

Reassembling the *Fragments*: Performing the Ordinary as Extraordinary

R. Shannon Constantine

*Artefacts such as ceramic teapots embody visceral, emotional, and symbolic meanings in their materiality. These meanings often lead to affective responses when the materiality of the object is altered, such as during breakage. While the breaking of a ceramic teapot is a quotidian, domestic event, displacing the event from its domestic context and framing it as a performance further nuances the meanings attached to it and enables critical engagement. This paper analyses the performance of breaking and its relation to both the camera and the ceramic artefact in David Cushway's "Teapot" video from his *Fragments* series, with the aim of understanding how structures of viewing and the materiality of the artefact impact our relationship to the object and to the process on display. Drawing on Auslander's discussion of "Liveness" and the concept of retheatricalisation to frame how the work is both created and viewed, alongside information from an email interview with Cushway and other information and analyses of his work, this paper explores the possibilities of reading Cushway's video as a performance due to intersections between the materiality of the object and the intervention of the camera, which involves retheatricalisation and a dialogue between liveness and presence. Analysis suggests that our approach to pieces such as Cushway's is strongly influenced by our personal archives of experience and knowledge, and is framed by the camera's role in constructing the video. Consequently, the paper suggests that our responses to the video as performance are guided by conditions of materiality, presence, and camera techniques, and are thus closely dependent on both the form and content of the video.*

Keywords: retheatricalisation; liveness; *Fragments*; materiality

According to Richard Schechner, "any action that is framed, enacted, presented, highlighted, or displayed is a performance" (2). Here, Schechner suggests a shift away from restricting performance to spheres such as the theatre and the cinema,

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opening up possibilities for quotidian events to be read as performances (depending on how they are presented). David Cushway's "Teapot" video from his 2006 *Fragments* series creates an interpretive space for the seemingly mundane act of breaking ceramics, setting itself up to be interrogated as a performance for reasons that include the materiality of the object on display and the camera's role in framing the event. Elaborating on why this piece is an interesting one to analyse, the possibilities for reading the teapot as an artefact involved in performance link to Cushway's own views regarding ceramics: to him, "the history of clay use is the history of humanity; it is the material that binds us to the earth that we inhabit" (Cushway, "Bio/Statement").

This materiality and historicity also connect to the embodied meanings and affective responses attached to ceramics, for example the sentimental attachment to a vase gifted by a dead relative, the memories embedded in a grandmother's tea-set, or even on a more basic level, the familiarity attached to the mug out of which one drinks coffee every day. These meanings involve an intersection of utility, affect, and value, connotations that are highlighted when the object under discussion is located within a performance such as Cushway's, where it is broken into pieces and is then depicted in a process of recreation that extends the moment of the break. In this instance, the action of breaking is set up as a performance through filming, and is furthered by the editing of that film, which together allow the viewer to "witness an ordinary occurrence in an extraordinary way" (Gray 16). Additionally, within the performance, the embodied meanings associated with the teapot are complicated by its status as both domestic utensil and art object, suggesting a tension between the intimate nature of the teapot and its displacement into the context of filming.

In order to engage with Cushway's video as a performance, this paper will explore three major concerns. First, it will interrogate how the materiality of the object and the actions associated with it in the video create possibilities for reading Cushway's "Teapot" video as a performance. Second, it will focus on how the camera's mediation between us as viewers and the piece enables us to engage with ideas such as presence and liveness, and third, on the ways in which retheatricalisation informs our reading of the performance. In terms of methodology, in addition to textual analysis, the concept of "retheatricalisation" and Auslander's discussion of "Liveness" are used as analytical frameworks. The artist's website and analyses of his work are also used as sources, along with a personal interview carried out with the artist through e-mail.

