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# The Relationship Between Professional Identity and Pedagogy: Using Objects in Narrative Inquiry Interviews

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# Aims

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- To describe my experience of using objects to facilitate narrative inquiry in order to reconstruct the pedagogy of an early example of stage design pedagogy
- To explore how the professional identities of Motley alumni were shaped by the pedagogy of the course
- To consider the impact of pedagogy on creative practice



# Context

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PhD at the University of Birmingham: **The relationship between pedagogy, professional identity and creative practices of stage designers.**

Research questions guiding the case study:

- How did the pedagogy of the Motley Theatre Design Course characterise ways of being a designer and ways of doing design?
- Within this model of pedagogy, how are designers positioned within the 'collective machine' (Singleton, 2013, p.47) of theatrical performance?
- What is the creative/aesthetic style that emerges from that positioning?

# Pedagogic Principles: Summary

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1. Designers should be integrated with the ensemble as equal collaborators
2. It is the job of the designer to communicate the play
3. The designer and design should serve the play
4. Settings should accommodate, and be built around, the movement of body in space
5. Costumes should assist the movement of actors on stage.

# The Absent Archive

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One of the biggest mysteries of theatre is not what has been put on the stage, but the unseen work that led to the production's first night. While what is visible is momentary and transitory, the creativity preceding it is invisible.

(Singleton, 2013, p.47)





# Hidden Work, Hidden Workers

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Disregarding ‘the craftsmanship of all but a few high-profile professionals’ has the effect of excluding all forms of ‘backstage labor’ from theatre histories, preventing the expression of ‘personal investments’ and articulation of ‘professional identities’.

(Essin, 2011, p.46)



# Hidden in Plain Sight

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What little writing there is deals with either the quotidian concerns of production practice or, when it ventures into considerations of how work is developed, relegates it to the uncritical and mysterious realms of intuition and emotional response—terrains that remain conveniently inscrutable.

(Isackes, 2008, p.52)





# Addressing the Gap: Narrative Inquiry with Objects

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- ‘Narrative inquiry’: The ‘scholarship of stories’ (Portillo, 2000, p.4)
- ‘[A] distinct form of discourse...the shaping and ordering of experience, a way of understanding one’s own or other’s actions, or organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole’ (Chase, 2011, p.421)
- Objects do not merely *reflect* who we are but are the very things that make us in the first place. (Bell & Bell, 2013, p. 82)

# Objects *as* memory: 'Punctum' and 'Studium'

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## 'Studium'

- An attentive encounter with (or study of) the photographer's intentions.  
(Barthes, 1999, pp. 25-27)

## 'Punctum'

- [S]ting, speck, cut, little hole-and also a cast of the dice. A photograph's punctum is that accident ... which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me). (ibid, p. 51)

In relation to objects:

[W]e might say that while some remnants merely give information about the past, like the studium, others prick and wound and grab and puncture, like the punctum - unsettling assumptions, exposing the unexpected.

(Hirsch and Spitzer, 2006, p.

# Objects, 'Punctum' and Memory

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## Temporal

- I can never deny that the thing has been there. There is a superimposition here of reality, and of the past. (Barthes, 1999, p. 83)

## Expansive

- It is an addition: it is what I add...and what is nonetheless already there.' (ibid, p.56)

In narrative inquiry:

[Objects] become vehicles for us to know ourselves and...our place in the larger world. Objects can be sensed. They can be touched and smelled, picked up and put down, over and over again. **These objects have been the vehicles to our memories...** [My emphasis]

(Bell and Bell, 2012, p. 68)

# Method: Recruitment and Structure

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- Seven participants recruited via Motley alumni network studied at Motley between 1968-2009.
- They were asked to bring an object that had been significant to them whilst they were on the Motley course
- Three stages to the object method:
  1. Participants asked reflect on their object **individually**
  2. Participants **interviewed each other**
  3. Participants introduced their object and reported their discussions back to the group. Further discussion mediated by me. This stage was audio recorded and transcribed.





# Method: The Questions

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## Stage 1:

1. What is the object? (Describe it in as much detail as you can)
2. What do you feel when you hold it and look carefully at it?
3. Where did it come from? (Was it a gift? Did you purchase it?)
4. Why is this object connected to the Motley Theatre Design Course? Why did you choose this object?

# Method: The Questions

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## Stage 2:

1. What did you learn in writing and telling about your object? (Were there any surprises?)
2. What did you learn about your partner's experiences of learning on the Motley course with/through the object?
3. What other thoughts/reflections/observations emerged through sharing/discussion with your partner?

