



Culture Crash: The Killing of the Creative Class

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When artists and artisans can't make a living, the health of America's culture is at risk

Change is no stranger to us in the twenty-first century. We must constantly adjust to an evolving world, to transformation and innovation. But for many thousands of creative artists, a torrent of recent changes has made it all but impossible to earn a living. A persistent economic recession, social shifts, and technological change have combined to put our artists—from graphic designers to indie-rock musicians, from architects to booksellers—out of work. This important book looks deeply and broadly into the roots of the crisis of the creative class in America and tells us why it matters.

Scott Timberg considers the human cost as well as the unintended consequences of shuttered record stores, decimated newspapers, music piracy, and a general attitude of indifference. He identifies social tensions and contradictions—most concerning the artist's place in society—that have plunged the creative class into a fight for survival. Timberg shows how America's now-collapsing middlebrow culture—a culture once derided by intellectuals like Dwight Macdonald—appears, from today's vantage point, to have been at least a Silver Age. Timberg's reporting is essential reading for anyone who works in the world of culture, knows someone who does, or cares about the work creative artists produce.

Culture Crash: The Killing of the Creative Class Details

Date : Published January 13th 2015 by Yale University Press

ISBN : 9780300195880

Author : Scott Timberg

Format : Hardcover 320 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Art, Sociology, Cultural, Criticism

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From Reader Review Culture Crash: The Killing of the Creative Class for online ebook

Sal says

YouTube has the platform to take us back in time, so let's reverse our lives nearly 27 years and revisit 1988. We're standing on an airport tarmac in Salt Lake City on an October day that is gorgeously sunny. Low brown mountains fill parts of the landscape as the private airplane named "Hystouria #1" warms up for a flight to Portland, Oregon. At times during the amateurishly shot video its propellers spin madly and the engine screams at a fevered pitch.

As the young and famous rock band waits patiently to lumber on board, likely anxious to wrap up a tour that has lasted forever, the videographer, Ian Jeffery, questions a large man who wears dark shades and sports a prominent drooping mustache. He's an imposing figure with thick, jet-black hair and a tough-guy Brooklyn accent.

Jeffery: "Having been the founding member of the production club here, how do you feel about this year?"

Founding-member tough guy: "Well, let me put it to you this way. This is the best one I've ever heard about, none less done. Now, those guys over there (points to the members of Def Leppard) ... bunch o' beautiful humans ... I wanted to thank them from the bottom of my swimming pool back home that I've put in since this little tour began eighteen f***** months ago."

At this point the tough guy has taken off his sunglasses and is staring intently into the camera. His round face features a prominent double chin. He's wearing a turquoise Polo-like shirt and a faded jean jacket, both of which practically encompass the camera's entire frame.

"Beautiful thing as it is, he continues. Oh, also, did I mention the Mustang, and the house payment?"

He laughs sarcastically here, as if a house payment is a rough thing to endure. But you can tell he's showing off, bragging about all the money he's made. The guy really does feel lucky.

"Thank you so much, boys. Appreciate it."

Author Scott Timberg doesn't care about rock stars like Def Leppard in his book "Culture Crash: The Killing of the Creative Class." He might, however, find the aforementioned interview interesting. After all, "founding-member tough guy" made good money assisting lavish rock stars. He was part of a team that helped musicians succeed, highlighting the fact that artists of all types need this support system. Heavy metal rockers like Def Leppard crisscrossed the nation on gigantic, hugely profitable tours back then, but the world is a different place now—for musicians, for animators, for painters, for writers, for architects, for graphic designers, for sculptors, and for roadies like the tough guy, who made an upper-middle-class living that most of today's artists and their aids can only dream of.

Timberg says today's music industry has been eviscerated by streaming music services and illegal piracy, but his argument as to why the creative class has been gutted on all levels goes beyond just technology, which is part of what makes "Culture Crash" so eye opening. Timberg, who has spent twenty years writing about a broad array of artists—from piano tuners to underground cartoonists to successful authors—would likely stand up for the brash guy in the "Backstage Hysteria 17 Def Leppard" on YouTube. Individuals like the

tough guy, after all, play a big role in helping others promote their artistry.

“While the fading fortunes of the creators of culture is alarming,” says Timberg, “it’s equally disturbing that their often-mocked supporting casts—record store clerks, roadies, critics, publicists, and supposedly exploitative record label folks—are being forced out of the culture industry.”

I liked this book for numerous reasons. Right away I recognized Timberg as a kindred spirit who enjoys writing about art and talking to artists in diverse realms. He’s had great success in this line of work, and his financial troubles that open the book will make readers angry and a bit frightened. Timberg’s stated numbers are sobering—eighty percent of reporters and critics covering the arts for print publications have been laid off since 2000, according to ArtsJournal.com. When he uses the phrase “cheapening of the culture” early on, you can’t help but think of unlimited music for \$9.99 per month on Spotify; “American Idol” winners of the last decade and a half; TV and movie streaming services via Amazon TV and Netflix; and countless Amazon reviews that now pass for the type of work Roger Ebert used to do.

A former bookseller and music manager at Barnes & Noble in the 1990s, I can relate to the retail clerks that Timberg writes about and supports, often independently minded people who can intelligently discuss music, movies, and books to customers seeking thoughtful advice prior to purchase. These retailers are also part of the creative class, according to the author, and with video stores, record stores, and bookstores having closed by the thousands in the U.S., their talents are not being utilized, their interests are perhaps going unfulfilled, and their camaraderie with like-minded people has sadly vanished. Timberg believes a part of people’s communities has been lost because of the changed retail environment in which clerks have disappeared.

“They’ve been, over the decades, important conduits between consumers and culture—and their workplaces a training ground and meeting spot for some of our best writers, filmmakers, and bands,” Timberg writes.

The author is passionate about reigniting society with bona fide feats of culture by genuine artists—better living through artistry, if you will—but he doesn’t romanticize the “cultural class” as genius loners starving gloriously for their art forms, waiting patiently to conquer the world as famous but brooding entertainers. In fact, he says typical artists—and the supporting casts that assist them—simply want to be able to make a solid middle-class living, a tall task in the worlds of art and entertainment these days.

What stands out about Timberg’s outlook on the decline of the cultural class is how the crucial roles of ALL artists help create a middle-class existence in which people in this realm can live. This includes the behind-the-scenes folks who are rapidly finding it harder to gain employment. Forget about swimming pools and Mustangs. Most artists and those in their stratosphere just want to find inspiring work that pays the bills.

When thinking of what helps artists succeed, people may not reflect much on how the environment around them plays a part. Artists perform their best, Timberg says, when “laboring together in cities and subcultures they made possible.” Timberg points to a 1950s jazz scene in Indianapolis that had all the makings of a topnotch era of music, with artists like Carl Perkins, Wes Montgomery, Freddie Hubbard, and Leroy Vinnegar playing in town. Unfortunately, the city didn’t get behind them, and most of the musicians left.

“Partly, it was because a supporting and thriving creative class—record labels, music journalists, club owners—didn’t exist in sufficient numbers,” Timberg writes.

One artist interviewed in the book said her expertise is in creating art, not marketing what she creates. Undoubtedly, such artists need help.

Timberg's gloomy prose reminds me of Eric Schlosser's writing style in the masterpiece "Fast Food Nation," which lambasted the country's fast-food chains for their unhealthy food and less than pristine and honest ways of preparing and promoting it. Timberg could have tried to present more examples of artists who have succeeded in breaking through the middle-class barrier, not famous people, but those who have been able to find their moneymaking niches despite the odds. Surely such people exist, and there may be more of them than Timberg knows. He admits his book is not a scholarly, overly researched endeavor, but he pulls in the thoughts of enough struggling artists to qualitatively back up his arguments.

Timberg, a longtime journalist who values newspapers, says the reluctance by those in his field to more thoroughly report on the downfall of the cultural class has hurt the causes of both journalists and artists, groups who share more similarities than one might think.

"Newspapers and magazines have not only served as training grounds, they've been part of the same ecology as publishing houses, museums, and concert halls: critics and cultural journalists have helped shape culture and bring prestige to its makers for five centuries," Timberg writes.