Introducing the theories and concepts engaged with in this paper, "retheatricalisation", liveness and mediatisation are concepts that require explanation. The term "retheatricalisation" was first introduced by Georg Fuchs in 1959, and refers to a process that occurred in the theatre of the 1900s by way of the historic avant-garde, a self-conscious alteration in theatre practice aimed at countering naturalist theatre and ensuring that theatre "created its own reality" rather than

merely mimicking reality (Lehmann 51; Fischer-Lichte and Riley 115). This involved an erasure of the divide between stage and spectator, and thus, led to the development of new forms of communication between the two entities alongside the development of a new theatrical code (Fischer-Lichte and Riley 115). Bleeker locates retheatricalisation as a reestablishment of the theatrical, and applies it as a self-conscious engagement between what is seen and the bodies involved in seeing it that purposefully highlights previously invisible aspects of the relationship between spectacle and spectator (7, 199). In this paper, instances of retheatricalisation will be approached as points that are integral to the performance.

Moving on to the nexus between liveness and mediatisation, Auslander theorises that the live and the mediatised are not two disparate polarities, but are mutually inter-dependent, drawing on each other in their representations (10, 11). Auslander identifies mediatisation as closely guiding the sensory norm for specific historical moments, and notes that it extends beyond the mere use of media technology, instead involving a “media epistemology” that implies a historical and contingent relationship between the live and the mediatised (35, 37). He analyses the incorporation of the ontology of liveness in television, which he identifies as closer to that of theatre than that of film, especially as television’s immediacy and intimacy heighten its semblance of liveness given its sense of events unfolding in “real time” (Auslander 12, 14). In this paper, the nexus between liveness and mediatisation (through the presence of the camera) will be foregrounded for its role in the performance.

Reading Materiality

Having laid out the theoretical framework of this paper, this section will approach the question of how the materiality of the teapot and the actions associated with it create possibilities for reading Cushway’s “Teapot” video as a performance. In its analysis, the section suggests that the materiality of the teapot and its embodied meanings are extended through the lifecycle of the object being depicted, which subsequently engages the spectator in a critical encounter and process of meaning-making within this performance event. To begin with, as an artefact, the teapot embodies meanings that include utility, domesticity, and creation, and since “the potential stored in ordinary things is a network of transfers and relays” (Stewart 3), these meanings engage spectators in a process of identification and meaning-making that varies between both viewing and understanding representation (Martin 219). As Cushway suggests, the breaking of a teapot is “a common event, *a kitchen sink or domestic melodrama*” (emphasis added), an association highlighted by his identification of the objects being filmed as a “recognisable tea-set” bought from charity shops, similar to the ones his grandmother owned (“E-mail interview”). To Dahn, this banality “enhances their ability to act as vehicles for symbolic meaning” (162): while this statement is questionable (an ornamental,

hand-painted vase could also have operated as a carrier of symbolic meaning), the quotidian nature of these objects does invest them with meaning situated in the domestic context. Our personal responses to the object on display indicate that viewing is always guided by structures of seeing and relationships between “the one seeing and what is seen” (Bleeker 2): these pre-conditions set up how the event is made recognisable despite, or perhaps because of, its status as a performance.

Interestingly, the “layer, or layering to the ordinary” (Stewart 3) that Cushway identifies as being a result of the way he films the video (“E-mail interview”) can also involve associations of breaking and remaking that extend beyond the domestic. Demonstrating how the initial event of a performance resonates with how its viewers make meaning of it amidst a cultural and political landscape that colours the “shift between representation and presence” involved in performance (Martin 220), one viewer associates Cushway’s piece with the teacup scene from the film *The Theory of Everything* (Jennings). This scene is itself linked to the breaking teacup in the *Hannibal* franchise (Kovacs), thereby creating a matrix of associations and significations within which Cushway’s piece may be approached (Figures 1 and 2). This, therefore, points to the “horizontalism” of criticism, where a critic begins from his/her subjective relationship to a performance (Martin 225), thereby drawing on an archive of reference-points which frame the viewing of a performance. In this piece, it is the re-assembly of the teapot and the space between its breaking and remaking (which plays on the visibility of the work and the interpretive possibilities made apparent through this gap (Martin 233)) that enable associations with other performances that have similar structures. To elaborate, the lifecycle of the object mediates the gap between the object on display and our own repositories of experience and knowledge. In Cushway’s film, he presents a familiar moment of destruction as a heightened moment of fragmentation followed by remaking: the moment of the break is rendered “hyper-realistic”, with the process of the fall and its reversal depicted in detail (Gray 15). This technique enables the video to be read as a performance involving a series of actions that is framed to extend beyond the commonplace domestic accident, and which then brings out the gap between the breaking and the reappearance of the teapot as a site for meaning-making.

