

Cultural Value

From Parlour Songs to iPlayers: Experiencing culture in the 20th & 21st century home

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Arts & Humanities
Research Council

Background

Executive Summary

This workshop, held at the University of Lincoln on 22 and 23 May 2014, was concerned with exploring some of the ways in which culture has been experienced in the home from the early 20th century to the present day. It drew together a number of experts from a range of disciplines including history, sociology, media studies, musicology, linguistics and fan studies as well as practitioners to look in detail at specific examples of domestic cultural engagement. Topics ranged from music in a pre-electronic age through television and radio and present-day activities associated with Web 2.0. Papers considered a number of specific examples of domestic cultural engagement, considering both consumption and production. Through our discussion we were able to suggest some possible methodological approaches to enable evaluations of how culture is experienced in the home as well as the value that individuals place on this experience.

Researchers and Project Partners

Convenor

Professor Krista Cowman
University of Lincoln

Participants

Dr Lucy Bennett
Independent Scholar

Dr Bruno Bonomo
University of Rome Sapienza

Dr Sophie Fuller
Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance

Dr Erika Hanna
University of Edinburgh

Dr Christine Grandy
University of Lincoln

Dr Ann Gray
University of Lincoln (Emeiritus)

Alex Graham
Television Producer

Professor Simon Gunn
University of Leicester

Professor Shaun Lawson
University of Lincoln

Professor Joan Swann
Open University

Dr John Mullen, Universite Paris-Est, was unable to attend at the last minute but offered a paper for circulation which was drawn on in our discussions.

Key words

Home
Domestic
Cultural production
Music
Television
Film
Digital culture

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Context and Aims

The workshop was held at the University of Lincoln on 22 and 23 May 2014. Its original aim was to respond to the Cultural Value Programme's call for expert workshops that might 'move forward the Project's thinking on the topic' in certain areas not yet covered. The call noted that to date 'discussion and research about the experience and value of arts and culture has focused primarily on public, institutional settings,' taking little account of the fact that 'it is in the home that most people experience culture most frequently.' Home is often overlooked, below the radar in analyses of cultural value. The workshop thus aimed to consider how including examples of domestic production and experiences of culture might add to assessments of cultural value. To achieve this, a group of researchers from the UK and continental Europe was assembled representing a variety of different disciplinary perspectives from arts, humanities, social sciences and computing science as well as practitioners. All have expertise in researching different aspects of cultural production or engagement in the domestic setting, and methodologies for evaluating how culture is experienced in the home from the late nineteenth century through to our present day.

Initial Statement

In the introduction to the workshop it was noted that for historians, the period since 1900 has been viewed as one of intense rapid change in living conditions, lifestyles, forms of behaviour, patterns of consumption and mentalities. The home, previously the preserve of architectural and design historians, is beginning to be recognised as a key site for the study of such processes of change: not only did domestic space and home life reflect these larger transformations; they also actively shaped them in a variety of ways. New housing types, for example, featured major changes to interior lighting, furnishings and the organisation of rooms and domestic space that in turn had the potential to increase the sociable potential of the home. Electric appliances were introduced and the home became increasingly wired-in, again facilitating an expanding variety of forms of domestic entertainment. At the same time, households began to change in size and consumption, the pattern of family relationships altered and new home-centred forms of leisure developed. The increasing importance of the home as a site for sociability and entertaining guests has implications for its interpretation as a site of cultural experience as demonstrated by a variety of phenomena ranging from domestic musical evenings to the recent popularity of book groups and digital fandom. New technologies such as the gramophone, radio, television, video, dvd and internet have all transformed the

20th century home into the key site for people's engagement with, and consumption and production of culture.

