



Identity Feedback

The travel bag that transforms

A second-hand, mid-sized courier bag has transformed my life in significant ways during its ten years, four universities and three continents spent slung over my shoulder. The fact that its previous owner barely used it at all before gifting it to me hints at a particular, subjective identity this seemingly utilitarian object occupies in my life.

The bag in question measures 36cm wide, 27cm tall and 9cm deep. It has one large volume compartment and two flat ones. The primary material is Cordura medium-weight nylon, lined internally with PVC. The fabric is a slightly-darker-than-neutral-grey, with an accent of formerly brown leather. A single seat-belt nylon shoulder strap with a sliding leather pad is its carrying method.

Our relationship, this bag and I, has a lot to do with a key word in the above description: formerly. The leather was formerly brown but after

consistent use, complete neglect of care, and exposure to UV, it's now more of a parched desert beige. The fabric, where it's managed to escape the sun's glare by hiding amongst its (the fabric's) own folds was formerly a richer, deeper grey colour.

There are stains. Last week a pigeon passing overhead at lunch in Utrecht, The Netherlands, relieved itself upon the bag's flap. This past summer I stored it in a damp tropical closet in Bali, Indonesia, for two weeks: its entire surface developed a film of mottled green mould that never quite washed itself out. In 2003 I inscribed my name haphazardly across its back in semi-permanent marker upon order of race marshals whom I wished would hold it in safe keeping while I competed in a summer cycling criterium in the capital of Canada.

The point is that the very process of decay that slowly brings the bag's

design to its demise brings it closer to me. And that's, in part, an unintended by-product of its design. Because of the material choices, and the choice of where those materials go—in particular the use of a long-lasting leather for a shoulder pad—the bag has survived longer.

Designers of the Sony Walkman infused the aesthetics of their device with that of Japanese culture. My bag does that in the opposite direction: it indirectly infuses my culture, my personal identity, and incorporates the cultures and environments and history my bag and I have encountered.

The design of the bag creates a feedback loop: the more used it becomes the more I want to use it, instead of using a different bag, a new bag—in short, another design without identity.

And like the cultural signifier that is the Walkman's size to its Japanese origins, my bag's designed dimensions, too, speak to a relationship: our relationship. Where an "inherently Japanese" culture dictated the Walkman's "minute size," the mundane standard size of my bag dictates my personal culture. The size of the bag has always determined what and how much I may carry. I must ask its permission: May I carry this extra bottle of wine? No. Should I take a sweater just in case? Yes. Do I need to bring three different camera lenses? No. The bag's design dictates how I live my life and thus how I construct my identity.

This constraint has also transformed my life by dictating what I travel with, which in turn has changed my philosophy about material possessions, namely to make do with fewer, which in turn has changed the way I travel and the way people perceive me when I travel. As an example, because I could only carry one change of clothes while cycling across Indonesia, I looked a little rough and desperate. Subsequently, people took more pity on me, invited me into their homes and left me with a better understanding of their culture.

But aspects of my relationship to this designed object are less quantifiable. Barthes says touch is "the most demystifying of all senses" whereby sight, i.e. the aesthetics of an object, are the most magical. In talking about the Citroen D.S., Barthes describes a very objective magic, as if the car's very nature were universally beautiful or, at the least, its designers intended it that way. To the uninitiated observer, my bag is somewhat lacking in this department. There's but a basic concession to aesthetics (the superfluous leather stripe on the flap). But to those in a relationship with it, i.e. me, the bag is infused with my experiences. It continues to develop a subjective magic.

Jeff Werner, Forum 2, May 16, 2008.