While the interconnections discussed above frame the interpretation of the performance event, the possibilities for this horizontal viewing do not arise merely from the actions and object being represented, but are an outcome of the presence of the camera and how it informs viewers’ approach to the performance, as the next section discusses.



Fig.1: Hawking's teacup



Fig. 2: Hannibal's teacup

The Camera: Presence and Liveness

“Ordinary affects are the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergences. They’re things that happen” (Stewart 1, 2).

In the quote from *Ordinary Affects* above, Stewart describes the potentials for affect that exist in ordinary occurrences (in this case, a breaking teapot). The interaction between the live and the mediated provides a necessary layer for the affect that results from a teapot breaking to be conveyed to viewers and read as a performance. Exploring mediation and mediation, this section analyses how the camera’s mediation between the viewers and the piece enables engagement with ideas such as presence and liveness, and discusses the interdependence of the live and the mediated as framing the performance. Considering the use of mediation in this performance, as suggested previously, it is the presence of the camera and editing that make this event visible as a performance, which then enables us to read the fall as more than just a domestic mishap. First, Cushway’s own views on the technology he used (provided by the University of Wales Engineering Department) inform an analysis of the role of the camera: he highlights the sensitivity of the cameras, explaining that the flashes of light seen in the video are caused by the flickering of the strip lights above their heads, and that technology enables alternative understandings of a commonplace experience (“E-mail Interview”), thus indicating the camera’s overt presence in this performance.

As Auslander notes, in today’s cultural economy, the live and the mediated are not two disparate entities, but exist in a dialogic, interconnected relationship, where each draws on, and is dependent on, the other (43). The connection between the live and the mediated is especially interesting in this piece, given its cyclical nature and its tactility. The action being filmed is a visceral, affective one, and contains within it notions of immediacy, presented in this video as a “hyper-realistic” (Gray 15) instance of a teapot breaking. To present this action, the teapot was thrown from the top of a ladder onto a paving slab, thus constituting the “liveness” of the breaking (“E-mail interview”) (Figure 3). Liveness in this context, furthermore, is dependent on the fragility of ceramic, seen by Cushway as a material that presents numerous interpretive and creative possibilities (“Bio/Statement”). This liveness, fragility, and possibility, however, are extended beyond the initial moment of breaking: the process itself is slowed down by the camera, which films at a rate of three thousand frames per second (Gray 16), and the depiction of breaking becomes an extended, eternally visible, performance. This is an example of an instance where the live is itself a product of media technologies (Auslander 25): the video depends upon the live for its immediacy and the affect attached to the breaking of domestic ceramic objects, while the “live”

event taking place in real time (though time is manipulated through the slow-motion cameras) depends on the intimacy and detail of the mediated recording, which positions the live in a cycle of continuity, repetition, and anticipation.

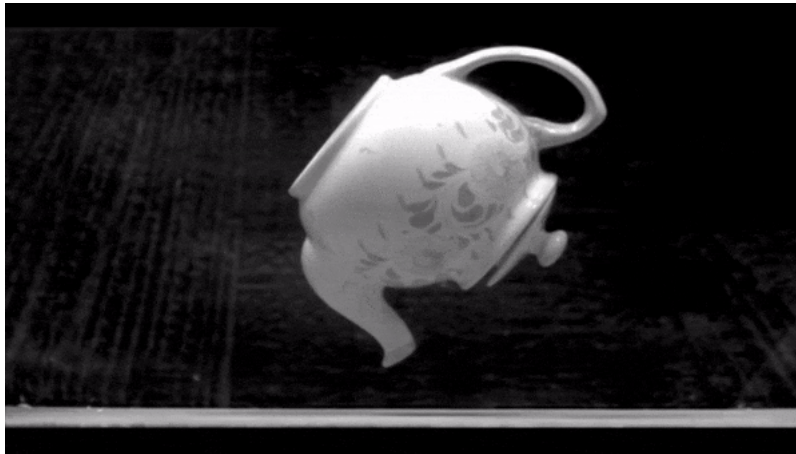


Fig.3: The moment of the break (view a clip of the video at liminalities.net/16-4/fig3.mp4)

