

**Steven Connor**

## ROUGH MAGIC: BAGS [2000]

(Source: first broadcast as part of the series 'Rough Magic' on BBC Radio 3, 9 January 2000, with a transcript made available at <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/eh/eng/skc/magic/bags.htm>)

### Editor's introduction

This chapter is an expanded transcript of what was originally one of a series of radio talks by Steven Connor offering 'philosophical adventures in the everyday'. This series, called 'Rough Magic', exemplifies an approach to material culture based on the fairly modest project of 'thinking through things rather than thinking them through' (Connor 2000a: 4). Initially these forays into the 'magic' of everyday things might bear comparison with Michel Leiris's surreal ethnography in 'The Sacred in Everyday Life' (Leiris [1938] 1988). Yet while Leiris is interested in what constitutes the sacred for him, Connor has a much more cultural and therefore communal project in mind.

The term that Connor uses to describe his approach to the material world is 'cultural phenomenology', and it is the qualification of 'phenomenology' by the term 'cultural' (and vice versa) that suggests its pertinence for approaching the everyday. For Connor:

Cultural phenomenology would aim to enlarge, diversify and particularise the study of culture. Instead of readings of abstract structures, functions and dynamics, it would be interested in substances, habits, organs, rituals, obsessions, pathologies, processes and patterns of feeling. Such interests would be at once philosophical and poetic, explanatory and exploratory, analytic and evocative. Above all, whatever interpreting and explication cultural phenomenology managed to pull off would be achieved by the manner in which it got amid a given subject or problem, not by the degree to which it got on top of it.

(Connor 1999: 18)

The things examined in 'Rough Magic' (bags, wires, screens and sweets) implicitly suggest the fruitfulness of recovering a perspective on everyday life that navigates across and

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### Bags

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between the anthropological and the psychoanalytic, the structural and the phenomenological.

Further reading: Clucas 2000; Connor 1999, 2000b; Merleau-Ponty 1962; Trotter 2000a.

**T**HESE PROGRAMMES are about the role in contemporary lives of certain, very mundane, but at the same time quite magical things. The more abstract, placeless and bodiless our existences, the more we come to live beside ourselves, and encounter the world and each other at a distance and through various kinds of remote control, the odder and lovelier things can become, and the greater the importance in our lives can be of objects that we can lay hands on, manipulate, transform and do things with. Human beings are such incorrigible fidgets, such manipulators of objects, of things we can touch and handle, or think of touching and handling, that it is scarcely possible for us to think, dream and imagine without things exerting their shaping force upon us. We think with shapes and weights and scales and textures. We literally keep ourselves in shape by the ways in which we heft and press and handle things. 'One does not think', Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have written, 'without becoming something else, something that does not think – an animal, a molecule, a particle – and that comes back to thought and revives it.'<sup>1</sup> The effort to prolong this way of thinking through things is what constitutes the group of writings assembled here under the title of *Rough Magic* [only 'Bags' is included here].

The essence of a magical object is that it is more than an object. We can do whatever we like to objects; but magical objects are things that we allow and expect to do things back to us. All magical objects surpass themselves. There is no more magical object than a ball. The first magical objects are probably the blankets, rattles and teddies that young children use for comfort and security, and to ease the growth of the knowledge that the world is full of things that are not them. Children know that their blankets, rattles and teddy-bears are not them, but are nevertheless theirs. Magical objects are for doing magic with; but we use the magical objects in which I am most interested to do magic, not so much on others as on ourselves. These objects have the powers to arouse, absorb, stabilise, seduce, disturb, soothe, succour and drug. They have a life of their own: a life we give them, and give back to ourselves through them, thereby giving rise anew to ourselves. Some of the magical objects about which I talk are ancient, some belong to the world of contemporary technology. All of them are strangely anachronistic.