Until recently it was widely thought that although domestic cultural engagement was initially a shared and socially cohesive experience the advent of new technology shifted this as multiple ownership of devices encouraged solo viewing; evaluations of recent developments suggest a reversal of this trend, however. The emergence of 'appointment to view' television along with 'event' programming for cultural events such as the Olympic opening ceremony or live theatre, opera and ballet performances add to the home's potential as a site for shared cultural experience. Insights from media and cultural studies present the experience of culture in the home as a two-way and active process; audiences react to and inform cultural products intended for domestic consumption. This has been broadened by further technological developments leading to phenomena such as 'sofalisng' where geographically separate viewers share their reactions to what they are experiencing online in real time, or digital fandom where they collaborate in cultural production eg by writing new scripts for popular tv shows. Historians have recently recognised the home movie as a key source for interpreting social change in the 20th century. Cine and video cameras have been joined by webcams, 'FaceTime', 'YouTube' and SoundCloud, making the home a key site for cultural production in the 21st century.

With this framework in mind, participants were asked to consider changes throughout the entire 20th century, the period when the home was transformed into a key site for cultural engagement, up to the present day. The workshop was arranged in three themes; non-electronic means of cultural engagement in the home; the home as a site for cultural production and domestic entertainment technology and cultural experience, although there was a degree of overlap between themes. The remainder of the report offers a summary of the findings, their methodological implications and some overall conclusions.

Session 1: Non-Electronic Means of Cultural Engagement in the Home.

Papers in this session looked in detail at phenomena such as reading groups and domestic musical production and consumption (largely prior to the advent of the gramophone although discussion ranged beyond this). Initial research questions included:

- What forms of music and literature are experienced in the home?
- How have these changed over the course of the 20th Century?

- How important is the social dimension of such experience as suggested by forums such as book groups or musical evenings?

Papers (from Joan Swan, Sophie Fuller and a written, pre-circulated paper from John Mullen) confirmed the range of cultural engagement present at home in the early 20th century. In the case of music, the early 20th century home became both a site for cultural engagement, and for cultural production. Musical evenings were popular and widespread with performance (both playing and singing) occurring in middle-class and upper-working class homes. It was noted that domestic musical production did not occur in a vacuum, but was linked to more public musical consumption. The genre of the Parlour Ballad, for example, whose title implied performance/engagement in a domestic setting was popular in public music hall performances but designed for domestic replication through the popularisation (and mass-marketing) of sheet music scores. In this way public performance was directly connected to domestic cultural engagement as the music hall audience was intended to replicate the songs they had heard in their own homes.

Other external factors had direct bearing on the levels of musical production and consumption in the home. Some of these were linked to technological developments. Whereas in the 19th century providing accompaniment to domestic singing performances (and thus being able to provide a reasonable level of performance at a musical evening) required levels of skill and technique, the advent of the player-piano or 'pianola' removed this requirement by facilitating a semi-automatic form of accompaniment. The potential for the consumption of music at home grew with the invention of the gramophone as this made it possible to hear and enjoy multi-layered performances including orchestral works and operas without the need to attend a public performance in a hall or opera house. The ability to listen to music at home or to perform it was enhanced through broader economic developments; in particular the evolution of the Hire Purchase system brought many reasonably expensive goods into the reach of working-class homes.

A number of methodological questions were raised as part of the discussion of how early 20th century music was performed and listened to in the home. We recognised that while certain external factors prompted a rise in musical consumption and production at home, others impacted on the way it was experienced. Class and gender were important elements in shaping who participated, and what was performed/listened to. Amongst practitioners and proponents of 'high' (ie non-domestic) culture there was a strong tendency to dismiss domestic musical engagement as of less worth and value. This was reflected and re-enforced through phrases such as 'Parlour

Song' or 'Drawing-Room Ballad', defined by the space in which they were performed and consumed, that became short-hand terms for less valuable forms of culture.