# Professional Identity and Pedagogy

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I brought things with me [when studying at Motley] not to completely decorate my space...and this is actually what we were encouraged to do anyway on Motley, this personalisation. **Of course, designing is partly about being personal, totally personal but also not being too personal in a way, it's that balance.**



# The Visibility of the Designer

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I think that he [Hockney] is brilliant, and I think that when he designs for the theatre, he is also brilliant, but a bit too brilliant. **I think he counts more than a designer should.**

(Harris, 1992, p.34)

[It was] a wire sculpture, which was very difficult to interpret as anything, but just Barbara Hepworth's wire sculpture...(Harris, 1992, p.77)



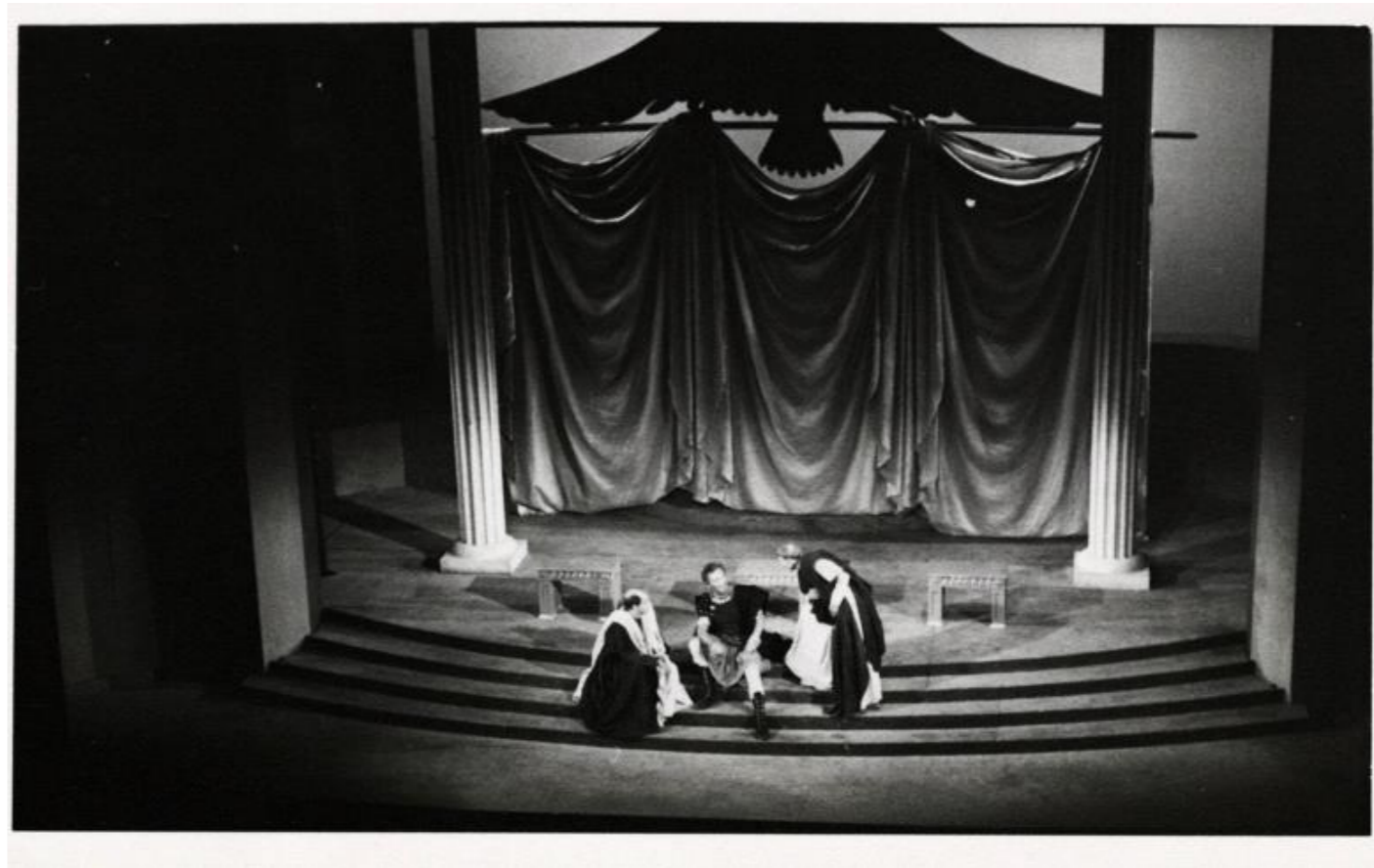
Barbara Hepworth, Apollo 1951, with Peggy Ashcroft as Electra in Michel St Denis's production of Sophocles's *Electra* at the Old Vic theatre, London 1951

# A Design Movement in the Twentieth Century?

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One can always recognise that it is someone from the course but not who it is... (Harris, 1992)

There was a certain thing against naturalism, but not against realism...to stress the real, but through the art, rather than through the fact. (Harris, 1992, p. 135)



Harris, M. (1953) 'Design for Antony and Cleopatra Act I Scene IV', available:

<http://imagesearchnew.library.illinois.edu/cdm/search/searchterm/530428-123>.