Discussing televised images, Auslander suggests that like live performance, the mediated has disappearance as its base, and that both these kinds of performance “become themselves through disappearance” (50). Applying this idea within the context of this performance, the breaking and remaking of the teapot unfolds as a performance of appearance and disappearance: the materiality of the teapot is constantly in flux, and neither its wholeness nor its fragmentation remain static. Instead, the teapot’s fragility and potential for rupture are performed in the slow break and its reversal, made visible as a result of the manipulation of time using specialised cameras. This manipulation of the materiality of the ceramic teapot is furthered by the camera’s mediation: it appears that the teapot reconstructs itself and moves back up at a higher speed than its fall and breaking. However, this effect is a by-product of the filming process, as Cushway notes: “as the film begins to rewind and we become aware of what is about to happen...our brains possibly speed up the process, it is almost as if we are willing the thing back together” (“E-mail interview”). This statement also indicates the interdependence of the live and the mediated, where the live informs our reading of the mediated and vice versa.

Retheatricalisation

Connected to the intersection between the live and the mediated is the operation of retheatricalisation. Exploring the question of how it frames the actions presented in this video, first, retheatricalisation is closely connected to both the setting up of the performance and the viewers' interaction with the "Teapot" video (due to its role in ascribing theatricality to the process of breaking, for instance). Certain aspects of the video highlight both its status as a performance in itself and the performativity of the action on display, and can be identified as self-reflexive moments of theatricality. Furthermore, these aspects (which include the absence of sound, the black and white colour scheme, and the moment in which the teapot begins to reconstruct itself) generate a critical space between the performance and its viewers that provides possibilities for interpretation and engagement.

In relation to the absence of sound, the video overturns expectations of the crash that accompanies breakage, calling attention to the constructed nature of the video and intersecting with concepts such as presence and liveness: while the visuality of the act is evident, without sound, the video does not complete its approximation of the act of breaking, and the apparent presence of the act is disrupted. According to Gray, "an intellectual response is secondary to the experience of the materiality of this work" (20): however, our connection to materiality is partly impacted by silence, which could also be seen as contributing to Cushway's intention of enabling an ordinary occurrence to be viewed in an unexpected way. Additionally, while the black and white colour scheme is an outcome of the filming method rather than a deliberate technique (Cushway asserts that this technology was the only method available to him at the time), it functions as a moment of retheatricalisation as the viewers are able to identify a gap between the 'reality' of the object breaking and the televisual image that is conveyed through the screen.

While the act of breaking itself may function as an instance of retheatricalisation given its speed and the teapot's fragmentation into a "beautiful, measured, hypnotic ballet of shards" (Dahn 162), the more apparent moment is that of reconstruction, which occurs two minutes into the video (the halfway mark), where a tiny chip bounces back up from where it falls (followed by the rest of the shards) (Figure 4). To Gray, this undermines the emotional effect of the broken ceramic and is the very moment at which the film "fails to convince" (17). To me, this failure to convince is effectively a moment of retheatricalisation, foregrounding its status as a theatrical construction where the viewer is distanced from the spectacle on display (Figure 4). This gap highlights that viewers do not engage with performances in abstraction of the creator's strategies of guiding visuality. It constitutes an aesthetic disruption that introduces conflict into the relationship between viewer and performance, thereby enabling both an aesthetic and a discursive "re-

distribution of the sensible” (Martin 223). It is this re-distribution and the strategies of managing attention (Bleeker 4) drawn upon in the performance that facilitate the accumulation of meanings, meanings that are also connected to the object’s materiality (to Cushway, the moment of reconstruction is intended to show that ceramics are both cyclical and indestructible, such as in the options for recycling and the possibilities for reconstructing the history of a culture from a few shards of ceramic (“E-mail interview”). In line with Gray’s argument, these interpretations may be secondary to initial emotive responses to the performance: however, the distance between performance and viewer offers a critical space within the performance event within which these meanings can be incorporated into the experience of viewing the performance.