### Bags

If you were to arrive on this earth from another planet, what would be the thing that would strike you most about humans, compared with other species? It would not, I think, be the possession of language, the capacity to laugh, or to remember, or to use tools, or any of these more traditional prerogatives human beings like to accord to themselves. It would be our need, apparently unshared by any other species, to carry things around with us. We are not homo erectus, or homo sapiens, but homo ferens. If



holding out: of supporting, holding and transporting through space, and enduring or lasting out through time. You bear an ordeal, or carry out a task, or hold on through suffering, as though time were something we experienced as a kind of weight. 'Time', we say, 'hangs heavy'. To bear, to carry, means to endure, to last out; to carry and to carry on, to carry over, to endure: weight means time: so weight means waiting. Samuel Beckett puns lengthily on the two different kinds of wait in his play *Waiting for Godot*, which contains a memorable bag-carrier in the person of Lucky, the slave of the tyrant Pozzo, who spends most of the play encumbered by his master's enormous bags. Because he is kept at the end of a long rope tied around his neck, Lucky is himself a kind of bag, more or less. Estragon, one of the two tramps who meet Pozzo and Lucky in the indeterminate landscape of the play, is tormented by the question 'Why doesn't he put down his bags?', asking it again and again.<sup>2</sup> The question itself holds up the action, which in this play of ultimate inaction, actually means keeping it going. When eventually Lucky does put down his bags, in order to start incomprehensibly thinking out loud, the others find his monologue intolerable, and beat him to the ground. Carrying not only weighs us down, it also, it appears, keeps us up.

And is not Beckett the great, hitherto uncelebrated dramatist of bags? In his play *Happy Days*, the first act of which is the monologue of a woman buried up to her waist in a mound of earth, the action is punctuated and parcelled out by Winnie's plunges and sallies into her bag – for lipstick, toothpaste, mirror, medicine, and all the possibilities they bury of beguiling the vicious time they embody. ('Perhaps just one quick dip', she says, as a boozier to his tittle.)<sup>3</sup> When, in the second act, she is inhumed up to her neck, the horror of her situation is signalled most of all by the bag which lies on the mound, tauntingly gaping just in sight and to hand, though for the handless Winnie now unreachable; as though all the resources of life and memory and history were held inaccessibly in it.

Lives are full of bags. Bags are full of lives.

Bags are female seeming objects, and have strong associations with female experience in many cultures. Few women are able to bear the horror of male fingers rummaging in their handbags; there is no man who has never itched to do this. In Britain and America, subtle, untaught but unbreachable rules still govern the kind of bags that men and women can feel comfortable holding or carrying. One of the rules seems to be that the floppier the bag, the less male it seems. Another bizarre rule concerns the length of the handle. The longer the handles of a bag, the more effeminate the bag, perhaps because the more handle there is attached to a bag, the more it can appear to be something hanging on to you, rather than something that you are actively holding. And then, for reasons which I cannot easily explain, a man's masculinity seems more compromised by a string bag than any other kind. But then why do women, whom men delight in imagining to be made up almost entirely of dark recesses and hidden cavities, usually have no pockets? My father used to say that somebody or something was 'as useless as a pocket in a singlet'. But such a thing has only to be named for me to be able to imagine its marsupial comfort and utility. I would willingly wear a singlet in secret if only to have such a thing close to me.

In every household I know, there is a special place where plastic carrier bags are hoarded. A drawer, or a box, or, nine times out of ten, a bag of bags. What is it for? What is the meaning of this? Perhaps because there is always something ruthless or insulting about simply throwing away a bag. In our cellar, we have an even more

marvellous contrivance. It is a luggage nest. On the outside, there is a large, firm, capacious suitcase, snapped shut with latches. Inside that, there is a slightly smaller suitcase; unzip that, and there is an aptly-named holdall, clasped tightly round a vanity case, and then a series of ever flimsier, but more tightly-budded pouches, purses and something I cannot forbear calling a reticule, though I do not know what this is. And round the whole thing, holding together the whole bursting, visceral contraption, there is a sheet of polythene against the dust, swollen skin-tight. It is a body we have got down there, a cannibal organism that binges on and breeds itself. I have just remembered that, when I was at school, the girls used to bring in anatomical dolls, that you could fold open to reveal their inner organs. Kneeling in front of our luggage nest, my hand plunging through the layers, groping for the little overnight bag I want right in the last level, I am doing the same play-surgery as they did in the playground.

