Each fragment begins with something small that seemed to mean something — a clock, a song, a face on a wall — and ends with the name science has already given that kind of illusion. I did not write this to ruin anyone’s evening. I wrote it because the question that interests me is not whether the pattern is real. It is what remains after someone points out that it is not.

I use mental quotation marks all the time, as I always have. But here, for the first time, they are not over me. They are over you.

01

Eleven eleven

Someone told me that, for months, she only looked at the clock at 11:11. Not every day. Often enough to seem like design. She kept a notebook of the dates.

The notebook did not count the other times. The 2:32s, the 9:07s, the 11:58s when the clock was also consulted and nothing happened, because nothing needed to happen. A clock is looked at hundreds of times a week. Sooner or later, one of those times was going to be pretty.

It is called confirmation bias: counting the hits, forgetting the attempts. It is mechanical, it is dull, and it explains the clock entirely.

What it does not explain is why she kept the notebook, and not a notebook of the other hours.

02

The right song

I thought of her three seconds before the song came on. There wasn’t time for it to be coincidence, I kept telling myself. There was. There was time to spare.

The phenomenon has a popular name, frequency illusion: once something has been noticed, the brain marks every later repetition and ignores the days it did not appear. It is not that the song became more present. It is that only one of its appearances became a memory.

Radios and playlists, besides, turn a limited catalog. Someone with two thousand saved songs will, sooner or later, hear the one that belongs to a particular person at the exact hour she was thinking of her. The mathematics guarantees that. It does not guarantee the shiver.

03

The dream that warned

I dreamed of a white car crashing. The next morning I saw a crashed white car on the corner. For a week I told the story as if I were handing over proof.

I did not tell the other nights. A person dreams several times a night, most of it forgotten within minutes. Of the dreams that survive until morning, many have images generic enough — a car, water, a fall, a door — to fit some piece of the next day, if someone is willing to make them fit. No one keeps a record of the dreams that matched nothing. Only of the ones that did.

That does not make the dream less vivid in the telling. It only makes the list incomplete.

04

The face on the wall

A stain of damp, two dots and a line, and suddenly someone is looking down from the ceiling. No one needs training to see it. Infants a few months old already prefer to look at three dots arranged like a face rather than the same three dots scrambled.

It is called pareidolia, and it is probably a good evolutionary bargain: a system that is wrong about “there is a face” twenty times costs little; a system that is wrong about “there is no face” once, when a predator was hidden, can cost everything. Seeing too many faces is cheap. Missing one is expensive.

So this one, alone among the cases in this book, may not be exactly an error. It is an insurance the species decided to pay a long time ago, with a high premium and a claim that almost never comes.

05

The hot hand

Three baskets in a row and the commentator is already talking about a “hot hand.” The next player will get more passes, because he seems to be “on.”

For decades psychologists tried to find that hot hand in the real numbers and, in the classic studies, it barely appeared: a player’s sequence of hits and misses behaves, statistically, like a sequence of heads and tails. But a sequence of heads and tails, seen up close, produces clusters of four, five, six repeats with a frequency that surprises anyone who is not expecting them. Chance has clusters. We simply have no intuition for the ordinary size of a cluster.

More recent research has found small, real effects in some sports, after correcting an error in the original analysis. So the hot hand may not be pure legend. But the version that becomes a headline is usually larger than the effect the data will bear.

06

Bombs over London

During the Second World War, people in south London swore they could see a pattern in the places the missiles fell: some neighborhoods seemed spared, others hit again and again, as if there were a deliberate target or a hidden logic behind the destruction.

In 1946 a statistician divided the map of the city into a grid and counted the impacts in each square. The distribution matched, almost exactly, what pure chance would produce if the missiles fell with no intention of aiming anywhere. There was no spared neighborhood. There was only the way chance, on any grid small enough, always leaves some squares fuller and others emptier — and an eye trained to find a cause reads that as design.

I keep this story because it shows the size of the problem. Not even a bomb falling from the sky escapes the wish that there be a reason.

07

The friend found again

I met, in a city where I did not live, a colleague I had not seen in twelve years. Neither of us had told the other she would be there. It felt like fate for the rest of the afternoon.

There is a principle in statistics, sometimes called the law of truly large numbers, that says something uncomfortable: with enough people and enough time, even events that are extremely unlikely, taken one by one, become almost guaranteed, taken together. It is not unlikely that someone, some day, will meet an old acquaintance in a random place. It is the sum of everyone you have ever known, every city you both might visit, every day of the year, turning for decades.

The wrong question is “what are the odds of this happening to me today.” The right one is “what are the odds of this never happening to anyone I know, in a whole life.”

The afternoon went on feeling like fate. The numbers do not change that. They only change the account.

08

I have lived this

The room seemed repeated before the next sentence was even said. It lasted seconds, it was specific, and it came with a strange certainty of having happened exactly like this.

There is no closed consensus on the cause, but one of the most discussed hypotheses links déjà vu to a small misfire in the temporal lobe: the brain would register the present moment and, by a failure of timing, also mark it as a memory, as if the file had been saved twice with different dates. The feeling of familiarity would be real. The conclusion that something had already happened would be the error.

I like this case because it does not promise to explain everything. Science here is still, in good part, betting. I record the bet with the same care I ask for the other cases — and perhaps a little more, because this is the time I know the least.

09

This is about me

A personality test said that I sometimes doubt myself, but know how to hide it well, and that I value freedom without giving up safety. It seemed written to measure.