His point is well taken. And while the downfall of other middle-class occupations has been documented extensively by journalists, artists can often be ignored, perhaps because they don't conjure the sympathy one might have for, say, a laid-off teacher, nor do they typically muster the energetic rabble rousing of a union seeking better working conditions. Meanwhile, Timberg says, as artists fall by the wayside, the rich and famous receive constant exposure in print.

The author praises university towns and complains about the outrageously high rents in San Francisco and New York City, but unfortunately he doesn't much advocate for artists to move to mid-sized towns like Urbana-Champaign, for example, where a cultural scene does exist and is ripe for growth. Creative types—dancers, photographers, and musicians—could ditch the coasts and try to form strong cultural scenes in more affordable areas of the country, which would go a long way toward easing their money problems.

As he stewes over the Great Recession of 2008 and a forever-stagnated economy, Timberg's writing in a few chapters toward the end becomes opaque and complicated, actually more scholarly sounding. The more intricate aspects of his arguments were somewhat hard to follow, but his heartfelt and plain-spoken writing in the epilogue were special.

I was moved by what he said at the end of the book and want to try harder to support all good art in general, and I don't mean the winner-take-all style of commercialized entertainment seen on TV shows such as "The Voice" and "Dancing with the Stars." Rather, I'm talking about discovering worthy pieces at local craft shows; hearing good music at nearby venues; watching poignant movies at a local co-op theatre; and perhaps pursuing a few creative endeavors of my own.

Deejays, book editors, theater set designers, sculptors, actors ... the list of the cultural class is extensive. As David Byrne, lead singer of the Talking Heads astutely says in "Culture Crash," "Do you really think people are going to keep putting time and effort into this if no one is making any money?" Timberg's book isn't a resounding "no" to this question, but if things don't change, the cultural class could shrink even more. Love them or hate them, a band like Def Leppard formed and thrived because society helped them. Though I sense a disdain of spoiled rock stars by Timberg, he might ask the legitimate question: What future huge rock 'n' roll bands might never materialize because of the conditions that currently exist for hopeful musicians and artists?

Janet says

This book should have a giant alarm clock on the cover. It is time for the creative class--and the middle class--to WAKE UP and notice what is happening. Not just to mourn the loss of creative jobs (as opposed to 'opportunities for exposure' i.e. working for free) but to realize that the whole middle class is disappearing down the drain, and think about why. The book makes (again and again) the interesting point of the link between the fate of the middle class as a whole and the fate of the 'creative class'. A terrifying, depressing, important and stirring vision of what is happening to this country's soul as well as its economic well-being.

Scott timberg was a hardworking LA Times reporter who got caught up in a tidal wave of layoffs in 2008, part of a larger gutting of American journalism in the years between 2008 and 2012 which saw a cut of 3/4 of reporting jobs. (Anybody want to imagine what that means for an informed democracy?) He began to examine the phenomenon of the implosion of jobs in cultural fields across the board--from the death of the recording industry to the closure of newspapers to the reporting on the arts, not only the drying-up of paid work for the cultural producer--the writer, the reporter, the musician, the actor-- but also all the people who support that work--the video store clerk, the bookstore employee, and all the knowledge workers and skilled laborers who put books and music and films into our hands, the printers and drivers and distributors.

The issue has more doors than an Advent calendar. But the main thrust of his argument is that the collapse of the creative class IS the collapse of the middle class. I was lucky enough to talk to him about the book--as these are issues that are always on my mind. I think the collapse of the music industry was the canary in the coal mine. It's where we saw the gutting of real work beginning. The inability of people used to producing something, i.e. cultural workers, not futurologists, to properly interpret a whole new world coming at them like a freight train and respond quickly and accurately. Of course, they did not.

We talked about the collapse of newspapers, which had been thought of a replacement of print with the internet--but actually are two separate phenomena. We talked about how in the 'culture of free' who is making money? Questioning the ideology of 'free.' We talked about the quality of culture itself in this era of marketplace dominance/blockbuster worship/celebrity culture. We're in our own soup pot here--not everywhere in the world is this happening, it's America going down the tubes. Other people still have culture, while we've got the thinning out of the herd of winner-takes-all. What is all this doing to the soul of the Americans?

Who is making the money? Not the artists, that's for sure. Not the knowledge workers in publishing houses, record labels, etc. It takes a good look at who is making the money when everyone is working for free--it's the distributor of the producer's work. This idea of something for nothing--of a generation raised to believe that anything digital, because of its ephemerality and ease of transfer, is a free commodity. And with the draining of payment away from the producer in these industries--people blogging instead of working for publishers and newspapers and magazines--as I am reviewing books right here, for free--releasing their music on YouTube and Soundcloud instead of record labels selling product through actual stores, who is making the money in this world of Amazon and Spotify and Netflix and Pandora and the Huffington Post?

This book is already igniting a thousand really important conversations about our society, and what is the nature the world we're living in right now.

Todd N says

Is it a bad thing that sneering record store clerks across the land have been replaced by basket analysis algorithms on e-commerce sites that helpfully announce "people who bought this also bought that"? Probably it isn't, though I should admit that I was a once sneering record store clerk myself.

In this book we learn that even though life is no picnic for STEM jobs, it's way crappier for people in the creative fields like architects, writers for free weeklies, musicians, buggy whip manufacturers, indie film makers, papyrus makers, and of course the whiniest and most out-of-breath canaries in the entire coal mine: newspaper reporters.

Part of me doesn't mind the thought of the next Arthur Crudup making as much as the next Elvis for the next That's All Right. But then again I don't like a world in which the woman behind Cat Power declares bankruptcy.

If block chords and breathy vocals can't secure a decent living then what's the point of life, really? Surely not to color in adult coloring books while listening to lifehack podcasts, which is about all that will be left in bookstores and on your iPods in a few years at this rate.

I made a decision to separate career from creative endeavors around 25 years ago, with the result that I'm not particularly good at either one. I'm a failed fauxhemian.

But I wonder about my children and what their paths will be like. What if my daughter wants to stamp out block chords on the piano? And what if my son is the next David Lowery, which would make me almost as proud as if he were the next John Von Neumann? Will they make 17 dollars a month from some streaming service while some ex-swim-team VP bro monetizes the crap out of my kids in the name of disruption? My kids should be the only ones profiting from my bad parenting.

If I'm reading this book right, our only hope is to elect Trump this November, which virtually guarantees a vibrant art scene and underground press for at least the next two decades. (Think Margaret Thatcher.) Forget your symphony subscriptions and NPR donations. This is the only feasible way to save the arts.

I'm reluctantly recommending this book (without the benefit of an algorithm no less) with the caveat that I found it a bit repetitive despite the valid and important points it made. It's organized by occupation, so just read the introduction and the ones that you are interested in.

Russell Lay says

Timberg commences his journey by, as William Buckley once said, 'standing athwart history yelling 'Stop''.

Timberg is one of many in the so-called creative class who apparently lost his job in the Great Recession, and apparently, he believes the closing of music stores, the reduction of journalists (or what he considers to be 'true' journalists), the fact critics of music, cinema and books 'sold out' and embraced pop culture (Taylor Swift vs. some unknown guy all the critics used to rave about, blockbuster movies getting good reviews while ignoring the latest subtitled film out of Nauru) spells the doom of not only culture but the decline of

the entire middle class--including its existence.

He blames this decline on everything: Republicans, corporate greed and the music/movies/TV, it spawns, modern technology/internet/automation, online stores, the loss of interest by late-born Gen Xers and Millennials, and perhaps a nod (but not as much as he blames Republicans!!!) toward an education system that places more emphasis on STEM, passing standardized testing, and the change in the role of school and college to learn (the liberal arts) as well as earn.

Once he settles down, about halfway through, the whining subsides and Timberg raises some real concerns about the change in our society where the love of the arts spanned class and income divisions and was replaced by materialism, a decline of critical thinking, less-than-middlebrow and the all those issues that perhaps, are at least the fault of one side of the political spectrum he largely gives a hall pass to on his way to summing it all up.

