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What Is Popular Dance?

Positioning the popular historically

A burgeoning interest in popular dance came to the fore in the 2001 winter edition of Dance Research Journal, which was devoted to ‘social and popular dance’. That an entire issue centred on dance practices situated outside the hallowed ground of the theatre dance canon indicated a nascent shift in dance studies towards an increasingly relativist position. In the introduction, editor Julie Malnig (2001) comments that the dances which fall within this category reveal a wide range of forms, skill levels, degrees of professionalism and performance contexts. Yet this potentially rich diversity also encounters vexing questions of classification. As Malnig asserts, ‘one of the fascinating aspects about the category of social dance itself is...the continually fluid interchange among what we call social, vernacular, and popular dances’ (2001, p. 7). Yet she only remarks on the leakiness of these terms rather than providing any delineation of their distinct characteristics. While Storey (2003) suggests that definitions of the popular are both constructed and reconceptualized by intellectuals, I would argue that the meanings and values attached to categories of popular culture carry currency within the social world. It is for this reason that I focus on the question ‘what is popular dance’?

In recent studies of early modern England (1500–1800), historians challenge the notion of a fixed divide between an elite culture that belonged to the dominant classes and a popular culture constituted by the masses (Burke, 1999; Harris, 1995; Reay, 1998). They argue that the concept of a singular, monolithic popular culture is limiting and instead propose that the ‘popular cultures’ of this period were fragmented, multiple and fluid (Burke, 1999; Harris, 1995; Reay, 1998). This pluralization
of the term moves beyond a class-based definition to include variations of region, religion, gender, age and occupation (Reay, 1998). Reay (1998, p. 199) proposes that the elite–popular polarity also neglects the ‘cultural exchange’ that occurred between the two groups and comments that, although ‘the people’ did not participate in elite culture, the gentry certainly took part in popular forms. Harris (1995, p. 16) further disputes the elite/popular division to draw attention to the cultural activities of a ‘middling society’. Indeed, many of these points regarding the myriad ways in which cultural practice operates recur throughout this chapter. It is the period of industrialization and urbanization from the mid-nineteenth to the early-twentieth century, however, that cultural studies scholars mark as key to the development of contemporary popular culture (Baroni and Callegari, 1983; Chambers, 1986; Collins, 2002; Storey, 2003). This epoch brought with it vast social and cultural change and mobilized a series of responses regarding its impact on life across Europe and America. Within this chapter, I therefore call on some of those historically constituted debates to interrogate the classification of ‘popular dance’.

I initially turn to dance studies to examine how the field deals with definitions of the ‘popular’ but, given their interest in the popular idiom, I also look to popular music studies and cultural studies to assess how scholars within those disciplines conceive the popular. In music scholarship the attention to popular forms arose as a reaction against the long-held tradition of valuing ‘art music’ as epitomized by the classical canon (Frith, 1997) and in Chapter 2 I highlighted the preoccupation in cultural studies with popular processes and products. Yet the desire to formulate a definition of the popular has proved troubling and elusive within those disciplines. Since ‘popular music’ encompasses a diversity of styles, genres, traditions and functions (Fiori, 1983; Shuker, 1998), scholars argue that its content and parameters are unclear (Cutler, 1983; Stratton, 1983). Equally, outside the arena of academic study, this nebulous category is rarely tackled in standard music dictionaries and in 1991 the Broadcasting Act in Britain struggled to create a definition that satisfied both artists and representatives from the music industry (Shuker, 1997). Similarly, as ‘popular culture’ also embraces a multitude of objects and practices (Frith, 1997; Sedgwick and Edgar, 1999), it is problematic to unify such diversity within a single theoretical model. Consequently, ‘popular’ is frequently applied to cultural phenomena independently of a definitional framework (Frith, 1997); accordingly, the term is reliant on common-sense or intuitive understandings.