Musicologists studying music in the domestic context in the early 20th century have also noted difficulty in accessing sources. Precisely because this music is performed in the home it is not subject to analysis through the channels available for public performance (critical reviews, for example, or commercial recordings). Letters, diaries and novels remain the most likely and helpful sources, along with sheet music sales although the latter give no information as to how they were performed or received. The former, where they can be found, are more likely to detail middle-class homes leaving a partial picture; cultural experience in the lower-middle or working-class home remains more difficult to access.

The domestic musical evening had largely died out by the inter-war period, but other forms of cultural engagement remained important in the 20th century home. Not all of these were reliant on developments in technology. Joan Swann's paper on reading groups outlined the findings of research from an AHRC project that looked at what was being read in these groups as well as the social dimensions of how it was being read. It was shown that people in reading groups that met face-to-face read diversely (specialism being largely – although not entirely – associated with online reading groups). Reading groups located in members' homes were not just about cultural consumption via discussion of prior, individual acts of reading as research uncovered instances of collaborative reading through which a second act of reading occurred in the context of the group meeting.

As with music, the popularity of reading groups has prompted their dismissal in some quarters as a form of cultural engagement that is less valid than other forms of literary criticism. Nicholas Clee in *New Statesman* suggests reading groups brought 'a coarsening of literary discourse.' Reading tends to be mimetic, using the book as a 'jumping off' point for other critics and relating to the readers' own experience, both seen by 'professional' critics as less valuable ways of reading. Other commentators have been more positive; a *Guardian* article in 2005 quoted a variety of more supportive positions including Prof John Sutherland who believed they showed 'people reclaiming the right to read from pointy-headed academics,' and Andrew Franklin, director of Profile Books, who saw them as a 'privatisation of those functions' previously offered by public libraries.

The popularity of reading groups in the present day has enabled researchers to draw on different methodological approaches that could not be applied to historical events, although they would be extremely useful to apply to other forms of contemporary domestic cultural engagement. Observation

can be carried out in several ways (being mindful of how the researcher's presence may impact on the dynamic of the observed group) including ethnographic approaches where following one group over a period of time would reveal detail of role evolution as culture is experienced and shared within a group. Observable practice gives relatively direct evidence not available for past events including notes, observations and transcripts of discussion, which can themselves be analysed in a variety of ways. While transcripts themselves offer evidence for engagement with cultural artefacts – in this case books, but the same could hold for other items – different presentations can shed light on the social context of domestic cultural production. Verbatim transcripts, for instance, identify instances of joint construction (one finishing another's discussion), stave transcription reveals validation, supporting language etc.

Sessions 2 & 3: Domestic entertainment technology and cultural experience / The home as a site for cultural production

Papers in these sessions explored how developments in domestic technologies, especially entertainment technologies, have impacted on how culture has been both experienced and produced from the inter-war period to the present day. A variety of changes – the increasing portability and affordability of cameras and sound recording equipment, the development of technologies such as HD cameras, webcams and camera-enabled mobile phones simplified domestic cultural production and the arrival of web 2.0 with accessible platforms such as YouTube and SoundCloud where home-produced media could be shared. Initial research questions included: How did the introduction of new cultural technologies affect the organisation of the home, of the living room and bedrooms for example?

- In what ways did technology alter social interaction between household members and between the family and friendship groups?
- How do factors such as gender, class and age shape or impact on the way technologically-delivered culture is experienced in the home?
- In what different ways has the home been used as a site for cultural production?
- What challenges might the proliferation of online cultural content pose for the 'professional' artist?
- How might an understanding of the home as a site for cultural production alter our view of its function as a site for cultural experience?

Papers in these sessions (from Lucie Bennett, Erika Hanna, Christine Grandy, Ann Gray and Bruno Bonomo) introduced research into a number of different forms of entertainment ranging from photography and home movies to television

and video and current web-based platforms, all of which have helped to spread and shape cultural engagement and production in the home.