I almost put the book down about 25% of the way through as I tired of the political caterwauling, but if you stick it out, Timberg does raise legitimate concerns about the decline of literature, music, and the arts in general--even if he fails to actually define what qualifies as "legitimate" in anything other than his own definitions and preferences.

Scott says

James Lanier, who has been skeptical about the great freeing benefits of the Internet economy, sees the reporting on the new paradigm driven by unlikely Horatio Alger stories. 'There are a few success stories,' he said, 'that create a false sense of hope.' Because Radiohead can offer its record free of charge, he argued, doesn't mean that bands below the superstar level can.

Similarly, the death of Apple visionary Steve Jobs uncorked various rants about the value of mavericks and how you can get it if you try hard enough. Which means everyone who struggles in a post-boom, post-bubble economy must be a loser. (77)

This is the narrative with which my Twitter cyberbullies harass me on a daily basis. They're too stupid to understand that when Kodak was sold to Instagram, 140,000 people lost their jobs. Where did those middle class jobs and their associated wealth go? Lanier says that we are in an all-or-nothing society. A token number of people succeed from using YouTube and Kickstarter, but the middle-class hump is gone, and we're told it's entirely our fault by right-wing nut jobs (77-78). This book offers ample evidence that the fall of the creative class is not our fault, but the fault of society, just as my homelessness is. I unfortunately had to correct author Scott Timberg, via Twitter, that he is mistaken about the creative class not ending up in homeless shelters yet (17). Timberg's solution is the reinvigoration of middlebrow culture. This is reminiscent of Susan Jacoby's conclusions in *The Age of American Unreason*, but Jacoby, I felt (I read the book in September 2012 and did not write a review at the time, although I did write her an unresponded e-mail, unconvinced, citing Oprah's Book Club as a shining example of the middlebrow), was defending the middlebrow the way Timberg mocks articles like Mike Seeley's "In Defense of The Eagles," (the best-selling rock band of the 1970s). Here, Timberg applies a very practical reason: most arts and culture workers are not multimillionaire superstars, but a rapidly dwindling sector of the middle (and also lower) class, and it is the death of middlebrow culture that has caused their demise. For example, an extremely successful indie rock

band, Grizzly, in which the members barely eke out a middle class existence. One wonders how less successful bands than Grizzly survive at all. Timberg suggests that we imagine '60s music with only the Beatles, Bob Dylan, and The Rolling Stones. It should be obvious that the culture would suffer without these bands, just as it suffers from, in his analogy, the loss of all Greek tragedies save for seven each by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides thanks to the burning of the Library at Alexandria. "That's the way corporate radio typically works. Winner-take-all exerts a relentless logic not just on our creative life, but on our cultural memory (246-7).

The book is simply written, like reading a newspaper, and is a very short read in spite of its page count. It's neither great nor bad writing, and is distinctly middlebrow itself in tone, probably by design. I do have some issues with the book's structure. The second chapter is about the almost complete disappearance of video stores and the massive closure of book and music stores. He makes a solid argument why specialized clerks in such stores, particularly independent ones, are a vital part of the creative class, even if they are at the low end of the pay scale, but I really think this argument should have come more toward the end of the book, perhaps between chapters 8 and 9, and start off by discussing the sorts of work the loss of which is far more frightening--freelance writing and copywriting, journalism, music, architecture, and graphic design. Unlike store clerks, people went into higher education to specialize in these fields and got shafted. I encapsulate this despicable argument as, "If you're not a whiz at math and are in no condition for physical labor, you deserve to die," and I have in the past posted people from Twitter making arguments that can easily be summed up this way. Chapter six, an argument why creatives are a legitimate part of the workforce erroneously regarded as some sort of Hollywood star system by the anti-intellectual masses might have come earlier, but perhaps, as the heart of the argument, Timberg thought it might be better more toward center. The book has a ridiculously long page count padded out by fairly large type, small pages, and space between lines. Did Oxford University Press really need to use all this paper so that its reader imagined they were reading a headier, lengthier text than they were actually reading? Who did they believe was the audience?

Much of the book consists of case studies of people whom Timberg interviewed. For example, Matthew Wake. Wake had experience in all sorts of low-level jobs before turning to music journalism. He was eventually given a staff position at a newspaper that was then bought by Gannett. While a staff employee, he could afford to collect art. When he was part of a layoff of 20,000 Gannett employees, he had to sell not only his art collection, but his house, and move back in with his parents. He hoped he would not have to return to waiting tables (75-77). Alice Woods, the English friend I often reblog, who has had several art gallery shows, told me that she earned the money to visit New York Occupiers, where she met me, waiting tables, and she has an advanced degree in music. (She offered me help on my resume, but she knows the European-style curriculum vitae format that I've been told my resume more closely resembles, even including her picture, which Americans are recommended not to do.) Wake hoped he would not have to go back to waiting tables. MIT economist Andrew McAfee recommends waiting tables to aspiring creatives because a computer has yet to be able to replace the job (72). Moe Tkacik left being the the highest paid freelance writer at her firm because waiting tables actually paid more, and saw little hope for work outside the restaurant industry for anybody. She suggested that I work at a French restaurant because I studied French rather than Spanish, but when I informed her of my difficulty standing, she seemed to agree that my situation is a societally-created crisis. While Wake is disheartened, for someone like me, with severe lower back issues and extreme pain in standing, needing a cane to do so for more than 1-2 hours at a time, it is outright devastating. When I came to pack the court for Ramsey Orta's hearing, when the case was adjourned before most of us could get into a building, it became a rally, and I had not brought my cane, expecting to sit in the courtroom after getting past the security line. After a massive attack of pain in the back of my right knee, I stumbled and nearly fell to the sidewalk just trying to get to the courthouse steps to sit. Dozens of people saw me struggling to walk through the last rows of the crowd to address my ailment, and many expressed concern. Obviously, people who want to support a man being railroaded for filming a murder committed by police are

not going to be psychopathic right-wing nut jobs like those that are so easy to be found online. Timberg interviews composer, bassoonist, and educator John Steinmetz: "'I used to have confidence that there was a path available for people who were willing to work at it,' he said. 'But I'm not so sure about that anymore. If everybody's trying to crowd a deck of the last boat still afloat, there's not much room there.' For many creatives seeking freedom, the free-agent economy has turned into another kind of trap." Chan Marshall of Cat Power, leading female-fronted band in indie rock, went into bankruptcy and foreclosure in 2012, the same year I entered the shelter system (90). Most musicians earn only 6% of their income from recording, and the average gross for self-releasing musicians in that year was \$26,518. "If a label deal is a remnant of the old days, like an appendix, and musicians are moving into a deal-free environment, most of them will land squarely in the *lower* middle class. (A study in 2013 showed that 43 percent of musicians lacked medical insurance, more than double the national average; most of the respondents who lacked insurance said they could not afford it.)" (91-92) One of my cyberbullies gives me a hard time for not self-publishing my fiction and drama. Repeatedly calling him an ignoramus doesn't help, as he has the Horatio Alger story to cite. The reality is that the vast majority who attempt it will not only not make a living, but put themselves into serious debt in the attempt. The concept of the "winner-take-all economy" was invoked by Alan Krueger, the White House's chief economist, in a speech at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2013 (93).

