

FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 10 | Spring 2010

Title	Plugs
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Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue Number	10
Issue Date	Spring 2010
Publication Date	05/06/2010
Editors	Ally Crockford & Siobhan Fitzgerald

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Plugs

Steven Connor

Abstract.

Plugs are peculiarly intimate objects. Plugs are archaic things, that belong to an economy of spaces in which what mattered was to seal, to store, to quarantine and dam up flow. But now the plug is used for different purposes, to establish connections, and to draw together places and times. Plugs are scale-transformers: they used to keep proximal things distant, now they bring distant things up close. We use plugs not to keep things apart, but to become a part of them, to plug in rather than plug up. Plugs used to keep things in their place, enforcing a world governed by the prepositions 'in', 'on' or 'at'. Now the plug is the enabler of relationships signified by prepositions like 'through', 'across' and 'between'. As such, the plug is a prime example of the interference between spatio-temporal dispensations that is so much a feature of the modern world. Perhaps the plug is itself a connector between the archaic and the contemporary.

I have in my hand a British 3-pin electrical plug. It is smooth, white, hard, odourless. When I hold it, or imagine doing so, my hand takes on the posture of a cardinal performing a benediction. Because this is a British plug, and knowing how to change a plug is the marker of basic practical competence in Britain, I have a clear awareness of what is inside it: the sprung cradle which holds the fuse, the little bar which cinches the top of the cable where it enters the throat of the plug, and the fiddly brass screws sitting atop the three pins, which screw down to grip the three beards of copper wire which I have stripped clear of their outer sheathings of blue, brown and striped green and yellow. Everything has its assigned place in this miniature cosmos, and nothing is interchangeable in its wonderful little engine of stresses, threadings, coercions, couplings and coilings, which requires patience and delicacy to assemble and fold together with maximum efficiency. Knowledge of this interior is denied to the inhabitants of those nations where plugs are sealed and inaccessible.

Plug. It's a word that performs its own nature, the final glottal g chopping off and locking down its sound with a kind of gulp, which happens to be the sound it makes when spelled backwards. It doesn't have a very interesting etymological history, for it cannot be traced much further back than early modern Dutch *plugge*, meaning, simply a plug, bung or stopper. The word seems to block itself off and plug into itself in the most absolute and obdurate way.

In some places plugs are getting harder to find. Why do airport lavatories, for example, have sinks with no plugs? Nearly always, they also have automatic taps that belch out a grudging little spatter of warm water (or, just as often, don't), when a hand is waved at or under them in a mystic pass. I imagine that it is because airport sinks are the products of the 'defensive design' that characterises most public amenities, that is intended to inhibit rather than to enable the way things offer themselves for our use. The principal concern for the designer of an airport lavatory is that passengers will be getting off planes crumpled and malodorous, and may want to treat the public lavatory like a private washroom, filling the sinks with steaming water, stripping to the waist and turning the paper towels into improvised flannels to give themselves bracing scrub-downs. Surely, the reasoning goes, if the flow of water requires to be renewed every few seconds, and no accumulation of water is possible in the sink, this kind of behaviour can be discouraged.

I admit I have myself, in grimmer, grimmer moments, been tempted by the prospect of such a public ablution. But what I mostly need to do in an airport lavatory is ping out my contact lenses, if it is before a long flight, or reinsert them, if I have just disembarked. Where the plughole would be in a domestic sink, there is in the plugless sink a little circular grating, with holes small enough to prevent the loss of rings, but large enough (or just about, I fear) for a contact lens to slip through. So I have to improvise some kind of plug (since I have never been a regular enough traveller to invest in a universal sink plug, which will allegedly cover any hole, though, in any case, the designers of airport lavatories are on to that, for most plugs of this kind require some minimal kind of depression in which to sit, and the plughole of the airport lavatory sink is quite flat). A

paper towel will do, though, because it quickly gets waterlogged, the glossy front page of a flight magazine is best.

But I see a larger purpose here than merely discouraging stand-up strip-washing. The aversion to plugs is part of a more allegorical abhorrence of slowness and lingering. For airports are places of universal, regulated glissando, where the aim is to keep everything smoothly, frictionlessly, and at an even tempo on the move. An airport wants to represent itself as a place with no sharp corners or declivities, no dubious alcoves, no niches in which stuff can accumulate and start to decay and age. A sink brimming with scummy water is a nauseous affront to a place that wants to suggest that everything is just passing smoothly through, without delay or obstruction. I suppose this is also why the lavatories in airports nowadays flush automatically at regular intervals, with or without human occupants, in a parody of the one who nervously wees whether they need to or not (such loos actually sometimes discharge climactically when you are sitting on them).