Domestic encounters with static and moving photographic images were discussed in papers from Erika Hanna and Christine Grand. Both of these papers concentrated on the mid-twentieth century as the period when photographs were becoming more commonplace but the technology required to produce moving pictures remained rarer. In common with the discussion of reading groups and domestic music, both papers emphasized the importance of amateur production to historical research as well as its perceived lower status within critical appraisals of photography and cinema. Accepting the cultural value of amateur photography and film suggests the need for an expansion of what is considered 'valuable' by people beyond the field of 'high' art. In amateur photography and in amateur film produced for consumption in the home there were significant elements of overlap in terms of subject and composition, meaning that analyses had to be attentive to differences and evolve methodologies to evaluate these. As with other cultural forms encountered in the domestic setting cultural experiences involving photograph and film were often highly sociable drawing friends and family together and blurring the boundaries between public and private sites of culture. Home movies or amateur films were intended for domestic screening while photographs were frequently arranged in albums that other contemporary sources suggest were passed around and shared on social occasions. The two forms each brought external public sites (landscapes, events and buildings) into the home offering a cultural experience that was often intended to be educational (through the focus on key architectural sites or foreign travel) as well as enjoyable.

The domestic production and consumption of amateur film developed alongside the presence of television, the medium that made a far broader range of domestic cultural experience possible from the mid-20th century. Ann Gray explained how while early studies of television and radio had drawn attention to the importance of gender in understanding how these technologies impacted on the domestic, the advent of the VCR also had significant implications for social domestic life, and for the way that culture was experienced within this. Television had been a vehicle for bringing aspects of public culture into the private domestic sphere whereas the VCR suggested the advent of a much more home-based model of leisure. Detailed quantitative research into how televisions and VCR recordings were viewed revealed much about the location of cultural experience in the home with, for example, women tending to watch the 'second' or spare television for their chosen viewing while the VCR and the 'main' television remained under male control. Bruno Bonomo's paper considered the impact

of widespread television ownership on the layout of Italian homes, and what this implied for social domestic relations. The television was typically in a common room such as the kitchen (in working-class homes) or living or dining room. Initially television viewing was a social and shared activity with neighbours, family or friends watching communally; the spread of ownership shifted this pattern to privatise the experience of television consumption. Drawing on a wide variety of evidence including home magazines revealed a level of anxiety around the presence of the television with elaborate disguises in the form of cabinets or wall mountings. In both papers it was apparent that different ways of researching the question of how televisual culture was experienced in the home (eg quantitative data from questionnaires, psychological understanding of audience behaviour and reaction, advice literature and literary representations) could also have implications for our understanding of how class impacted on this as well as for the gendering of domestic relationships and its spatial dimensions.

Lucy Bennett's contribution to the workshop explored the impact of Web 2.0 and the plethora of different digital platforms that emerged from this to consider how culture continues to be experienced in a domestic environment in the present day. Her overview of very recent developments drew from the field of Fan Studies, a relatively new area of academic enquiry focussing on groups with a strongly affective tie or connection to a particular text, object or person. Lucy explained how fans' consumption of and interaction with cultural phenomena such as television and music had been strongly shaped by technological advances from 90s. Fan studies gives us a new vocabulary to define a growing range of cultural practices, many of which are located in a domestic environment. Examples included 'cellcerting' where live concert performances were shared with fans at home in different time zones and geographical locations via the medium of the cellphone. 'Fanfiction' where fans wrote (either individually or collaboratively) or rewrote scenes from popular series often with the aim of produce strong empathy with characters. The emphasis on empathy might be seen as mirroring the critical reaction observed in studies of reading groups where readers search for empathy was dismissed as irrelevant or naïve by literary critics. There were also echoes of the cultural transference seen working in the early 20th century where sheet music encouraged replication of public performance of song in the home. Knowledge was shared via the internet meaning that the site of cultural production was much more blurred than in previous instances considered in the workshop. New technology was simultaneously encouraging other forms of cultural production at home such as music or film performance, which could be shared with a potentially infinite audience. One interesting development prompted by the possibilities of new technology was an 'activist' dimension to

cultural production (an example would be the use of YouTube to share and endorse videos supporting the 'don't ask don't tell' campaign that aimed to end discrimination against homosexuals in the US military). Unlike earlier examples such as home-hosted musical events at the start of the 20th century, the accessibility of a growing number of platforms provided a vast databank of cultural production as well as the immediate responses of those who viewing or listening to the content. How best to analyse these was a question that researchers are still debating.