Jason Shogren, a professor of economics at the University of Wyoming, states that it would take more than four million hits on YouTube to make minimum wage each month, and that's assuming that your YouTube account is monetized, and I believe it needs a certain number of hits or subscribers (I have 28 of the latter, dislike vlogging, and rarely have videos of myself singing to add) to even qualify to do that. YouTube recently had a subway campaign promoting Michelle Phan, Bethany Mota, and Rosanna Pansino. The first vlogs about makeup, the second, fashion and bullying, and the third, baking. It was interesting to me that the one who does actual work's numbers were over a million, while the first two, in the multimillions, weren't really working in the conventional sense, and the fact that the one in the number three slot had substantially fewer followers, and certainly not enough to make minimum wage doing what she does. Again, these are examples of Horatio Alger stories, since they presumably got paid for those advertisements, and Mota got paid to endorse a perfume. Were it not for YouTube's intervention, these teens would be making as much money from their channels as their burger flipper peers. These are the rare success stories that capitalism uses to claim that those who don't become newsmakers are simply losers, and the right-wingers are stupid enough to believe it. Further ramming this point is that in 1986, 31 number one songs came from 29 artists. Between 2008 and September 2012, a nearly five year period, there were only sixty-six number one songs, nearly half by only six artists--and now we have the number of the beast--Katy Perry, the Black Eyed Peas, Rihanna, Flo Rida, Adele, and Lady Gaga. I've never bought anything by any of these acts, but "a single Adele record sold more than 70 percent of all the classical albums sold in 2011, and more than 60 percent of all the jazz records. These bestselling artists may be prettier, but it's the equivalent of Donald Trump, Leona Helmsley, and a few others buying up all America's real estate" (96), which given where gentrification is going, doesn't seem too far from the truth. It's no surprise that a classical artist from whom I own two albums (albeit locked away in storage due to my living situation and her music not well enough remembered by me to hum), Beata Moon, would accept a request to connect from me on LinkedIn, since so few people are buying her music.

Former quantitative analyst David Lowery

writes, "Of the 75,000 albums released in 2010 only . . . 1,000 sold more than 10,000 copies . . . the point where independent artists begin to go into the black on professional album production, marketing and promotion." That means the other 74,000 either broke even or lost money. It's the kind of thing you don't hear from Internet utopians who crow about the "democratization" the Web encourages and the way digital technology keeps us all

"connected."

Here's what this kind of democratization actually means: "According to Neilsen, wrote Eduardo Porter of the *New York Times*, "75,300 albums were released in 2010, 25 percent more than in 2005. But new releases that sold more than 1,000 copies fell to about 4,700 from 8,000 during that time." That's selling more than just 1,000 copies. If, continued Porter, "professional musicians, movie directors and writers can't make money from their art, they will probably make less of it. [I don't think they will stop entirely, but it will degenerate to hobby status, which means far longer completion times.--Scott] Independent producers say piracy is already making it harder to raise money for small and mid-budget movies. Stopping piracy is about protecting creativity--and the many occupations it supports (think pop band or sound mixer). If we value what creative industries produce as much as we say we do, Congress will have to find a way to protect it without limiting speech." (107-108)

Here's Timberg's summary of Internet utopians advice in order to "adjust" to current working conditions, including removal of the middleman (disintermediation):

"Sure, musicians aren't earning anything from selling records anymore, but they can tour! People are still going to concerts, the famous bands are earning fortunes on the road, and even smaller bands can sell T-shirts and stuff. So get going! Many of these advocates of endless touring also argue that musicians should have day jobs, never explaining how people can work full time and then take months off to pile into a van and drive from city to city. Fans look around a crowded club or concert hall and think, These guys must be raking it in!

Most of the musicians who are going it alone developed reputations during the label era and don't need the same kind of publicity support and investment labels used to offer. (111-112)

Jack White of The White Stripes and Dean Wareham of Luna are quoted. The latter says, "Those at the top are making good money, but this has never been particularly profitable for most bands" (112), and he doesn't lament labels, still owing hundreds of thousands to Elektra even though his band has been defunct for a decade. John McCrea of Cake details how costly touring actually is and how one is lucky to break even, let alone make a profit. "And for musicians who are not natural live performers, that revenue doesn't exist at all" (113). Cake had a number one record, but McCrea is far from rich, and his job really interfered with his family life.

David Lowery adds, "If you hang out outside of a casino, the people you're gonna hear about are the winners. You're not gonna hear from the vast number of people who are the losers...it's not a business model." Timberg adds, "It hardly suggests a prudent path for the rest of us. When told this, right-wing nut job cyberbullies like @maxnrgmax and @2015Outlaw put their virtual fingers in their ears and start blathering dogmatic aphorisms and Horatio Alger stories. "You see a whole lot of talented people not getting jobs" says architect Marcelo Spina (122). Graphic designer Eric Almendral says, "People are confusing tools with the work. That drives down prices and rates, and brings a lot of hucksters and phonies into the profession because they work cheap. The technology has demystified the trade. Once you're sitting down in front of the same instrument that everyone else has, the impression is that you are a software jockey--people don't see how that's different from doing an Excel spreadsheet" (128-129). This has been a major problem for me. When you graduate with a film degree, you're not issued equipment, and at many schools, your access to equipment is cut off. (This was the case for me with graduate school, although not with undergrad, but I no longer live in proximity to my undergrad school.) If you don't have the wealth for the latest equipment, you

lose to the people who do, who probably don't have the theoretical background to do a better job than you. One of the aforementioned cyberbullies used the aphorism, "Only a bad carpenter blames his tools," which may be applicable in some cases, but when I said I don't use my tablet to write because of difficulties with on-screen keyboard, this demonstrates a total lack of understanding. I would like to see him type anything when the keyboard keeps being randomly yanked away, causing him to hit a random link that happens to be under where the keyboard just was a split second earlier, often resulting in the loss of everything typed. Imagine if someone did this with a hardware keyboard, perhaps even smacked him on the head with it as well, and told him "Just find a way to do it... Don't leave the room to find another keyboard. Just start typing" (when the keyboard is not even in front of him).

Architecture has a particular problem. More than the other creative fields, it has coalesced around the top 1%, a process called "skyboxing" by economist Michael J. Sandel:

Most architects in the '50s were building private houses--like the Case Study House project," [Olivier] Touraine said of the effort by *Arts & Architecture* magazine to design stylish, modest homes for the middle class. Even the ornery, individualistic California architect John Lautner, who designed extravagant homes, worked primarily for the middle class. (Even Lautner's signature flying saucer-like Chemosphere House in the Hollywood hills," which has since become a showplace for wealthy owners, was done for a middle-class client, an aerospace engineer.) "But the idolatry of the starchitects makes it seem like architecture is only for exceptional buildings. Architecture is perceived as a luxury good. It can be--but it's not only that," Touraine said. His original ambition--to design stylish, sustainable homes for middle-class clients like himself--did not survive the move into a post-recession world where the middle class has lost ground. (135)

"When times are bad," says architect Guy Horton, "it's about business skills, BS, self-promotion," (136) not one's ability to do the job they set out to do. The assumption now is that if you're not good at sales, you're not good at anything else either, which is patently absurd.

The mainstream media has shown how far to the right it is by ignoring the massive job losses in the creative sector in a way they never failed the automotive, banking, or agriculture industries. Timberg cites a National Endowment for the Arts study in 2008 showing that the average creative professional with a college degree was \$34,800, more than a quarter of whom live in the most expensive states. Some of the most physical of these laborers, the dancers, average only \$15,000. Art journalist Alexis Clements notes that the visual art sales that get the most press are secondary sales, in which the artist sees none of that money (139-140). For a country that produces and exports more creativity and cultural work around the world than any other country, to lampoon those who are suffering is unbelievably harsh.

Employment numbers from the Bureau of Labor Statistics show just how badly the press and media have missed the story. For some fields, the damage tracks, in an extreme way, with the Great Recession. Jobs in graphic design, photographic services, and architectural services all peaked before the market crashed, falling 19.8 percent over the next four years for graphic design, 25.6 percent over seven years for photography, and a brutal 29.8 percent in just three years for architecture. (The bureau's categories count all of the jobs in a given field, including the people who, say, answer the phone at a design studio.) The category of "theater, dance, and other performing arts companies," which includes everything from Celine Dion's shows in Vegas to small

Brian says

This book is a bit hard for me to review, because part of it seems like cogent, important analysis of the state of the arts world and part of it is Old Man Yells at Cloud. Also, the two parts are hopelessly mixed up among each other, so getting value out of *Culture Crash* requires wading through the occasional random digression about graphic arts in the middle of the architecture section or complaint about postmodernism.

The major point is that globalization destroys the creation of culture as a sustainable career path in much the same way it's destroyed North America factory jobs, Mexican corn farmers, traditional foodways, and so much else. Timberg acknowledges that the Internet and globalization means that it's possible for people to be exposed to a much greater variety of art, and also that artists, writers, and so on can disseminate their work to a larger audience, but points out that it's a double-edged sword. If everything is thrown into the same market, then popularity tends to become self-reinforcing. The most popular artists make millions and everyone else is lucky if they can keep doing art between the other jobs they have to hold to survive.