The paradoxical thing is that an airport is itself nothing but a huge cistern, that sucks people up in great masses, swills them around with nothing much to do for hours, and then suddenly and ecstatically spits them into the sky. The plugless sink is a utopian disavowal of the entire peristaltic store-and-release metabolism of which the airport consists.

But there is another kind of plug that is getting hard to find in airports. As more and more travellers have laptops, the batteries of which cannot last out the long hours of the flight, we have all grown familiar with the sight of laptop owners anxiously scanning the walls of the terminal at ankle level for power sockets. We know that they must exist, for how else does the floor get cleaned, so where have they hidden them, and why? The fact that electrical outlets are becoming more and more scarce is surely for the same reason that there are no plugs in the lavatory sinks. For where there are power sockets, then owners of laptops will inevitably spot them and latch on for a free infusion of juice. But it is not the freeloading that is offensive to the airport's *amour-propre*. Where the sockets are in their usual place, close to the floor, this will induce suited executives to hunker down

cross-legged like medieval tailors to work at their machines, sometimes, where there are double sockets, in incongruously intimate couples. The accumulation of such persons, and the clusters of other users of laptops and, increasingly, of other rechargeable devices who may hang around in their vicinity, waiting for them to shove off so that they can in their turn log on, are another kind of unwanted accumulation or resistance to the genial general flow desired by the airport, and a disturbing human analogy to those accumulations of grey, greasy water.

But these efforts to abolish the plug in certain places only serve to highlight the ineffaceable prominence of the plug in our practical and imaginative lives. Your sense of being and belonging is bound up with the kind of electrical plug with which you have grown up. Plugs plug you in to a particular locality and life-span. Growing up in Britain, I am used to the three-pin electrical plug I began by eulogising (though I can also just about remember that they used to have round pins). There is something hugely conclusive about the way in which this kind of plug locks into its socket and is clamped tightly in place. I find the two-pin plugs in use throughout most of the rest of the world contemptibly (and alarmingly) loose and approximate in their operation, especially in the US where, unless one inserts the plug with simultaneous decision and precision, and at an angle of precisely 90° to the socket, the act is almost always accompanied by a spiteful little spark and crackle just before the pins go home.

The rhyme between the washroom and the electricity grid, between plumbing and power, is a prime example of the interference between temporal dispensations that is so much a feature of the modern world, especially given the importance of plugs in providing access to entertainment (MP3 players) and communication (Local Area Networks). One might say that the plug is itself a connector between the archaic and the contemporary.

This communication between different times and their signature physics also highlights a striking dichotomy in the development of the plug and our relationship to it. For centuries, the principal use for plugs has been to stop things up – to seal, to store, or to prevent leakage. Plugs were used to keep food and drink fresh in containers, and to keep

the ships that might transmit them watertight. Robert Boyle's experiments with air and vacuum during the mid-seventeenth century depended upon the capacity to manufacture tightly-fitting plugs of different kinds. The word plug was often used to refer to the sucker of a pump, leading to the dialect term 'plugman' for the man who had the vital responsibility for pumping water out of mines. Plugs of this kind and in this era carry the instinct for partition, the need and desire to keep unlike things separate and free from contamination. Plugging belonged to a world in which massive moral value was attached to the idea of continence, even if this often went along with a fear of various kinds of stoppage or failure of flow. John Bunyan advised his readers 'Take heed therefore of listning to the charms, wherewith sin inchanteth the soul. In this be like the deaf Adder, stop thine ear, plug it up, to sin: and let it only be open to hear the words of God' (Bunyan 1684, 116).

Plugs also illustrate the hold over the human imagination exercised by the idea of tight and exact fit. When two things come together in this way, the difference between two apparently opposite objects is deliciously annulled, making a single thing out of two. This can be confirmed in the fact that the word 'plug' refers indifferently both to the socket in the wall and the contrivance on the end of the cable that stickler electricians prefer to denominate as the 'plug-top'. There seems a kind of destiny, a sense of utopian consummation, in such perfect experiences of reciprocity, perhaps because things that fit seem to be ideal and absolute rather than off-centre and approximate in the way that nature perversely seems to prefer. That the word 'plug' had a sexual meaning in the nineteenth century should obviously come as no surprise.

The very ubiquity of plugs, bungs and stoppers also meant that they gathered associations that were at once crude and humble. 'Pulling the plug' on something originally referred, not to the breaking of an electrical connection, but to pulling out the stopper that released the liquid in a water-closet. To 'plug away' at something does not suggest an operation of very high dignity or finesse. Hamlet imagines in similarly reduced terms the fate of Alexander, ingloriously reduced to plugging a hole after his death:

Why, may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till he find it
 stopping a bung-hole?... Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander
 returneth into dust. The dust is earth, of earth we make loam, and why of that
 loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer-barrel?

