

## **Culture Isn't Free**

BY MIRANDA CAMPBELL 7/2/2105

*ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Miranda Campbell is an assistant professor in the School of Creative Industries at Ryerson University and the author of Out of the Basement: Youth Cultural Production in Practice and in Policy.*

Expecting artists to work for free hands the reins of cultural production to ruling elites.

The missives from the struggling artist keep piling up. Filmmakers show their work at renowned film festivals but still turn to crowdfunding to pay emergency vet bills. Writers agonize over how mortgage officers will perceive incomes cobbled together from teaching contracts and freelance gigs. Musicians go on successful tours but come home with deep debts, while their widely streamed songs earn a pittance.

In 2012, one of the most popular indie bands around, Grizzly Bear, shared how little their lives had changed since their success — one band member remained in the same 450-square-foot apartment, while the rest still lacked health care coverage. Since the bottom has fallen out of record sales, the band earns its livelihood through licensing and touring, but, as singer Ed Droste explains, the latter usually means not having to pay rent for a couple months rather than a large windfall.

In a post-Napster era, artists of all stripes face the expectation that the fruits of their labor should circulate for free, both on and offline, and when revenues from creative work do trickle in, they rarely amount to a decent wage.

Persistent shame and stigma about poverty have made some artists wary of admitting their difficulty making ends meet. One blogger with an MFA in creative writing states, “I haven’t been talking about how poor I am in a serious way or how terrifying it is to be on the cusp of my 30th birthday, wondering when I’ll have enough quarters to do laundry again.”

Yet these days more and more artists are challenging the bohemian stance that artists should shun economic capital in favor of pursuing art for art’s sake. Artists and creative workers increasingly lick their low-income wounds publicly and vent about the elaborate dance of self-reinvention in the digital age. It’s become trendy to discuss and even quantify exactly how little money is being made from creative projects. Mathematics has never looked so hip.

These confessionals stem from a desire to raise awareness about artist livelihoods and draw attention to the contemporary challenges of earning a living from creative work. Stories like Grizzly Bear’s bring immediacy and detail to broad and harsh economic realities and can be vehicles for empathy, building bridges for the reader to commiserate with their fellow human.

But beyond commiseration, it's unclear whether these stories play any role in instigating change, or creating more favorable working conditions. Stories of struggle have become a normalized way to talk about the difficulty of earning a living from creative work in a postcrisis economy, but does telling these stories do any good, or play any role in helping artists find their feet in economically stagnant times?

We're living in an era where fame does not mean fortune, despite dominant perceptions that achieving visibility equates with financial success. Essayist David Rakoff lampooned the "old fantasy of carnal chaos of drop cloths, easels, turpentine, raffia-wrapped Chianti bottles holding drippy candle ends, and cavorting nude models," highlighting instead how painful, tedious, and lonely artistic work can be.

Making art "requires the precise opposite of hanging out" and is often "a deeply lonely and unglamorous task of tolerating oneself long enough to push something out," characterized by a "lack of financial security and the necessary hours and hours of solitude spent fucking up over and over again."

But most people still consider making art a privilege, demonstrated by the knee-jerk reaction to conversations about artists being paid fairly for their work, particularly when the artist is, or is perceived to be, wealthy. The launch of Tidal — an artist-owned music streaming site that, while certainly no panacea, seeks to more equitably distribute earnings to creators — was met with a collective eye-roll, as commenters scoffed at the idea of rich artists getting richer.

When David Byrne of Talking Heads recently declared he was pulling his catalog out of Spotify because of measly revenues from the service, and concerns about the sustainability of this distribution method for emerging artists, online commenters were less than sympathetic. "Truly creative people are delighted to share their work and ideas for free," wrote one commenter. Another said, "If you are only being creative as a means to get rich, then I don't want your crappy creation and I hope you go bust."

Likewise, much of the voluminous and heated response to Grizzly Bear's post-fame challenges sought to discredit the band's story of struggle. Online commenters cited Droste's family pedigree — including a cousin who founded Hooter's — and trendy restaurants he had been spotted at.

Celebrated British author Rupert Thompson recently spoke out about the crushing effects of the Great Recession on the ability of writers to make a living from their craft. At sixty, he is no longer able to afford to rent an office space to write in. Instead, Thompson decided to turn a tiny corner of his attic — an area so small he can't stand up in it — into a workspace. "I have no private income, no rich wife, no inheritance, no pension. There's no safety net at all" he said.

Still, online commenters debated the merit of giving Thompson any sympathy. Some

suggested that Thompson should be grateful that he is doing something that he loves, that he owns a home, that he is able to convert his attic into a tiny workspace. Others suggested that expecting to write all day and survive financially was foolhardy to begin with.

It's difficult to imagine this reaction to stories from workers in other professions lamenting their faltering ability to make a living from work that is well received.

When tales of artist struggle are rooted in the experience of individual artists or bands, the public response is often to push back and discredit, to find fault in the story or suggest the individual is not a credible spokesperson for the problem he or she is articulating. But debating the extent to which Grizzly Bear members, Rupert Thompson, or any other individual artists do or do not struggle financially is pointless and fails to address why artists struggle, what lessons might be learned from their stories, and what solutions might be developed.