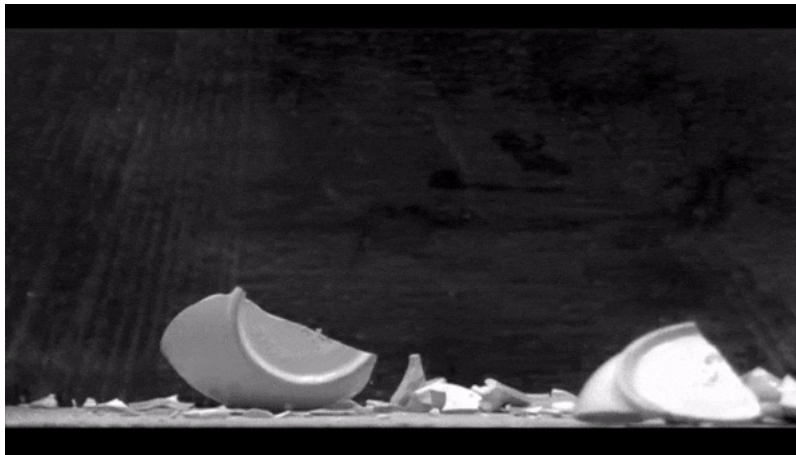


Fig.4: The moment of reconstruction (view a clip of the video at liminalities.net/16-4/fig4.mp4)

To conclude, Cushway’s “Teapot” video from *Fragments* can be read as a performance due to both the materiality of the object on display and the presence of the camera in framing its presentation. These factors, in combination with embodied meanings and affective responses, nuance viewers’ engagements with the performance, enabling the extended fall, breaking, and reconstruction to be read as a departure from the ordinary. Materiality is both extended and questioned, engaging the viewer in the performance event. Additionally, the role of viewers’ own archives in interpretation is suggested by the intertextual connections that can be made between these and other performances, thereby indicating the possibilities for broadening the scope of interpretation through horizontal criticism. The interconnection between the live and the mediated sets up possibilities both for

interpretation and affective response, while the camera's mediation suggests the interdependence of the live and the mediated in framing how the performance is depicted (with the immediacy and affect associated with the live interacting with the intimacy and continuity of the mediated). Rhetoricalisation (through silence, a black and white colour scheme, and the moment at which reconstruction occurs) guides both the setting up of the performance and its viewing, creating a space for critical engagement by drawing attention to the how the performance is constructed.

Figures

Figure 1. Falling Teacup. Still from *The Theory of Everything*, directed by James Marsh. Working Title Films, 2014. *YouTube*, uploaded by 41sttry, 19 July 2008, www.youtube.com/watch?v=sEXIpwgt5gE&feature=youtu.be. Screenshot.

Figure 2. Teacup. Still from *Hannibal*, season 2 episode 11, "Kō No Mono," created by Bryan Fuller and Thomas Harris, Dino de Laurentiis Company, Living Dead Guy Productions, AXN Original Productions, and Gaumont International Television, 2013. *YouTube*, uploaded by Ele Nora, 11 Nov. 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=HCRZ09wJrT8. Screenshot.

Figure 3. *Teapot*. 00.00.06-00.00.16. n.d. davidcushway.com, www.davidcushway.com/fragments/. Video clip. Used with permission of the artist.

Figure 4. *Teapot*. 00.02.00-00.02.10. n.d. davidcushway.com, www.davidcushway.com/fragments/. Video clip. Used with permission of the artist.

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