Conclusions and methodological implications

The discussions during and after the workshop threw up a number of important points with regard to methodologies for evaluating and analysing how culture is experienced in the home, and raised some suggestions for future research. The range of papers all emphasized the importance of the home as a site for cultural engagement and for cultural production. This was not a dramatic change, but something that could be seen occurring throughout the twentieth century. Technology was an important dimension of culture in the home with a growing range of tools helping a diverse body of engagement and production since the 19th century. So although recent technological developments such as new platforms for both making and sharing art, music, literature and drama have transformed the home into a rich source of cultural production in the 21st century, technologies from earlier periods (the pianola, the gramophone, the cine camera) performed a similar function.

All of the papers suggested that the boundaries of public and private, often used to delineate the domestic world of the home from society, were complicated and blurred when the question of cultural experience at home was considered. Producing or accessing culture in the home was frequently a sociable experience shared with family or friends; it could also involve importing 'public' cultural events into a private domestic context. Such imports could occur through complicated and highly professional as in the case of live transmission of concerts or plays or through small-scale amateur practices such as celltexting.

Our discussion suggested that studying culture in the home had implications for the ways of thinking about both the social and the cultural. Although some exceptions were suggested (such as women's more private viewing of the 'second' television) there was a strong social dimension to much cultural engagement in the home as noted above. A key theme across the discussion was the potential for culture in the home to function as a cohesive force bonding people together. This contradicts much of the popular concern that

has often been attached to television and internet platforms as studying the contexts in which people engaged with these revealed that they frequently provided a shared experience of culture rather than an individual one. The social dimension of domestic cultural engagement was less marked in the case of cultural production, but even here it was not wholly absent and could be seen in practices such as the second acts of reading seen in reading groups. Our understanding of the 'social' was further complicated through phenomena such as social media that were critical to attempts to evaluate how culture was experienced in the 21st century home.

Certain behaviours were seen as distinguishing how cultural consumption functioned in the home from other settings. Whereas public consumption of culture often demanded a certain kind of approach, dress or behaviour, domestic cultural consumption might be considered more liberal. This was observed in the practices of reading groups where participants might sit on the floor, eat and drink while discussing and not necessarily accept the views of professional critics. On the other hand many professional critics viewed domestic cultural engagement as being of lower value than that which took place in public. Parlour Ballads, amateur films and photographs and the critical verdicts of reading groups were amongst instances of home cultural engagement that were seen to have been dismissed by critics for their perceived lack of quality or importance. This dismissal might help shape a fruitful line of enquiry for future research as a project that mapped the history of cultural 'embarrassment' over the past century and was attentive to the processes through which certain cultural phenomena became classified as 'kitsch' may offer a way into considering how cultural value is ascribed and the weight given to such value within different social groups.

Through our interdisciplinary discussions we became aware of a number of methodological possibilities that might usefully combine in attempting to analyse how culture has been experienced in the home. Historical approaches showed that while examples of cultural engagement and production in early twentieth century homes (eg music making or home movie-viewing) were not difficult to find, the question of how participants experienced culture or its value to them was less well documented and required corroboration with other sources such as personal accounts or literary representations of domestic cultural events in order to contextualise and evaluate the question of experience. From the post-war period onwards there is more quantitative and qualitative data available (eg questionnaires, transcripts) to evaluate the experiential aspects of culture in the home. The products of contemporary domestic cultural production can be seen in a myriad of different formats freely available online, but the sheer size of data poses challenges to researchers.

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