

Popular Past, Popular Present, Post-Popular?

An inconspicuous Victorian door on a backstreet off Bethnal Green Road leads into a dimly lit room. Wartime band music tinkles through the speakers, as men in uniform arrive accompanied by women with hairdos sprayed into perfect waves and barrel curls. They buy beer and wine from the bar, and sit at small tables around a central space. The crowd grows and soon the tables are full. As the music fades, an M.C. emerges from behind a curtain. He seduces the audience with promises of astonishing spectacle, hair-raising feats and beautiful bodies, peppering his patter liberally with innuendo. A woman in a vintage coat and hat takes the stage. She sits demurely, listening to a male voice describe the ideal qualities of women. But as the voice lists “the roles for which [women] were intended: the mother, the wife, the hostess”, she grows increasingly agitated. She stands, paces up and down and removes her gloves....

The performer, Audacity Chutzpah, deftly peels off layered costumes representing Western female archetypes of the twentieth century: the suffragette, the wartime worker, the hippy, and the secretary. Between each layer of fabric, the jarring sound of a needle scratching a record makes audible the grating of one historical period against another. A mobile phone rings and she cautiously puts her ear to a ‘brick’-style antique. Her office outfit is then teasingly removed to reveal an image of femininity whose historicity is ambiguous: the burlesque performer in black knickers, suspenders and pasties. The audience cheer, and then queue to buy sushi from the kiosk in the corner during the interval.¹

At the Popular Music and Dance Matters Symposium at University of Surrey in 2008, I gave a paper on changing definitions of ‘the popular’ in the last two centuries (Parfitt, 2008). In the nineteenth century, performances such as the cancan in France and music hall in Britain were popular in the sense that they were considered to be ‘of the people’. Whether ‘the people’ were defined by their class or national status was often a point of contention, giving these performances political potency. Popular performance of the twenty-first century frequently refers back to or even re-embodies nineteenth- and early twentieth-century popular forms and identity politics. Neo-burlesque performance and Argentine tango, for example, are contemporary practices defined at least partially by their relationship to a popular past. Nevertheless, the markers of popularity in the twenty-first century are not the same as those of the nineteenth. Popular performances are now channeled through social and technological networks that transgress boundaries of class and nation, particularly the internet. Even local popular dance practices, such as tango and capoeira classes, are often tied into transnational networks of communication and travel. ‘The people’ who define the popular today are defined less by class and nation than by international imagined communities of practice, who may collectively negotiate narratives of their relation to a popular past. At the end of my paper, Dr. Sherril Dodds, the convenor of the conference asked me, “So should we still call it ‘popular’?”.

This question has played on my mind over the last two years, particularly on my regular forays into the London neo-burlesque scene. Watching burlesque is an activity haunted by historical juxtapositions, such as those described in my opening paragraphs. Spectators participate in this complex performance through vintage clothing styles and a mode of spectatorship that straddles historical and contemporary performance expectations. Performers often embody past burlesque routines, conventions, costumes and archetypes, particularly those of the 1930s, '40s and '50s, while signaling their historical distance from the originals through parody, vocal commentary, and physical/sexual difference.

The spiritual home of London's neo-burlesque scene is the retro/vintage subculture that has blossomed in East London in the last decade. In an area beyond the old city boundaries, where foreign fabrics and food from French Huguenot silks to Jewish bagels to Bangladeshi curries have for several hundred years fuelled a local economy in constant threat of absorption into the City, where art students, immigrant communities and property developers mark and re-mark constantly shifting territories, the daily struggle between past and present takes artistic and commercial form in a pervasive vintage aesthetic. Converted Huguenot villas, vintage clothes, markets of ephemera, vintage gift shops and tea emporia provide the architectural, imaginative and economic framework for burlesque's embodiment of the past in the present.

While shaped by local histories and aesthetics, London burlesque is also inseparable from national and transnational webs of influence. Urban centres in Britain, Europe, the United States and Australia (e.g. Brighton, Berlin, New York and Sydney) form interconnected hubs of burlesque activity. These are shaped both by local performance histories, and by live and online encounters with international burlesque practices, past and present.