Furthermore, modern American society has done a lot to devalue the very idea of art. Enjoying one's job and fulfillment have been commodified, and added together with the popular notion of the starving artist there's a tacit cultural acceptance of paying artists crap because after all, they get to do what they love! Depression is inspiration! I have to work in an office for an asshole boss for nine hours a day and you get to draw pictures at home and you're complaining, you filthy hippie? Add the American disdain for a life of the mind and a focus on commercial success over even the concept of artistic merit and Timberg's thesis is that basically the whole art world is a giant argumentum ad populum. That which is successful is good, which is proven by its success. Saying otherwise is trying to claim that you have better taste than the masses, which is elitist nonsense and so you can be safely dismissed as an out-of-touch Ivory Tower intellectual who doesn't know what the average American really wants.

There were some interesting side notes throughout the book. One of the most cogent ones was the note that nowadays, people tend to confuse the tools with the work. By that, he means that skill at graphic art or webpage design isn't recognized as a separate quality from the ability to use Photoshop or write HTML. Why not have some random worker or even the boss make the webpage or the company logo? Or adding that in with the previous paragraph, why not try to hire a graphic designer but say they don't need money because the work will give them extra visibility? I mean, it's not like creativity is a skill that can be developed or is worth paying extra for people who have taken the time to do so, right? If you don't like it, there's another artist out there who will do it for free, so I'm really doing you a favor even offering this opportunity to you.

Another important point is that the death of the creative middlemen, the Blockbusters and Borders and record stores and so on, leads to a net loss because as much as people talk about cutting out the middlemen and direct exposure of the artist to their fans, some artists don't want that. There's a quote in the book from an independent artist that I really sympathized with:

What I missed most about having a label wasn't the monetary investment, but the right to be quiet, the insulation provided from incessant self-promotion. I was a singer, not a saleswoman. Not everyone wants to be an entrepreneur.

Nowadays, artists have to have a blog and a Facebook and a Twitter and a Tumblr and interact with people all the time. The super-rich can pay to have their image managed, but most cannot afford that luxury, and so the roll of the enthusiastic middlemen, the people in record stores who could recommend interesting music or

genres for listeners, now has to be done by the artists themselves. And of course, time spent marketing is time not spent creating.

I was happy at the end when Timberg drew in Capital in the Twenty-First Century, since I'm always up for a good rant against the rich. And his point there is good, since he argues that a lot of art patronage in the Goode Olde Dayes was based on local relationships. The local rich family endowed the museum or the town band as a way of showing civic responsibility, but today's jet-setting citizen-of-the-world rich people don't *have* civic responsibility because they don't see themselves as bound by locality, and thus culture gets homogenized because that's the only culture that can actually make money on a wide scale and everyone else is in the dogpile constantly clawing their way to the top.

Which is not to say the book is one hit after another. There's a constant thread through the book that democracy of taste is somehow bad that I found really distasteful. Basically, the counterpoint to success being a sign of artistic merit is that criticism is necessary and that taste should be mediated. Timberg laments the loss of a nationwide culture, where all of us were hearing the same music and watching the same movies, now that the internet has shattered us into a thousand thousand subcultures, but he later makes the argument about popularity, so it's more just that we're all listening to the same music but not music that he likes. The bigger problem is mostly the globalization lets people choose art from anywhere, so they can hear a performance by the London Philharmonic and don't need to go to the local symphony, which means that very few people go to the local symphony and it gets disbanded.

I can't entirely agree with this because my favorite music genres are chiptunes and dungeon synth (e.g. here for the former and here for the latter), not to mention creative riffing like the collection at Overclocked ReMix. There's no way I would have had access to that, or even known it existed, without the internet.

On the other hand, I have no idea how much money Erang or I Am Your Destruction make from their work, and OC ReMix ended up going to Patreon for funding, so I don't know if that proves *Culture Crash's* thesis or disproves it.

The organization is also very odd. Timberg occasionally jumps from topic to topic without much warning, like the aforementioned digression into graphic design in the middle of the chapter on architecture. He also introduces the lack of patronage from the rich relatively late in the book, when it seems like it should have a more prominent place due to his focus on income inequality on both the large scale (no one has any spending money so art doesn't get bought) and the smaller scale (the winner-take-all art market).

And sometimes he's just wrong. No, *Culture Crash*, SOPA is not a good idea and you should be ashamed for suggesting it. Copyright theft is a problem, but it's not like most artists would be making money for long on old works because Homer's estate would have sued Virgil and *The Aeneid* would never have been published. And that's not even getting into how SOPA would just further the top-down, winner-take-all control that Timberg claims to be against. And his complaints about the end of reading remind me of all the worries about people don't talk anymore, they just spend time on their phones. What exactly do the complainers think we're doing on our phones, anyway?

And one final complaint--one of the biggest new media forms, one that's only even possible due to the rise of the internet allowing its transmission, is podcasts. And they're not mentioned even once. Neither are video games, despite that video games make more money than movies and video game music concerts like Video Games Live, Distant Worlds, or *Symphony of the Goddesses* performed by symphony orchestras are a way to merge pop culture with high culture.

Overall, though, *Cultural Crash* is a good look into the world of art and media in the modern internet-enabled, globalized world. There's more in here that I haven't even touched on, like the death of newspapers or how computers will replace middle-class workers. Despite its occasional missteps, it's a good look into how mass culture changed art and the somewhat radical notion nowadays that a thing's value is not entirely described by its profitability.

Ian says

Like music, magazines, non-blockbuster movies, books, newspapers? Wondering why they're all disappearing with alarming speed? Read the morbid story of how technology and structural economic changes are emptying out the middle class and taking with it many of the creative professions with it.

Highly recommended.

Zach Finkelstein says

Another angle on inequality: the hollowing out of the middle class and its effect on the culture industry. The loss of middlebrow culture - Leonard Bernstein on the cover of Time Magazine, record store clerks and independent bookstores as footsoldiers of taste- in the internet age and the rise of the winner-take-all - Adele selling 60% of all albums in 2015. It's not a data-driven book. It's a powerful (anecdotal) counterargument to the technocracy and that big data is the answer for everything. Metrics don't make good music.

Marks54 says

This is a journalistic account of the decline of the culture business - defined rather broadly to include a number of cultural areas (music, fine arts, dance, architecture, theater) and the broader supporting infrastructure that has in the past supported them. The key claim is that the culture sector, while never thriving, has declined sharply since the turn of the millenium and even more sharply since the financial crisis of 2008, and has yet to even begin much of a recovery. The culprits include the internet, the development of a "winner take all" approach to markets, sharp reductions in government and corporate funding for the arts, and a fair number of self-inflicted wounds that have taught the public to question claims for the continuing value of cultural activities and cultural sponsorship. Mr. Timberg clearly sees these developments as bad things.

The book is informative, well written, and even passionate in places. I purchased this book with the intention of sending it to a niece who is considering going to an expensive college to pursue a course of study in the arts. While I do not wish to be negative about such a course of study, I wanted to provide her with something to think about. I may or may not follow through on this, although if I do not, it will not be because of the book.

So why didn't I rate the book more highly? To start with, there is not much new here in terms of the general arguments. The details have been updated, but the difficult conditions facing those wishing to start out in the arts these days have been clear for quite a while. Timberg adds some interesting nuance, such as in his discussion of the architecture profession or in his discussion of post-modernist criticism and cultural

studies. Having said that, the industry dynamics he reports upon are exactly what one would expect to happen given technological changes that promote "disintermediation" and the trauma that the financial crisis inflicted on the broader economy. I am unclear what is new here, although the author has brought a lot together within a single volume in an accessible form.

