

# Culture Crash: The Killing of the Creative Class

By Scott Timberg

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Scott Timberg is an adjunct writing professor, a blogger on West Coast culture, and an award-winning journalist. In this book, he observes that the number of Americans who earn their living by making art is decreasing, and traces its implications. After World War II, the arts were not only a means of entertainment but a road to self-development and knowledge, a road that is now in disrepair. He spends too much time on describing the plight of creative white middle-aged males, rather on such groups as young women of color. Nevertheless Timberg makes the case that the demise of newspapers, of risk-taking film companies, and of bookstores, record stores, and video shops, rob its former customers of an informal but effective educational milieu. The profit motive bears responsibility for this unhappy state of affairs and has impacted the middle class culturally as well as economically. Timberg describes the “creative class” as those who work with their minds at complex levels, including physicians, lawyers, software engineers, publishers, critics, and book and record store clerks in addition to such obvious groups as artists, architects, musicians, filmmakers, performers, and the like.

Timberg displays an in-depth knowledge of Western culture and this grounding serves him well when he discusses the vicissitudes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He tells his readers how ancient cave paintings were not only done for esthetic reasons but to magically attract deer and other animals for the hunters’ bows, arrows, and club. To the medieval mind, the painter was of little account except for channeling the glory of God and the saints. Musicians of the late Middle Ages were stationed outside of towns so that they could alert guards as to the approach of enemies and marauders. During the Renaissance, artists and musicians became “advertisements” for the nobility. The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries became times of great expansion for the arts, with accessibility to middle class patronage. The growth of cities allowed the performing arts to expand beyond the salons of palaces and castles. Books could be read outside of libraries. Symphony orchestras could perform in concert halls. But artists were no longer supported by nobility and many became “outsiders.” Lord Byron fancied himself as a “dandy” but Edgar Allen Poe dies in a gutter. Culture became a minority taste, with many creative people living in academic settings at best or in bohemian squalor at worst.

But after World War II, the education of women opened up a new group that enjoyed the arts. Henry Luce and other magazine publishers brought culture to their readers and the much derided “middlebrow” culture emerged. In the United States, the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. President Eisenhower sent black musicians around the world. Book clubs flourished, many of them run by women. British television featured such highly praised series as “Civilization” and “the Ascent of Man.” This “Age of the Middlebrow” lasted three or four decades, according to Timberg, with Harper Lee and Ray Bradbury becoming household names, and Robert Frost and James Baldwin appearing on television. Thelonious Monk was on the cover of Time magazine

and Glenn Gould became a popular figure – despite the provocative musical style of these two performers. But then something happened. The minor members of the “creative class” lost their clout to their better known peers. Timber is not especially articulate as to how this occurred, and it is here that he needs help from social scientists and economists with their time lines and their citations of money spent and money earned.

One might think that the Internet would have opened up more opportunities for the “creative class” but Timberg notes that it is one thing to find a group of like-minded fans on Facebook and another thing to locate work that pays a living wage. Even people with millions of Twitter fans have trouble converting this fan base to bankable assets. Superstars, on the other hand, have received more attention and fame than ever before. Timberg correctly observes that coverage of the Academy Awards and Golden Globes have escalated from “a pseudo-event to a judgment of the Gods” (p 235), preceded by months of speculation. At the same time, the media covers the business events of films and telenovelas to the exclusion of serious analysis of the artistic merits of movies and television shows. As a result corporations have become the superheroes of consumer culture. The focus on celebrities, in film, television, and other media, has left very little room at the top of the ladder for aspiring artists producing a “winner take all” mentality. Context is ignored in favor of life styles of the rich and famous.

In previous eras, artistic production was often a top-down process. A merchant from Florence or Venice commissioned a painting. The Vatican assembled a chorale group. A royal family selected a painter to record their visages for posterity. With the advent of the Renaissance, artists began to join in communal groups where they could express their individuality but with support from their peers. The Impressionists, the surrealists, and even the Dadaists produced classics without top-down subsidies. Further, their subject matter and their styles were not constrained by church dogma or by subsidies. Timberg observes that something organic takes place when great artists are assembled. He cites Indianapolis in the 1950s, a time when such jazz artists as Wes Montgomery, Leroy Vinegar, Carl Perkins, and Freddie Hubbard assembled offering “a distinct relaxed, gently swinging sound” that contrasted with the big name jazz music of the metropolitan centers” (p. 25). He provides examples from poetry, painting, architecture, and country music – but then the scene disintegrated. Why? Timberg blames the recession of the 1970s, the lack of supporting institutions, and the absence of peer support—a network that emerges at the right place and in the right time. Timber maintains that there has been a disappearance of the “widespread idea of...a sense that some culture matters” (p. 230).