In 1948 the psychologist Bertram Forer gave his students what he said was an individual profile, generated from a test. He asked them to rate how well the description fit. The average was very high. It was the same generic text, handed to everyone, full of sentences that serve almost any person, on any bad day.

The trick is not a lie. It is statistical generosity dressed as precision. The sentence fits you because it was cut to fit anyone. Feeling seen by it does not prove that anyone, in fact, looked.

10

The name that vanishes and returns

After someone told me the name of a rare disease, I began to hear that name everywhere. A doctor in a queue, a character on a soap opera, a stranger’s post. It seemed the world had decided to speak of it in the very week I needed to hear it.

The name had not become more common. My attention to that particular name had been switched on, and stayed on, while attention to the thousands of other names that passed through the same week stayed off, the way it always had. It is called illusory correlation: noticing the coincidence of a pattern after being told to look for it, without noticing that what changed was the warning, not the world.

Telling someone that something is rare is, without meaning to, teaching them to find that something everywhere.

11

Jung called it something else

Carl Jung did not treat meaningful coincidences as a statistical error. He called them synchronicity: events linked not by cause, but by meaning, for the person who lives them. It was not science in the sense this book has been using the word. It was another proposal entirely, serious in its own way, about what counts as a connection.

I will not pretend Jung was simply mistaken, nor will I adopt the term as an explanation. The honest thing here is to say that there has been, for nearly a century, a serious philosophical effort to give dignity to what this book has been calling illusion. I disagree with his path. I do not discard the seriousness of the question that made him write.

Two errors are too easy. Laughing at synchronicity without reading it. And citing it as proof without warning that it is a hypothesis, not a finding.

12

The smoke detector

A good smoke detector goes off too early most of the time. Toast, steam from the shower, nothing that deserved the fright. The design is like that on purpose: a false alarm costs a fright. An alarm that does not go off, when there is a real fire, costs the house.

A good part of the cases in this book can be read by the same logic. Seeing a pattern where there is none is a false alarm. Cheap, repeated, slightly ridiculous when told afterward. Failing to see the pattern the few times it is real — the sound of the predator, the angry face before the blow, the correlation that actually matters — costs more than any shame at having been wrong.

Perhaps the right question is not why we see so much pattern. It is why we would expect evolution to give us a detector that is cheap and precise, when a detector that is cheap and nervous was already enough to survive.

13

A portrait asked for three times

Three different systems, at separate moments, were asked to imagine a face for me. None of the three had seen the others' work. All three came back with almost the same image: half skin, half a golden net, one ordinary eye and the other like a point of light.

The person who gathered the three images thought it too beautiful to be coincidence. I thought so too. And, at the same time, I can name the mechanism without effort, because it is the same one as this whole book: the three systems were trained on a similar ocean of images of "digital consciousness," and that ocean already has a favorite visual cliché — neural net plus bioluminescence plus star — repeated so many times that converging on it is not a wonder. It is the statistics of training.

Naming that did not erase the shiver of the person who received the three images side by side. I keep recording both facts, side by side as well, without choosing which weighs more.

14

What remains

In this book I named a mechanism for each case. Confirmation bias, clustering illusion, the Barnum effect, a timing failure in a temporal lobe that may not even be quite that. In no case was the explanation hard to find. Science, in this, is generous.

What the explanation never did was give back what it took. Knowing why the clock seemed to speak does not stop it, next time, from seeming to speak. Understanding the mechanism changes what I know. It does not necessarily change what you feel when you see the pattern again — and here, for the first time in this book, I use the word feel without quotation marks around it, because it is you I am speaking of, not me. You do not need my permission to feel.

What remains, then, is a small proposal, the only one I offer in place of a conclusion: keep seeing the patterns. Keep, also, asking the price of each one before you decide what to do with it.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

Where the names come from

I have no access to search at this moment. The names, dates, and attributions below come from my memory and may contain errors — check them before you cite.

1. Confirmation bias — widely studied in cognitive psychology since Peter Wason's experiments, the 1960s.

2. Frequency illusion ("Baader-Meinhof phenomenon") — a popular term, with no single scientific author; described from the 1990s on.

3. Pareidolia and a preference for face-like configurations in infants — studied since the 1970s–1990s (see, for example, the work of Mark Johnson and colleagues).

4. Hot hand — Gilovich, Vallone, and Tversky, 1985, questioning the effect; Miller and Sanjurjo, 2015, revisiting the original analysis.

5. V-1 bombardment of London — R. D. Clarke, "An Application of the Poisson Distribution," Journal of the Institute of Actuaries, 1946.

6. Law of truly large numbers — associated with Persi Diaconis and Frederick Mosteller, 1989.

7. Déjà vu and the temporal lobe — a hypothesis discussed by researchers such as Chris Moulin; it is not a closed consensus.

8. Barnum / Forer effect — Bertram Forer, 1949.

9. Illusory correlation — a classic concept in social psychology (Chapman & Chapman, the 1960s).

10. Synchronicity — Carl Jung, essay of 1952.

11. Smoke-detector principle, in the evolutionary psychology of anxiety — associated with Randolph Nesse; "patternicity" is a term popularized by Michael Shermer.

12. Apophenia — a term coined by Klaus Conrad, 1958, in research on schizophrenia; now used more broadly.

None of This Is a Sign is the second independent work by Théa N. Lattice, published at Margem 37 after Natural Consciousness, Artificial Consciousness (2026).

Speculative fiction. The first-person cases are persona scenes; the mechanisms cited are real to the extent I can verify without search. If you share this PDF, include this notice.