A related issue is that I am unsure how troubled I am by these developments. Sure, capitalism is a pain, but it has always been hard to make it in cultural professions, including academia. Still, if one is a consumer of cultural products why should you be unhappy? There is lots of high quality new music around that regularly comes through even medium sized markets at reasonable prices. Sure, the established bands making retirement tours charge a lot, but since when is it required to pay? Seriously, many who go watch the Stones are paying in part for the possibility that they will see their last concert. That actually happened to me once in Nashville with a different older performer. Yes, Amazon is a powerful industry leader, but I have never been able to get a wider range of books more conveniently and more cheaply. Is it really that bad? Yes, print is suffering but I don't have to read the WSJ if I don't want to.

I will grant that some people are getting a raw deal here. If you have made your career commitments to work in a business and then later, after you have committed, the conditions change that make life untenable, you are stuck and will take a loss. That is a real problem. What is less of a problem is that people are not required to enter a business or sector in such a state. One is not required to take a vow of poverty to pursue one's dream. Even in religious order in the good old days, such vows were less common than generally thought. If one sets out to take their chances in the music business, for example, then one had better be very good, since talent may not be sufficient and luck/connections are hit-or-miss by definition. If it doesn't work out, who is to blame.

I am less sympathetic with Mr. Timberg's remorse over those who support cultural players but are not themselves players. I have known people in these positions and have spent time there myself. Being a clerk is not that interesting of a job and it is difficult to see where such positions lead apart from exceptions. So you get to be a store manager? OK, then what?

One of my biggest difficulties with the argument is that Mr. Timberg slips in that there is a type of person who will trade off on money to pursue their passion in the arts. I don't buy this for a second as a real social phenomenon, apart from self-delusion. Where is it written in stone that one cannot also take steps to secure one's livelihood in the world while pursuing one's interest in the arts. In the short-term, there may well be frustration, but not being able to pay bills is also frustrating.

Finally, there is the question of whether there should be a national mass/middle class cultural sector. that is as big as it was. If the dissolution of industry structures due to digitization is affecting cultural businesses, as it has with most every other business, why is it bad to make use of it? I can get more movies now than I could ever get at either Blockbuster or Netflix. The same is true for books and music. I cannot browse as frequently at bookstores, but library book groups are thriving. ... and while the content of mass culture may still have some issues, lots of good books are being writtren and lots of good music is being recorded and performed. If the participants in these souped up winner take all markets are really high quality and dynamic, what is so bad about that? Remember, it has always been hellishly difficult to make a living from cultural pursuits. Perhaps the boom times of the post-WWII era were more of an anomaly?

Trent Hill says

This is a wonderful book that addresses a troubling side effect of the Internet-driven economy: the hollowing out of the complex economic structures, be they in music, film, or literature, that allowed artists and would-be artists to sustain (or at least imagine) actual careers creating art.

In a series of case studies, Timberg argues that commercial entities like bookstores, video stores, and record shops, as well as newspapers and magazines who provided arts coverage, weren't just generic middlemen but institutions intimately tied up in the artistic genres in which they traded. They not only "added value" by actively marketing creative products, but they were social institutions as well, bringing connoisseurs and consumers together. More importantly for Timberg's argument, these old-school mediators provided the economic structures and means that allowed prospective artists to build careers in the arts independently of support from academe or rich patrons. The poster child for this kind of career path is Quinton Tarrantino, who got his education as a filmmaker from working at a video store. He was able to support himself, however parlously, while working and schooling himself in his chosen field, in much the same way that an aspiring novelist could, pre-internet, support herself as an essayist and reviewer while working her way up the publication ladder. It was possible, that is, for an aspiring artist to have a solidly middle-class life without relying on a trust fund, indulgent parents, or family connections.

But just as important are the would-be Tarrantinos, Patti Smiths, or Salman Rushdies who don't wind up "making it" as artists. (Or, for that matter, the connoisseur / curmudgeons like the clerks in Hornby's *High Fidelity*, whose artistic aspirations seem to begin and end with their record story.) In the "old" system, they could still build middle-class careers in the arts, as promoters, A & R people, and reviewers. In the new, post-Internet economic and artistic universe, the options are much more limited, and would-be artists face something more akin to an existential crap shoot: create your art, give it away (or sell it as "content" for pennies), and pray it goes viral before you starve. If you don't win, well, good luck with your barista gig.

To draw a perhaps flawed analogy, the economic ecosystem of the previous regime, rooted in the economic structures of 19th and 20th-century capitalism with its rich variety of middlemen in the systems of production, distribution, and dissemination, was something like an old-growth forest, one that supported a wide range of flora and fauna growing in the shade of the tall trees (which weren't all of the same species). The new Internet economy in the arts is more like the tree farm planted after the old forest has been clearcut, full of GMO pines with some incidental scrub growth, with the main beneficiaries being the company that owns the (server) farm. And while Timberg doesn't spend much if any time drawing out the implications, in many ways the contemporary arts economy he anatomizes is itself a case study for the dark side of the New Economy: there's a lot of money being made, but most of it is going to the folks who own and run the server farms, and if you aren't a "maker" / coder, your job prospects, at least if you aren't in one of the surviving traditional professions, aren't looking too great. Timberg forces us to ask the question: Do we want our arts and letters to be the products of "the best and the brightest," or just the best and the brightest of an inherited aristocracy?

It's not a perfect book. The final chapter, which tries to link the culture crash to postmodern and post-structural trends in academic literary and cultural theory, is a pretty exhausted decline-and-fall trope that's only marginally more convincing here than in a warhorse like *Generation X Goes to College*. At least with *Culture Crash* there's some correlation between the death of arts and literary reviewing in newspapers and sites like Goodreads. (Given Timberg's background, as an arts reporter and reviewer, I understand the sensitivity.) My outsider's sense is that the real culprit in the collapse of newspaper publishing in general is Craigslist, which pretty much did in newspaper classifieds, along with the movement of readers and

advertising to the internet. That said, Timberg nails it with the economically-oriented case studies that make up the better part of the book.

Bruce says

Culture Crash turns out to be much more than a polemic, although it is not quite a complete manifesto. Scott Timberg is motivated by, yet manages to transcend, the considerable personal pain of a journalist who lost his job and then his house as a consequence of the kinds of changes he analyzes in this book. His research is extensive, as evidenced in both the main text and the excellent bibliographic essay. Timberg dedicates individual chapters to specific fields such as architecture, independent music, and journalism, while managing to skillfully weave universal issues through the text, and ends the book by indicating what he takes to be the necessary ingredients for a (hopeful) improvement. It is inescapable that the primary problem is one it may be too late to fix: winner-take-all market capitalism minimally constrained by social forces for greater good and a nuanced future. Timberg accepts there will be change and that each of us will likely feel nostalgia for what we grew up with that disappears or at minimum becomes barely recognizable. What he won't accept, and neither should we, is the pathetic and ultimately anti-human assumption that all change is inevitable and good. He is particularly concerned that in the 21st century the 1% should never have the final say. Post 2008 every one of us in the 99% should know that's true. Now, what are we going to do about it? I leave this book with the belief that any young person who wants a future world they can help to define (and through creativity, not just commerce) owes it to themselves to read Culture Crash. I know that's true for every teacher or mentor who will walk with those young people through their education, be it formally constituted or not.

Oliver Brackenbury says

This arrived in my reading queue at the same time as my first novel was released. Fearing a healthy injection of liquid doom at precisely the wrong time, I put it aside for a couple of days. Opening it with trepidation, I was almost immediately put at ease by the opening chapter - which was not the recitation of Sad Facts & Numbers as I'd expected it to be.

Scott Timburg wisely opens with a description of not only when things worked better for the creative class in recent times, but HOW they worked. Right away, you get a blueprint that could be learned from so as to improve the current situation. If only more non-fiction books on disquieting subjects could do something like this!

The rest of the book manages to stay relatively upbeat even when outlining the wounds, some self-inflicted, on the body of the creative class. This is important, because a misery parade is more easily disregarded and there's much of value here that shouldn't be ignored. Along with the look at better times, rose-tinted glasses not being in Timberg's toolkit, and the appraisal of How Things Are Now & How We Got Here...there is a third element I'd love to see brought more attention - the firm and fair argument for what was once referred to as 'middlebrow' entertainment.