Hence, “many—perhaps most—are still struggling. Some have ceased to struggle; they are simply flat on their backs” (p. 218). And what is happening to writers and designers is also happening to the middle class. It is another example of plutocracy versus penury, a country where one percent of the population owns one quarter or more of the wealth. And that is a conservative estimate. Four members of the family that owns Walmart Industries own more

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commercial resources than the bottom 40% of their fellow citizens. The average worker must labor four months to earn as much money as the CEO of his company earns in one hour. The World Bank's index of income inequality lists the United States as number 112; America has supposedly recovered from the recession, but 0.5% of the gains since 2009 have gone to the top 1%. As can be seen *Culture Crash* is an economic primer as well as a cultural survey.

Tinberg himself lost his job as arts reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* after a real estate mogul bought the paper and gutted its staff. Tinberg makes a comparison to the disappearance of art and music classes from America's public schools, the dismissal of the arts in favor of readership and education that caters to big business and its recruitment of properly educated and prepared novices. Even here, the days of the paid apprentice are over; the rungs of the ladder in creative industries have been gutted in favor of unpaid internships. Cities such as New York and San Francisco are driving out the very people who developed their unique cultures, their remarkable ethnic neighborhoods, their musical styles and artistic movements, and the venues that supported them. They, and similar cities, are becoming cities with dwindling middle classes – the segment of society that served as hubs for art and music. Tinberg's evocative interviews allow creative people to speak for themselves, producing panoply of squandered talent and sidelined innovation.

Nonetheless, there are some bright spots and Tinberg ends his book on a positive note. Television has never been better. Young artists have made a point of escaping from "class" distinctions. Mainstream publishers, Movie studios and record companies are taking more chances. Blogs, articles, and books are being written about the greed and venality of the top 1% who "have no home town or home team of any kind. Their dedication is entree to capital and to its frictionless international exchange" (p. 233). At the same time, it is acknowledged that many billionaires come across as intelligent and decent" another sign of hope. The challenge facing American society is to encourage a creative class that is robust, productive, and secure. "It means being ornery, forward-looking, and wise" (p. 252). Midcentury intellectuals who assailed middlebrow culture, "did not know how good we had it" (p. 255).

Tinberg is highly selective in making his case. The Soviet Union took a different trajectory yet is only referred to a few times. Eastern European countries are referred to less, Asia and Africa barely at all. Nevertheless, this is an original and remarkable account of the current struggles of the "creative class" (if that word actually describes the people Tinberg is writing about). It also points to a cultural crisis in the United States and, perhaps, other parts of the world as well. Ortega y Gasset derided "the revolt of the masses" and Dwight MacDonald dismissed with contempt "midcult and masscult." But Tinberg perceptively observes how creative culture, the very font of U.S. civilization, was enriched by this development and has described his vision for the future. He would like to see "a world in which people who are not poets read poetry and draw sustenance and wisdom from it. In which non-dancers attend dance concerts, and folks who are neither professional musicians nor foreign businessmen go to jazz shows. In which a growing not a shrinking number of people read and discuss novels, and can hear about authors and ideas in the press. Where adults, and not just children, learn to play instruments, supporting music schools and the musicians who teach there. Every decent sized city would have an array of book and record stores and performance venues, as well as a good newspaper that could afford arts coverage and assertive watchdog journalism....It means a world, in short, very different than the one we have now, and even more different than the one we're headed toward. Without wishing, and passion, we'll certainly never get there. With nerve and follow-through and some luck, we just might" (p. 267). This is a splendid vision. Will it ever be embodied and actualized? Tinberg has provided the blueprint and the foundation should his readers enlist the internal motivation and the external support to actualize it.

## REFERENCES

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