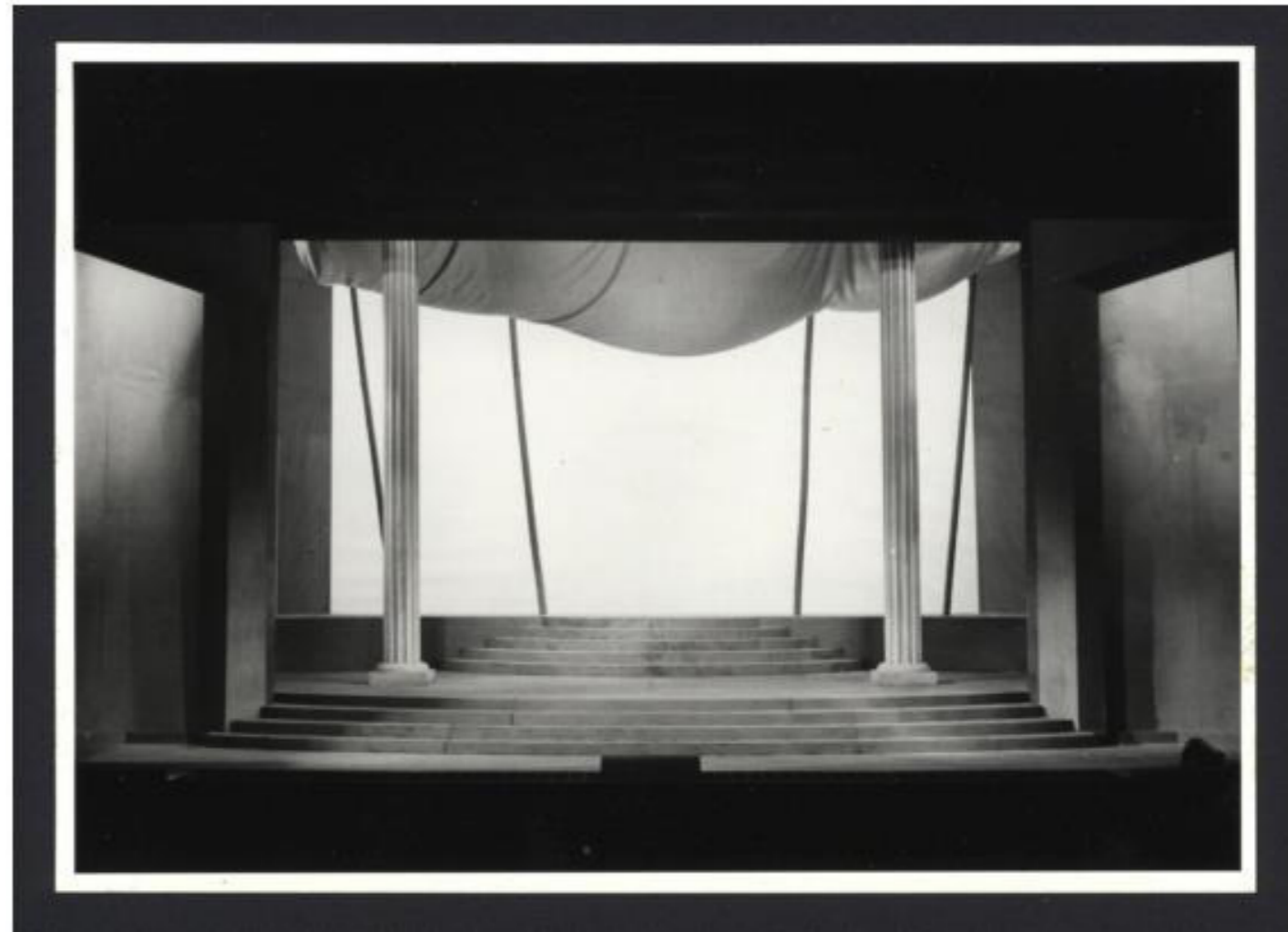


# Aesthetic outcome: 'Poetic Realism'

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The poetic in poetic realism meant...the crystallising of meaning in a moment in the dramatic action, in terms that both appealed to a sense of 'everyday' reality and also represented the significance of that reality.

(Lacey, 2009, p. 240)



Harris, M. (1953) 'Design for Antony and Cleopatra Opening Set: Act I, Scene 1', available: <http://imagesearchnew.library.illinois.edu/cdm/search/searchterm/530428-103>

# The Motley Professional Identity

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- The professional identity of a designer reflects the need to master the balance between their own creative identity as ‘generative artists’ (Isackes, 2012) and the demands of the text or narrative
- It is the ‘job’ of a Motley designer to establish the ‘truth’ of a text in collaboration with the director
- Research provides the lens through which the interpretation takes place
- A necessary condition for success in designing in a poetic realist style is to cede some aspects of identity

# Conclusions: Objects in Narrative Inquiry

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- Experience of using of objects in narrative inquiry was that they facilitate diverse and rich accounts
- Participants shape the narrative through their choice of object - **it is what is significant for them**
- The object provides a focus for both the speaking subject and – at times - the feelings and memories associated with a subject’s narrative. **The displacement onto/into the object helped to foster an atmosphere of trust and intimacy**
- The objects did not just prompt recollection but appeared to **contain and hold those memories**. Perhaps, as Beckstead et. al. (2011, p.195) , suggest: ‘Memory is not only “stored in brains” but rather distributed through social artefacts and cultural tools’

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