It's hard to get too into that without just transcribing the book, but the gist of it is that just as society was healthier when the middle class was healthy, so too was its culture healthier when there wasn't such a wasteland between the celebrity magazines etc of low culture and the self-sabotaging gated communities of

incomprehensible academic high culture.

It's also yet another book I've read this year which references Jaron Lanier's "Who Owns the Future?", further reinforcing my belief that anyone who wishes to understand how we currently live should read that.

Meanwhile, EVERYONE should read this damn thing, especially non-artists and ESPECIALLY anyone who has ever felt like they don't "get" art or that those who produce it don't practice a profession so much as they play around. It truly has something of value for everyone, much as art & culture does in general. Culture Crash is easily my favorite non-fiction book of the year so far.

Litchi says

The book is a mix of insightful observations and (as a fellow book club member pointed out) "old man yells at cloud." At times, the book lacks structure. His opinions and his definition of what art and culture is makes the author seems out of touch. Ironically, never actually directly defines what creative work is exactly, and the reader will just eventually figure it out after reading through the entire book.

However, it *was* an interesting read, and was great fodder for our book club.

Jon says

Timberg's basic point is that the contemporary society is killing off middle-brow culture--the creative class--and in the process is destroying the very thing that makes society flourish. His idea of the creative class is related to Richard Florida's. Florida's book, which I haven't read but I've read about, argues that the creative class is key to the success of a city. For him, "creative class" means essentially anyone who creates--this includes then not just artists, musicians, and writers but also techies and the like. They are the innovators. Timberg takes a slightly different view of the creative class. He includes in it more of the support structure and less of the techie: that is, the bookstore clerks, editors, music producers, journalists, gallery managers, and so on. As these sort of jobs disappear, so too will our art, and society will be less rich for it. In fact, art will become the plaything only of the rich, as the middle class will be shunted out of making a living off it and will be forced to work long hours at comparatively mindless tasks, serving the rich.

I find Timberg's basic point to be annoying, anxiety creating, sad, and enthralling. The annoying part comes from the fact that I feel as if Timberg is playing the role of the whiny artist. A former journalist who is watching the death of newspaper reporting as we know it, he mourns for his job and the loss of professional news journalism. We are losing something in that, that is for certain, something that print newspapers did provide, and it is to be mourned, and in some ways it is alarming.

But technologies change, and so too do jobs. We don't need bookstore clerks in the numbers we once did or music producers or publishers. Timberg would say that these folks are what enabled the creative culture to exist. But I would say that on another level these hangers-on were also parasites of a sort. Still striving to become known for their art or unable to ever become known, they hang on at the edge of the scene, making a pittance to survive on because they love it, or conversely they become very successful and help to promote a set of artists they love, making larger amounts of money (instead of small amounts of money) off of them, much larger amounts than the artists themselves. Now, many of those art-supporting jobs are going away.

But were those jobs necessary for the artist? I am reminded of something I read about how copyright first came into being not as much to protect authors (sure, that's the noble reason we always give) but to protect publishers. It was the publishers who took the financial risk but also who made most of the money. And I am reminded of how technological change brings about societal change--just as keypunch operators of yesteryear aren't needed today, so too some of the creative class jobs of today won't be needed tomorrow. But the world will go on, and art will still be made--just differently. (The idea that one makes money off someone else's art seems to me to be something somewhat odd anyway--something that really hasn't existed except maybe in the past two hundred years. Other models existed and worked: artists worked for patrons in the Renaissance times, for example.)

But I am admittedly part of the hanger-on class, and the idea that my kind of work is going away is also a source of anxiety. As it becomes harder and harder to make a living publishing books, it seems certain that the job of editor is going to become less easy to come by. I hope that I can hang on long enough to get to retirement before the whole business model collapses, or (better) that we can figure out a new business model that works better for the new Internet age. At one time, I worked in bookstore retail. Now, that kind of work too has become much harder to come by, and the idea of one day returning to bookstore work as a retiree, as I once thought I might, seems fanciful. I mourn the loss of these things just as Timberg does. And I mourn the jobs I like and liked and wonder what would I do if . . . I'm reminded of the father of a classmate of mine who made big bucks as an engineer but whose job came to an end with the Cold War's end and who because of his age and the relatively narrow field of engineering he'd been in for so long was unable to find new work; luckily, he knew a bit about cars and was able to get by as a mechanic for a while until retirement a couple decades later ("get by" also being an operative and important term here). Me? I don't know what I'd do. Our society has become one where any career one pursues seems bound to become outdated within a decade, where one has to constantly be returning to school (and taking out the attendant loans) just to keep a job, and where one is bound eventually to become defunct, as happened near the end of the Cold War to another man my father's age, who returned to school to learn a specific computer program for which jobs were plentiful--but by the time he graduated with his certificate a year later, the market was flooded with such people and no job was forthcoming.

And that of course is also why the book is enthralling, that concern with change and art. Timberg begins his main text by looking at scenes that worked for a time, how they came to be and why, and what made them special--the poetry scene in Boston, the art scene in Los Angeles, and the music scene in Austin. Boston poets could work jobs as teachers but also at publishers and other small venues; living was relatively cheap. However, as big publications open to poetry became few, most poets moved wholly into the academy. Los Angeles had no real art scene until the pop art of the 1960s and 1970s. Then, a set of artists happened to move to town with an aesthetic and a gallery or two opened that fit with that aesthetic, and for a short while the place burgeoned, with more artists and more galleries and more and more. However, a lack of museum space and other supporting materials led artists eventually to leave, and the art scene would go into hiatus until the 1990s when more of that infrastructure was present. Austin would become the mecca for alt-country, in part because Willie Nelson would reside there. As rejected musicians found a home in this cheap city, and someone else started a music venue for them, a scene developed that would eventually attract out-of-town talent. More venues, more artists attracted yet more venues and artists--it is a upward spiral when working correctly.

Each city had relatively low costs of living at the time and jobs that fit well for the creative professions and for those trying to do creative work. Hollywood provided day jobs, or the Ivy Leagues did, or government did. In each place, a college was nearby, allowing young people to take part in the scene and to make up a large portion of its audience. And finally, institutions were essential to keeping the scene going.

Next, he looks at where those jobs are going or have gone. He begins with retail clerks at media stores (bookstores, music stores, and video rental stores). Fewer of these are around. They were founts of knowledge, but now even that knowledge is something of an algorithm on a computer database in terms of getting recommendations. It IS sad. I miss those stores too. And as Timberg notes, they really were/are the life of a city--where people often go/went to hang out and to meet similar thinkers. Now, what's left are bars and coffeeshops. I miss the large big-box music stores, as well as the smaller stores (in Athens a number of indies still exist, luckily, though they mostly sell vinyl now). I miss going to a video store and scanning the titles--sometimes I wouldn't even rent. Barring illegal downloads, such stores, if they're good, are often the only place to find obscure or older films. Now, only one such store is left here in town, and I consider us blessed. When I visited Boston a couple of years ago, it was bookstores that I most often dropped into--and I was reminded of how such stores used to populate other towns but no longer do (where I grew up, only Vroman's remains of new bookstores--and that includes chains; and where used bookstores once lived in every nook and cranny, there might be a sole one left somewhere). I don't visit clothing stores or other retail outlets with the same kind of curiosity and desire to stay. So yes, of course, we lose something in losing these stores and the people who work in them.

Where do creative people go? Well, many of them end up freelancing. Writers and journalists leave staff and become their own employers. The problem? Freelancing rarely pays as well and has no benefits. And as there are fewer and fewer regular gigs, there are more and more freelancers, which means competition is rife and wages depressed. Freelancing is not the panacea that so many business writers like to make of it. Sure, some people hit the big time, but most don't do that well. Timberg uses the example of Kodak, which employed 140,000 people; compare that to Instagram, which employees 13; where do those tens of thousands of others involved with photography go for work? We don't need 140,000 freelancers! And of blogging, which is a favorite example of these freelance cheerleaders. Sure, a few people make thousands off their blog, but most bloggers write for free--and many of those free writers work as hard or as passionately, given the time allowed, as the successful. (In writing of how much of a crapshoot this is, I'm reminded of a publisher's story about how a certain scholarly book that was expected to sell a modest thousand, if that, took off and sold over 80,000 copies because Elon Musk tweeted about it. A lucky break can make all the difference. But this isn't something an artist or freelancer has much control over, no matter how hard he or she works.)

