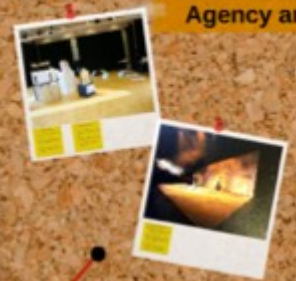


**Relationships between power and agency:  
The role of the 'theatre designer' in performance-making processes**

**Dramatic Performance  
Postdramatic Performance**



**Agency and Power**



**Interview Analysis**



**Conclusion**



**Introduction**



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# Introduction

## Agency and Power

- How is designer agency expressed in design pedagogies?
- How does power shape enactment of agency in different forms of performance-making?

## Methods

- Interviews with eight performance design course leaders
- Purposive sample from a range of UK HEI settings
- Semi-structured interviews using an element of photo novella or 'picture stories' (Hurworth, 2003)

"Pamela Howard describes a theatre designer as being 'like a wife', in that traditional sense:

*[A theatre] designer had to be like a wife – supportive, a friend and a partner, ready to co-operate at all times and on all occasions, good with money, decorative, good sense of humour, and accepting that no relationship is finite and when someone else came along, you would be passed over. (Howard, 2006, p.26)*

What do you think of that?"

"Yes! That's rather good. In that traditional model you are. And of course, that's what students resist! They don't want to be the missus! Who does? Exactly, they don't want to pick up the kids [LAUGH] Yeah, that's great, she's right."

## Designers and Disappearing Acts

- Job roles that have relational and support characteristics 'get disappeared' because they are associated with the feminine ('Like a wife'). (Fletcher, 1999)
- 'Unseen work' (Singleton, 2013)
- Absence of backstage work and workers from theatre histories (Essin, 2011, p.33)

## **Why is Design Pedagogy the Focus of the Study?**

- A means by which normative ideas about designing can be explored as a site of 'social practices' (Kaspersen, 2000, pp.32-33) constituting social life, forming agents and realising structure.

# Dramatic Performance

## Postdramatic Performance





## **Text and Dramatic Performance**

- **'The authentic vitality of the author's voice' (Rebellato, 1999, p.118)**
- **'Wholeness, illusion and world representation' (Lehmann, 2006, p.22).**
- **'The infernal couple'. Design is a 'superfluous and harmful additive' Pavis (2008)**
- **All elements of performance are subjugated to the 'primacy of the text' (Lehmann, 2006, p.21).**



# Postdramatic Performance

- A 'scenically orientated' theatre (Lehmann, 2006, p.17) where a text-based dramaturgy is replaced by a 'visual dramaturgy' (Ibid., p.93).
- The organising principle of the dramatic text is put to one side, in favour of collaborative assembly of 'material' (Braunschweig in Pavis, 2008, p.118).
- 'Parataxis': The non-hierarchical, pluralistic approach towards performance-making in postdramatic performance (Lehmann, 2006, p.86).



# Agency and Power

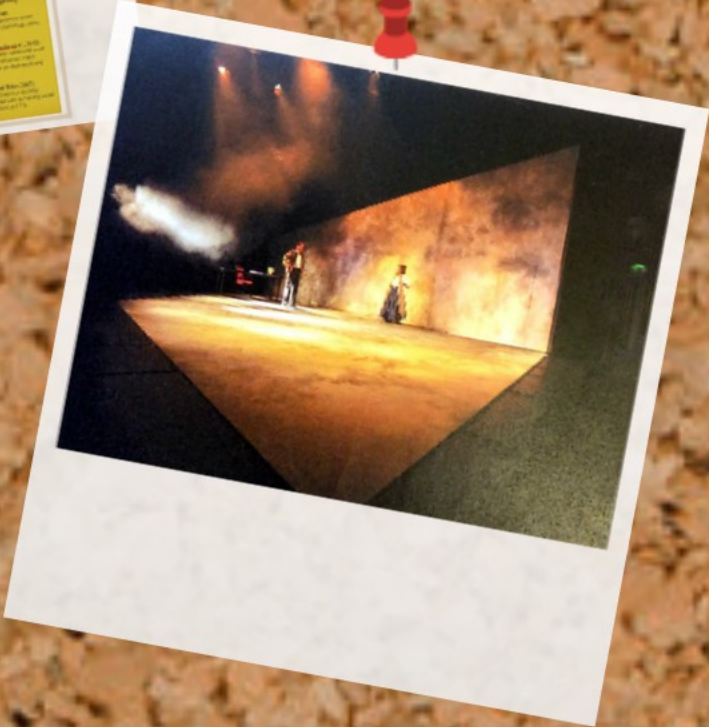
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**What is Agency?**  
Agency is the ability to act independently and make choices. It is the power to influence or control the actions of others.

**Agency and Power**  
Agency and power are closely related. Power is the ability to influence or control the actions of others, while agency is the ability to act independently and make choices. Power is often used to exert agency, and agency is often used to exercise power.

**Three Types of Agency**  
1. **Individual Agency** - The ability of an individual to act independently and make choices. This is the most common type of agency and is often exercised through personal decisions and actions.



## What is Agency?

- 'A faculty of free-will and choice' (Kockelman, 2007, p.375) or 'existential agency' (Eteläpelto et al., 2013).
- 'A placeholder for some vague sense of human freedom or individual volition within a broader model' (Hitlin and Elder, 2007, p.171)
- Separable, inseparable, subservient, dominant or interdependent relations with social structure (Hayward and Lukes, 2008; King, 2010).