If bags irresistibly suggest wombs, bellies and breasts, and may suggest an identification with women in their containing function, they have some distinctively male ingredients, too. For the shape of bags is rhythmic. Bags are defined by a rhythm of alternation between rigidity and collapse. Held, or worn, or carried, bags come into their own, assume and hold their own shapes. Put down, bags sag and crumple, their rigidity and definition ebbing from them. And bags offer quickening excitement in the contrast between hard and soft shapes; the pillow-case on Christmas morning, jutting with exciting knobs, elbows and corners, or the inverse, the impermeable outer casing containing folded softness.

You can think of bags as concrete meditations on the nature of human weight and shape. The principle of a bag is that it runs from the skimpiest form, which does nothing but wrap its contents, through to the sturdiest skeleton, which gives no clue as to the size or shape or weight of what lies inside. It is the operative difference between men, who may think of themselves as impermeable and undentable, but who nevertheless know, perhaps even more intimately than women, the bag-like rhythm of tumescence and collapse, and women, who cannot give birth without having to change their shapes. Bagmakers and bag users relish the jokes this contrast allows: a lock on a floppy bag is the most lovely futility imaginable.

How we carry bags is important. Bags are carried in the hand, in the crook of the arm, over the shoulder, on the back. In the form of pockets, bags can blister out on chests, thighs and hips. Our care for baggage extends to our means of transport, which have bags attached to them, from saddlebags to the boots of coaches and cars. We carry bags on our fronts, on our heads, to the side, on our backs. Bags are a way of keeping and displaying connections between our fronts and other parts of us, less visible, more vulnerable. A couple of years ago, do you remember, girls took to wearing tiny, exquisitely functionless little rucksacks, like a ganglion in the middle of their backs. It was as though they had a third eye, or a little growing homunculus clinging to them. Bags are our most intimate selves, even when we wear them most casually strung around our necks or on our backs.

Just as we sleep in sleeping bags, we have a need to restore ourselves to bags and sacks when we die, just as we come from bags and sacks in getting born. This is why we find the idea of putting a body straight into the ground so difficult to do, and why bags and sacks are associated with death just as much with life. Nineteenth-century resurrectionists, who dug up newly-buried bodies for the purposes of medical dissection, were known as 'sack 'em up men'. The more like bags we become, the more we

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sag and dangle, the more we are weighed down with ourselves, rather than carrying ourselves, the closer we are to death. War means servicemen coming home in body-bags. The First World War poet Isaac Rosenberg refers to the body of a soldier about to be reduced vilely to mere matter as the 'soul's sack'.

So, as well as goodness and wealth and plump incipience, bags are also the sign of indigence and indignity. Uselessness, indignity and superannuation. Giving somebody the sack derives from the phrase 'to give someone the bag to hold' common in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A woman who left a man at a dance to flirt with another would give him the metaphorical bag to hold, the idea being, I suppose, that to be left holding somebody's bag, left uselessly hanging on, or hanging around, you have been reduced to the condition of a bag. Holding her bag, the jiltee would have become it. Similarly, to be given the sack and made useless is to become a sack. No beggar so poor as to be unaccommodated with a bag of some kind; in the late sixteenth century, to 'turn to bag and wallet' meant to become a beggar. Tramps and bag ladies need bags to make the nothing they have and are into a kind of portable property.

Bags are antique and aging things. You can call someone an old bag, but it would be ridiculous to call someone a young bag. We carry more and more bags about our persons, which themselves become more and more baglike, as we age. Clothes enact our relationship to this ageing into the state of baggage, rags, luggage. Our very clothes keep us clear of death and age only as long as they hold us, the function of clothes not at all being to cover, but to contain and sustain. Is there a grimmer witness to our good riddance than our clothes when they are emptied of us – a flung sock, or a tangled brassière?

The absurd uselessness of baggage at the approach of death identifies baggage with death's ultimate beggary. Perhaps this is why packing, even in the midst of life, is always a bit like picking over and putting away the possessions of the newly dead.

### Notes

- 1 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1994) *What Is Philosophy?*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchill, London: Verso, p. 42.
- 2 Samuel Beckett (1986) *Waiting for Godot*, *Complete Dramatic Works*, London: Faber & Faber, pp. 28–9.
- 3 Samuel Beckett (1986) *Happy Days*, *Complete Dramatic Works*, London: Faber & Faber, p. 151.