Burlesque's network of localized urban scenes and online communities allows performers and spectators to consume and creatively reproduce the popular burlesque past. Historical costumes (corsets, suspender belts, gloves), props (feather fans, balloons) and choreographies of bodily revelation and concealment are invoked in order to revive, challenge and complicate recognizable archetypes of femininity, masculinity, heterosexuality and homosexuality. Like their nineteenth- and early twentieth-century precursors, neo-burlesque performers weave contemporary class, national and racial politics through their overt performances of gender and sexuality. Unlike earlier burlesque practices, however, neo-burlesque is explicitly energized by a tension between the present and its own popular past. While all performances play with the past to some degree, though their negotiation with conventions of genre or style, for example, in neo-burlesque the relationship between past and present is foregrounded, giving its performance of identity politics a specifically historical dimension.

In Audacity Chutzpah's performance of *Women Through the Ages* (2009), for example, the history of women's liberation in the twentieth century becomes one long burlesque strip. As consecutive layers of feminine clothing are shed, women's increasing political liberty is symbolized by their freedom from body-covering clothing. This historical narrative serves to reclaim the (near) naked female body as a product of women's progressive assertion of political rights, rather than a vulnerable construct of the male gaze. Yet, Chutzpah also acknowledges that this narrative might not be as straightforward as it appears: her attempt to burn her bra is thwarted by contemporary health and safety regulations, and in her most politically powerful incarnation as 'President Chutzpah', she nevertheless gets sexually harassed. In its final, 'liberated' form, Chutzpah's body still bears the complex markers of women's historical negotiation between physical liberation and enslavement to the male gaze: a suspender belt and stockings.

Neo-burlesque is not the only contemporary popular performance practice driven by its relationship to the popular past. Kéline Gotman's (2009) article on tango tourism in Buenos Aires in the last issue of *Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies* described touristic consumption of the sites of tango's past, as well as its present. Tours to key locations in the narrative of tango history, and fleeting conversations with elderly tango dancers offer tantalizing glimmers of an 'authentic' tango past, glimmers which can be commercialized in the transnational tango economy. This is an economy not only of 'passion', as Gotman notes, but of the popular past.

Consuming the popular past, through dancing tango in Buenos Aires, or by participating in the London burlesque scene, appears to position the consumer and the performer in relation to the modernist and colonialist politics (including those of class, gender, race and nation) that these practices originally performed and negotiated. It appears to signal both a continuation of these politics and a distance from them, perhaps an acknowledgement of the extent to which the contemporary body both is constructed by the past politics of the body, and possesses the potential (realized or latent) to challenge them.

When I was originally asked the question, "So should we still call it 'popular'?", I replied tentatively (expecting groans from an audience weary of the birth of new 'post-'s), "Perhaps it should be called 'post-popular'?"ⁱⁱ This neologism has stuck in my mind because it seems to convey both the continuity and discontinuity between 'the popular' and its contemporary consumption in the practices described here. The prefix 'post-' is perhaps derivative, but it nevertheless serves to indicate the connection between this practice and postmodern concerns with memory, nostalgia and parody. This is not to say that all of contemporary popular performance might be considered post-popular, or that past popular cultures have not reworked their own histories. Rather, practices become post-popular when the creative construction and consumption of the popular past becomes central to their contemporary popularity. The producers and consumers of the

post-popular fashion their bodies as sites of a complex intersection between the popular past, present and future. These historical layers accumulate, like Audacity Chutzpah's vintage garments, and it is precisely the temporal juxtaposition, the semantic friction between one costume and another, that gives these bodies their potent post-popularity.

ⁱ This description is based on my memories of *Farewell Whoopee!* at the Bethnal Green Working Men's Club, 11th December 2009, particularly Audacity Chutzpah's performance, *Women Through the Ages*.

ⁱⁱ In a forthcoming book chapter (Parfitt-Brown, forthcoming) I expand on this concept in relation to the film *Moulin Rouge!* (2001). As I acknowledge there, I am not the first to coin this term, but my definition of it is distinct from previous interpretations.

Works cited

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