# Agency and Power

- 'The twin concerns of power and structure and agency have developed in parallel rarely engaging one another' (Hayward and Lukes, 2008, p.5)
  - 'Power over': power as a product of social causation (structure)
  - 'Power to' = the ability of individuals to act (agency).
- My position:
  - 'Social power' (Pansardi, 2012, p.73) or 'Proxy agency' (Bandura, 2012, p.12)

# Three Types of Agency

## **Authorial Agency (Isackes, 2012)**

- The 'impact of hierarchical power in some forms of theatre making that privilege some authors over others'

## **Professional Agency (Eteläpelto et al., 2013)**

- 'Professional subjects and/or communities of influence'...'power both constrains and resources professional agency at work' (Ibid, p.61).

## **Identity Agency (Hitlin and Elder, 2007)**

- Repetition of 'role enactment or identity performance...concerned with achieving social or substantive ends' (Ibid., p.179).



# Interview Analysis



## Authorial Agency

Power and authorship:

*There's no example of the producer asking "Which play do you really want to do? Which piece do you really want to do and which director do you really want to do it with? and I'll make that happen"....**I don't think they [directors] want to remove themselves from that seat of power**" [My emphasis]*

## Authorial Agency

Dramatic and other forms of performance:

*"[There are] differences between authoring work and theatre design which is not the same as authoring your own work...One is dealing with a text, one is interpreting a text...and a director to interpret that text"*

## Professional Agency and Communities of Influence: The Linbury Prize

*"[T]he Linbury allows a kind of nirvana like situation where there's a certain amount of budget that's allocated for the set and that cannot be compromised into something else like the actors, the programme, you know. It's Nirvana!"*

## Professional Agency and Communities of Influence: Prague Quadrennial

*"[I]n that exhibition you could see it in some of the things...you went around the exhibition and anything that looked like a box set or something like that or within a proscenium stage looked ridiculously old fashioned...there were more and more theatre designers that were also directing, lighting maybe even writing, maybe even performing and this whole thing called theatre design, or scenography or design for performance was slowly eroding and breaking up."*

## Identity Agency and Flux

Flux reflected in course names:

*"[W]e firstly called it theatre design for performance. That was a conscious thing of trying to say we're not just theatre design anymore...it was an acknowledgement that the students were doing that...we had these students saying "I want to make a piece in the space", "Oh, right" and "Oh God" you know, and we started to realise that theatre practice was changing."*

## Identity Crisis

Flux reflected in professional identities:

*"One of the struggles faced in our line of work is labeling. Do we call ourselves theatre designers or scenographers? Is it craft or art? Can I call myself a theatre designer if I don't design performances that take place in a theatre? Am I a designer if I organise the performance space and its use but don't design anything that is physically placed in that space? Am I a scenographer if I only design one aspect of the performance?" (Sophie Jump, a designer in Crawley et al., 2011, p.7)*

## Identity Agency, Power and Precarity

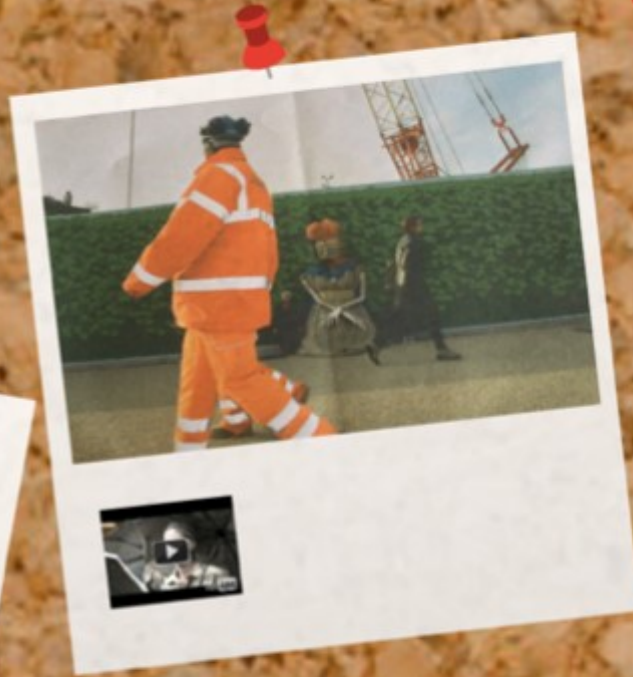
Increasing precarity in employment:

*"All work is freelance and they're [students] amazed that there used to be the REP system where you would have a designer and a deputy designer and Head of a whole team and you would learn that way but I don't think there's one theatre... nowhere...that does that."*

- Power over, power to?



# Conclusion



## Conclusion

How is agency expressed in design pedagogies?

- Tension between author/ interpreter or generative artist/ reactive artist
- Forums for the expression of professional agency are separate from performance: 'secret worlds'
- Identity is in flux and increasingly precarious

## Conclusion

How does power shape conceptions and enactment of agency in different forms of performance?

- In dramatic performance, designers positioned as having 'relational and support' ('Like a wife') and prone to 'disappearing acts' (Fletcher, 1999)
- A new generation of designers resist the old hierarchies: '[T]hat's what students resist! They don't want to be the missus!'
- A move away from hierarchy in postdramatic is not necessarily emancipatory in improving designers' 'power to' act

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