It's not a matter of dredging up a more appropriate poster child for the starving-artist cause. If we want to improve the lot of artists, we need to shift gears from a woe-is-the-artist conversation to one about the importance of art and the need to support the creation of art at the societal level.

This new conversation will depend in part on developing new ways of thinking about the struggles of artists, and broadening the focus of cultural production away from individual practitioners. There are a couple recent works in particular that help us conceptualize these problems.

In her book *The Public Platform: Taking Back Power and Culture in the Digital Age*, Astra Taylor first asks why it matters whether artists earn a living. In answering this question, she draws on hardship stories of individual artists, even citing her own experience of being paid \$20,000 by an independent production company for two years of intense work to make her documentary film *Examined Life*, only to have the film uploaded to torrent sites shortly after it premiered.

Taylor recounts these stories not only to convey the challenges of producing art in today's economy, but also to make a broader argument about the role of art and culture in fostering an informed and engaged democratic public sphere. For her, democratic culture means broad and equitable access both to the tools of creation and the means of dissemination.

If individual artists cannot make a living from their creative work, they will eventually throw in the towel. So Taylor contends that policy intervention is needed to ensure that large corporations do not monopolize the cultural sphere. "Our lives are improved by the positive externalities that art and ideas produce, our world more beautiful, more interesting, more ambitious."

In *Culture Crash: The Killing of the Creative Class*, Scott Timberg also emphasizes the role of institutions in supporting creative work. Timberg notes that in the years since the Great Recession, it is not only individual artists or creators who have been affected — people who play supporting roles, like DJs, bookstore clerks, set designers, and editors have also been hit hard.

And institutions don't just play an incubating role for cultural production — they also provide employment to a broad swath of the population. So when records don't sell, it's not only recording artists who suffer. Timberg claims that whether one works as an artist or in a supporting role, "we're all in this together."

How can we foster this sense of solidarity, not just among creative workers and those whose labor supports their work, but also in the general public?

An important first step is framing the production of art as work, not as a privilege. Despite the supposed glamor of being an artist, most earn an income that falls near or below the poverty line.

In addition to challenging these perceptions, we need to recapture the idea that art and culture can perform public functions: art educates, art provokes, art transforms, art uplifts, art soothes, art imagines other worlds. The danger of not supporting artist and creative workers is that these functions are left in the hands of elites.

We also need to expand access to art creation, as part of a broader push to support the production cycle of art from creation to dissemination. This will involve shifting away from giving individual grants to individual artists and instead funding public institutions — like shared work spaces and affordable housing — and ensuring that small venues can keep operating and showcasing creative work.

Tackling nitty-gritty policy work is also essential — fighting for permits, licensing, and zoning for cultural production could prevent artist eviction due to escalating real-estate speculation, noise complaints when neighborhoods are rezoned, or fines for putting up posters in public spaces. A whole swath of creative workers lacks access to health coverage, parental leaves, pension plans, and other protections. Developing sustainable culture also means addressing these issues.

Taylor suggests that particular historical moments usher in new initiatives for cultural support. The Great Depression saw the birth of the Works Progress Administration as part of the New Deal, which employed musicians, writers, visual artists, actors, and directors in Federal Project No. 1.

The Cold War gave rise to the National Endowment for the Arts, with Congress resolving that "while no government can call a great artist or scholar into existence, it is necessary and appropriate for the federal government to create and sustain not only a climate encouraging freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry, but also the material

conditions facilitating the release of this creative talent.”

In this economic moment, it's time for a new New Deal. Many types of workers endure substantial material stress, but we need to count artists among these struggling workers, rather than dismiss their stories as the needless whining of people who have the privilege of doing what they love.

Rather than assuming that the ability to produce art is a luxury, we can support creative work so it is more accessible and so more people can continue in their creative professions rather than having to quit to find more stable employment.

Culture theorist Angela McRobbie suggests that widespread structural underemployment means it's time to reimagine creative work by developing structures for “strategies of social cooperation” so that the creative energies of young people can be directed towards the common good in ways that go beyond volunteering. A universal basic income, for instance, could allow artists to develop creative projects directed towards greater community involvement.

McRobbie calls for a renewal of radical social enterprise and cooperatives, including literacy and street education programs, photography workshops, or other projects for urban and environmental improvement. Artists have the ability to make interventions into prevalent social problems, but this capacity cannot be left to the market alone to dictate.

The question remains of how to gather public support for such initiatives. When the problem of earning a living is presented as an individual story, it's easy to dismiss it as the failing of the individual.

Artists are expected to reinvent themselves, turn to crowdfunding, and hustle their way out of their predicaments. But we cannot crowdfund our way to broad public support for culture or to more sustainable approaches to cultural production. We need to move from narrating individual struggles to discussing community-wide challenges and collective solutions.

Stories of struggle do matter, but we need to start the conversation by discussing why these stories matter and what will be lost if only the wealthy can pursue a career in culture.