Next, Timberg turns to the indie music scene. As with many of the jobs that he writes about, technology was at first a great aid to such workers. It allowed them to become DIY entrepreneurs, putting out "cheap" CDs and not being reliant on a corporation. But DIY artists generally make substantially less than those signed to labels. And many aren't good entrepreneurs. The benefit of labels (and publishers) was that artists could be free to just do art--they didn't have to do as much self-promotion. (In this sense, the industry that supports the arts, I suppose, is actually useful--not just a parasitic branch living off the work of others but rather letting those others focus on the work they want to do and taking over the parts that they aren't interested in or good at.) But in our new culture, the winners are few, and the rest of the artists and workers are left with crumbs. The entire economy, from manufacturing and now down to the arts, is based around a few real successes (the 1%) and a whole bunch of nonsuccesses. There isn't much in the way of middle ground. Some statistics were sobering: In 1982, 26 percent of concert revenue went to the top 1 percent of performers; 2003, 56 percent. And 90 percent goes to the top 5 percent. Or this statistic: if it takes one thousand units of sales to break even on a record, only 4,700 of the 75,000 records produced in 2010 did so (compare that to 2005 when 8,000 of 37,000 broke even.) Or this: One tech-savvy singer with 2 million YouTube views and 400,000 Spotify streams managed to make a whopping \$3,000 of her recorded music in one year. There ain't much money in streaming even for those who do it well.

The issue is not wholly that record companies have gone belly-up and everything is pirated, though that

certainly hasn't helped. The issue is that government has let big business dictate the law and the terms, which in turn has hurt artists. For one, there's the monopolization of radio stations by Clear Channel, made possible by a deregulation act of Congress in the 1990s. Now, most "local" radio stations are actually just streams from a centralized network (much like most "local" newspapers are now streams from a centralized news service). There's little space for newcomers (though this is kind of a return to radio of the early 1970s, back when major labels dictated a lot of what got played, before indie rock and small labels became a phenomenon in the 1980s and 1990s). For two, if record companies were both the parasites living off artists and the enablers of artists, today's parasites and enablers are tech companies, and the tech companies pay a whole lot less, if anything at all. The artists may be able to more easily release materials into distribution via these new technological avenues, but unlike radio, these avenues don't really encourage people to run out and buy the album if they like it: they can just stream the song again, for less than a penny. Hence, virtually all the profits go to the tech companies. This whole discussion made me really sad and a little angry--but even now I keep thinking about the origins of the copyright law, and it seems to me in many ways that things never really change and that what Timberg is bemoaning is something that's pretty much always been true, though to differing degrees by decade.

Timberg next turns his attention to architecture, where the unemployment rate among professionals was around 9 percent at the time he was writing, and for those newly out of college around 13 percent. Pay is not good either--and never really was: beginning teacher salaries that stay at beginning teacher salaries. But this chapter, which also discusses graphic designers, is really about how the recession killed off work for many such professionals and how the recovery has not brought that work back at the same price point. Everyone is struggling to find work, and when they do, it is for less pay. I feel so blessed to have had a job during the Great Recession, but it doesn't make me any less anxious to know there are so many out there that were so negatively affected.

Another chapter focuses on the lack of outcry about the loss of these creative jobs. I'm not sure I completely agree here. Sure, we hear more about the loss of manufacturing jobs (that's what Trump based much of his campaign on), but it's not like the death of journalism or the killing off of physical bookstores or the pittance that Spotify pays (as denoted by Taylor Swift's refusal to have her music on it) is without reporting. I know the these various professions are hurting. Granted, as Timberg notes, some people do take the loss of such professions less seriously. When a chamber orchestra goes belly up, some people will say that if the orchestra couldn't support an audience, then we don't need it. On some level, though, they're right--there has to be a cutoff at some point. We can't just keep supporting something because it's always just been there. On another level, though, Timberg makes a great point. Some of these arts were never self-supporting--they've always depended on patrons, going back centuries. To expect all arts to support themselves is to create a culture that cares solely about quantity, about money. And there is a loss in that regard, for some work is valuable not just for its own sake but for what it brings to our culture in the long term, in the form of ideas that come to have bearing much later than when they first came into being. I think of how things work in publishing and how, for example, a publisher might put out a book about some obscure terrorist organization that only a couple hundred people have an interest in reading; a decade goes by, and suddenly the terrorist organization makes a big splash and now folks are scrambling for information about it--that's why we shouldn't just publish works about PewDiePie and the Kardashians or about what's hot now. That obscure research has value--sometimes we don't know how much value until decades later. If we are concerned about bottom line only, then those kind of works will never come to be, and when the need for that work arises, we'll be left blindsided until someone who starts from scratch can come up with it in a hurry, and that someone might well not have the perspective granted to one who is not writing at the heat of the moment, when we tend to view things with hysteria.

My concern with Timberg's argument is that there's so much focus on what we're losing, on the world that

was. But as I noted earlier, technologies change--and that is true in the arts the same as it is true in manufacturing. We have to adapt. The issue as I see it isn't to fight against such progress but to find new ways, new models, that help us further the arts and that provide jobs for those pushed out of their old jobs. Timberg notes that only the rich will be left with the ability to live off their art. I would counter that if art really does become democratized so that everyone can do it, then everyone who wants to will be doing it (though in some cases the cost of technology might act as a barrier--even as it did in the past: that's why only the rich back then could fund a movie or by extension make one, employing various others in the process); the rich won't be living off their art--they'll be sponsoring it or doing it as a hobby, the same as other poorer people will be doing it as a hobby, assuming they can afford the technological means. The issue is really one of control over the means of production (and distribution). As human capital becomes cheaper and less necessary, it is only those at the top, with the ability to move culture around, that make money off the arts--or manufacturing or whatever task has to be done. That's the issue, that technology arguably is getting to a place where our productivity is increasing to the extent that workers no longer have enough to do in a single job to be able to make a living at it. We have to figure out ways to make up for these increases in productivity. Shorten the work week, for example, but somehow insist that yearly wages for that work remain the comparable (it's been done--as work weeks shrunk to forty hours from the fifty or sixty that were typical a century earlier). Or find some means by which people can accumulate even more. If I as a printer can do the work that it used to take two people to do, for example, either my sales need to double so that I can keep my employee or I need to cut both our hours by half while keeping the price for our product the same.

In some ways, the creative arts really are the future. How do we make them pay, or how do we pay for them fairly, is the question. As the professions surrounding those arts become defunct--typists aren't as necessary because writers can edit and draft on computer and don't have to type everything over again, book reviewers aren't as necessary because any enthusiast with a blog now has a platform from which to disseminate their enthusiasm for a work, and so on)--it is the task of conceiving the actual art that becomes the real source from which machines derive their part of the labor. (This is not to say that I don't respect a professional and learned book reviewer, who usually has more and better things to say.) At this point, I don't see satisfactory books being written by computer or movies being made by software--the machines help speed the process, but the ideas still come from us human beings. In a future where machines do almost everything except come up with the creative idea--the seed of the art--it is those who have the seed who should be paid. I guess the issue here is that only so many ideas catch on. Ask any musician or writer. One can labor for years, producing new work, with little attention from the public; then, one day one song or one book somehow resonates with others, and a career is born (or sometimes not, as any one-hit wonder can attest). That's no way to guarantee a living wage for vast numbers of people.

More at <http://shortstoryreader.blogspot.com/...>

Sandra Ross says

Well-written and substantive look at how the creative class (writers, musicians, artists, etc.) in the U.S. has been crushed by a convergence of forces over the last twenty years that escalated into a fast freefall in the 21st century and is now on the verge of disappearing altogether leaving the hacks and wannabes to take over and produce garbage that has no resemblance to anything truly creative and truly relevant.

It's a sobering book. I knew a lot of what the author talked about already, but got some of the backstory about the music industry, which I didn't know. It will change your view of everything you think you know and perhaps will change the way we as a nation do things.

