

‘Anyone who has idly fingered a roll of Sellotape or flipped a beer mat back and forth ... will enjoy Connor on the joy of fidgeting.’ *New Statesman*

‘Applies the techniques of literary theory to stuff ... enchanting’
Independent

‘Who would have thought that fishing at the back of a desk drawer or the bottom of a handbag could reel in such treasures? Thanks to this book, fidgeting will be a far more thoughtful occupation in the future.’ Daniel Miller

‘The familiar becomes strange as un-thought-out everyday items are examined in such a way that they become magical.’ *Times Higher Education*

‘Turns a nimble wit and a fresh eye to bags, batteries and buttons’
Scotland on Sunday

‘An entertaining history of everyday objects and personal possessions’ *Bookseller*

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Paraphernalia

The Curious Lives of Magical Things

Steven Connor

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Introduction: Speaking of Objects

Magical Things

Waiting in Dublin airport once, in the state of tipsily philosophical bliss that is common with me in airports, I saw a baby aged about nine months sitting at its parents' feet. The baby was entirely absorbed in a game that involved stretching and releasing the strap of its mother's handbag, while sliding the buckle up and down its length. At one point, its mother reached down and carelessly handed it a piece of muffin to eat. The baby looked from the muffin to the handbag, seemingly weighing the chances of it being able to play some useful part in its push-me-pull-you investigation. After a couple of puzzled moments, the muffin was thrown aside and the baby resumed its researches. I had never seen such absorption and intentness, and have never forgotten it. The baby was simultaneously concentrated and abandoned, utterly in and at the same time entirely out of this world. I thought I had seen something amazing:

a creature coming into being in its very capacity to leave itself behind in the ecstasy of play.

What was more amazing was that this miracle of animation came into being through something seemingly simple and inanimate. For this is how we usually think of things such as bags – as just there, inert, without will or consciousness. When we speak of an object – from *ob-*, opposite or against, and *-iacere*, to throw – our word evokes something that is thrown or thrust up against us. The word ‘object’ seems to assert the existence of that which stands apart, and has no part of us.

But this book is about a different kind of object, or one experienced in a different kind of way, that, like the enigmatic bag under such intent investigation in the airport, seems to escape its own finitude, its dourly objectish being-there, to go beyond, or spill to the side of, what it merely is or does. I am going to call this kind of thing a magical object. One way of putting this is to say that such objects are invested with powers, associations and significances, that they are therefore not just docile things, but signs, showings, epiphanies. The meditations on objects I offer here will indeed often suggest that they can be seen as what in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Europe would have been called ‘emblems’, allegories of human life, implying pocket homilies on love, time, hope, error, striving and death. As such, they give us work to do as well as being merely available for us to work on. And yet, their power comes entirely from us.

But this should not be taken to imply that these are fundamentally neutral or inert objects that we have merely tricked up with symbolic significance or buttered with ‘sentimental value’. Objects often have what J. J. Gibson calls ‘affordance’, meaning that they

seem to hold out certain very specific kinds of physical invitation to us, often involving an angle of approach or physical address.¹ A teacup asks to be picked up by the handle; a brandy glass invites one to cradle it, tender as a dove, from underneath; a shoe hints pointedly at a particular kind of toe-first, Cinderella insertion; a table spreads its flat expanse generously for banquet or billiards; a chair irresistibly proposes that one lower oneself into it backwards. Such objects seem to have us, or certain parts of us, imaged in them. The affordances of objects means that they are not merely externally loaded with associations and connotations, but that we find ourselves implicated in, or apprehended by, them. We act in accordance with the affordances of objects. Things are taken up with, preoccupied by, us.

The function of a highly specialised piece of equipment is usually inscribed clearly in its form; it has to be exactly the way it is and not some other way because it is *for* one particular kind of thing. What is more, it may seem to require of us a certain kind of highly specific posture or stylised movement. But magical objects seem in some respect not to be merely given in this way. It is not that they are awkward, enigmatic or non-compliant. Rather it is that they seem to offer richer and more indeterminate kinds of affordance, making them seem in various ways excessive to their ordinary or assigned uses. Magical things all do more, and mean more than they might be supposed to. A ball is a magical object because its affordances, its ways of proposing itself for use, are at once so irresistible and yet also so seemingly open. The more common an object is, the more various the uses it will propose, or make possible. That is why so many of the magical objects I discuss here are adapted to uses different from those for which they were ostensibly devised. Magical objects in this sense

are always playthings, things that seem not to give some specific instruction as to their use, like the labels saying ‘eat me’ and ‘drink me’ on objects in Wonderland, but rather seem to say, ‘play with me: try to make out what I might be good for’. Magical things invite a kind of practical *rêverie*, a kind of floating but intent circling through or playing with possibilities, a following out of their implied reach. Magical objects are such stuff as dreams are made on. They afford reflection on their affordances.

So the essence of what I am going to call a magical thing is that it is more than a mere thing. We can do whatever we like to things, but magical things are things that we allow and expect to do things back to us. Magical things surpass themselves, in allowing us to increment or surpass ourselves with them. They are things, as we say, to be *conjured with*, though their magic is done on ourselves rather than on others. Such objects have the powers to arouse, absorb, steady, seduce, disturb, soothe, succour and drug. If they seem to have a life of their own, it is a life that we give them, and give back to ourselves through them.

Fidgetables and forget-me-nots

Many of the objects with which I shall be so earnestly toying in this book are also *fidgetables*, things that hold out the possibility of being fiddled with – buttons, elastic bands, pins, sticky tape, glasses. Fidgeting expresses our oddly intimate relationship to objects. Fidgeting always requires an object, something to fidget with, even if it is only with oneself. Indeed, the urge to fidget might almost be put down to the need for or lack of some object, and the casting about for and taking up of some substitute for that object. Without some kind of

object to fidget with (a cigarette, a biro, a slip of paper, a lock of hair), one becomes fidgety.

But, even though we may have favourite fidgetables, fidgeting is never satisfied with any particular object. This is because fidgeting is itself a process of searching for what might be called the ideal object. I mean by this something that is at once part of the world, something that can be owned and kept and fixed in place and relied upon to stay put, in all the usual ways that objects can – and yet also resembles me, in all my fugitive variability, all my ways of being beside, and taking leave of, myself. The philosopher and historian of science Gaston Bachelard has evoked, as one avatar of this kind of object, what he calls the dream of an ideal paste. The ideal paste (of which snow, ice cream, mashed potato, putty, playdough and potter's clay, all of them generalised kinds of *stuff*, are versions) is infinitely malleable, while yet never becoming entirely liquid, for at that point it would begin to escape me. The ideal object resists me, while yet also yielding; yields, while never simply giving way before me.² It is capable of being deformed beyond recognition while yet persisting in itself. It is in fact like me, or the way I take myself to be, in being infinitely variable while yet miraculously remaining the same. It is capable of being put maximally to work, which is to say, maximally in play. We play with such objects as we do with all playthings, for an entirely circular reason – namely, to find out how much play (in the sense of give, stretch or variability) they may be found to possess. Sometimes, the action of taking an object to its limits will result in its being tested to destruction. Eventually, the paper clip snaps. Perhaps all play has at its horizon the death of the plaything. When we put something to work, we use it for a particular purpose. In play, we seek not so much to use things as to *use them up*. The