Imperial Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay,
 Might stop a hole to keep the wind away. (Shakespeare 1998, V.i.194-204, 330)

When plugs were bungs and stoppers, they were the means of forbidding flow. They
 maintained a vitalising, and sometimes dangerous potential difference between things: on
 one side of the plug would be wine, on the other side, contaminating air; on our side
 would be the ship's hold, on nature's, the thirsty salt wave. The plug also established a
 differential of time. It not only held things apart, it held them up, retarding the natural
 tendency for things to decay into adulteration.

But this meant that the plughole could also be the cause of sudden inversions or
 disappearances. The music hall song 'A Mother's Lament' details one such catastrophe,
 when an undernourished baby ('nought but a skellington wrapped up in skin') vanishes
 from the bath when his mother turns round for the soap. In response to her anguished
 cries the angels reply 'Your baby has gone down the plughole/Your baby has gone down
 the plug/The poor little thing was so skinny and thin/He should have been bathed in a
 jug'. Different versions of the final verse emphasise the alternative kinds of other world
 to which the plughole can give abrupt access, like a wormhole to other dimensions of
 space and time:

Don't worry about him, just be happy
 For I know he is suffering no pain.
 Your baby has gone down the plughole
 Let's hope he don't stop up the drain

Your baby is perfectly happy

He won't need a bath any more
He's mucking about with the angels above
Not lost but gone before

But for us, and probably only since the creation of electrical networks at the end of the nineteenth century, the idea of the plug has reversed its meaning. A plug is now not something used to keep things apart, but something that is used to establish connections, to draw together places and times. Its function is not to inhibit communication but to enable, not to preserve distinctness, but to establish interchange. In the past, plugs tended to keep the world at bay; now they let it in, or let us into it. We use plugs not to keep things apart, but to become a part of them, to 'plug in' to powers, actions, events, influences. Plugs are scale-transformers: they used to keep proximal things distant, now they bring distant things up close. Plugs used to keep things in their place, enforcing a world governed by the prepositions 'in', 'on' or 'at'. Now the plug is the enabler of relationships signified by prepositions like 'through', 'across' and 'between'.

In an electrical circuit, the point is that there is no difference between the two sides of the connecting node, which means that, in a sense, the point of a plug is to abolish itself; as soon as connection is made, it is as though the plug were no longer there. And yet, although plugs have become universal in the age of electricity, they have never come near to achieving a single, universal form and consequently fading from view. The modularisation of audio playback equipment after the Second World War, which meant that the listening apparatus was distributed between items like turntable, tape-deck, tuner, amplifier, speakers and headphones, produced a joyous proliferation of different kinds of plug to connect all these different components together: 3, 5 and 8-pin DIN (Deutsches Institut für Normung) plugs, TRS, XLR and RCA (Radio Corporation of America) plugs, along with 'banana plugs'. The multiplication and diversification of TV, video and computer equipment only added to the menagerie, with RF and coaxial, optical fibre and SCART (Syndicat des Constructeurs d'Appareils Radiorécepteurs et Téléviseurs) plugs, all of them, of course, with their mirror-image or gendered complementary forms. And, naturally, all these plugs require adapters. Regularly, I find myself standing entranced

before the baroque library of copulations ranged before me in the electronics store: RF-SCART, RCA-phono, male-male, male-female, female-female, unicorn, centaur, mermaid, griffin, liger, tigrion, manticore.

The very necessity of plugs keeps us earthbound, hooked up like intensive-care patients to life-support systems. For our world is far from being the homogenous and evenly-distributed space that would, in John Donne's words, make 'one little room, an every where' (Donne 1980, 60). It is lumpy, clustered, as our own bodies are, focussed at particular points of passage and connection, nodes, portals and boreholes which we use to make connections and breakthroughs. Of course an airport is just such a bud, or plug-in point. Without power-points and places of connection, we are houseless, amnesic orphans, aware that of the pathetic limits of our internal thesaurus of songs and onboard mental entertainments. We are ourselves leaky vessels, draining sinks, hearing the gurgles of our own outflow. So, however we might fantasise about a world in which we could be open to ubiquitous energy and data, we know that we need to take every opportunity to engorge our devices with sufficient power to get us through to the next plug-stop.

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Steven Connor is a writer, critic and broadcaster, and the Academic Director of the London Consortium Graduate Programme in Humanities and Cultural Studies. He is the author of books on Dickens, Beckett, Joyce, ventriloquism, skin, flies, and other topics in literary and cultural history. Two books are forthcoming in 2010: *The Matter of Air* (Reaktion) and *Paraphernalia: The Secret Magic of Ordinary Things* (Profile). His website at www.stevenconnor.com makes available lectures, broadcasts, unpublished work and work in progress.