

Book Review

**Midlife Creativity and Identity: Life into Art**

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Philip Miles (2018). *Midlife Creativity and Identity: Life into Art*. Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 2019, 203 pages.

During most of my twenties I remember looking up to bands like *LCD Soundsystem* or *Franz Ferdinand*, largely because they were led by musicians who were older than many of their contemporaries. I always felt I would end up having *that* career in music. Seeing people working in music in the latter part of their thirties always gave me hope that I still had time to follow that path eventually. It is in this context that Philip Miles' *Midlife Creativity and Identity* presents a welcome study of the work of artists during their 'middle age'. In recent years there has been a substantial upsurge in studies surrounding cultural labour, with notable studies exploring the role of social class, gender and racialisation in cultural production. Miles contributes a necessary, engaging and comprehensive ethnographic study that explores two further under researched areas within cultural labour studies – age and the creative process itself. Organised into three themes based around different types of creative practice - music, art and literary authors – the book explores the processes, 'transformations' and 'authorial routines' central to creative practice.

Given the concern with midlife, it is unsurprising that time emerges as a key theme throughout the book. The initial section of the book details the experiences of *The Ruins*, a group of musicians bordering their fifties who write and perform within Derby, England. What is striking within this section is the 'distance from necessity' – to quote Bourdieu – within which they operate. Their recording space captures the trappings of a midlife middle-class lifestyle and operates as a space of near timelessness. As Miles recounts, the temporal limits of rehearsal room space bookings which constrain younger, aspiring bands are of little concern for *The Ruins*. On initial reading, there is a feeling that the artists' relationship with money is perhaps understated within Miles' book. Perhaps, this criticism is unfair, however. As the book proceeds, 'time' acts as the form of capital that structures the experience of the participants' creative lives. For the working-class participants who feature in Miles' study, time acts as a proxy for advantage, their late entry to these creative occupations helping to overcome feelings associated with 'imposter syndrome' as demonstrated by the case of writer Annette, or the ability to embrace risk and get out of their 'comfort zone' (p. 76), in the case of the visual artist Peter. Age, in many ways, seems to correspond with having *more* time to be creative – either through affording participants more time or through the feeling of urgency that creativity can no longer wait.

While Miles' theoretical inspiration crosses the disciplinary boundaries between sociology and the more literary end of cultural studies, the crux of the book's theoretical framework bridges the work of Raymond Williams within the broadly late modern paradigm of Bauman, Beck and Giddens. Miles' key conceptual development is to introduce the notion of the 'mezzanine', which refers to a 'place' or 'state' where artists 'go' to explore their creativity in between the routines of everyday life. Inverting late modern notions of individualisation as unmooring individuals from sites and sources of belonging, the mezzanine state is an exalted place where artists 'let go' of the ties to everyday routines that limit them. This mezzanine, taking influence from Williams' notion of 'structure of feeling', is a place of uncertainty and risk where artists are able to explore their creativity. Miles uses his concept of

the mezzanine throughout the book to organise his analysis to place an emphasis on the creative process and routines of creativity. The concerns for ‘product’ or the ‘cultural industry’ (p77) that are understated by the participants earlier in the book, represent a return to the undesirable concerns of the everyday: money, routine and convention. The participants all exemplify the contrast between the ‘mezzanine’ and their everyday routines through their work. The artist Robin, for example, considers his creativity to be the process itself - the ‘notion’ of being creative – and contrasts this with the completion of the finished object - an ‘act of forgetting’ (p95). Indeed, Robin likens letting go of the work of art to the letting go of an academic paper and ‘getting it out’. Likewise, Annette finds her enjoyment in writing in a more ‘leisure’ like time characterised by the absence of routine, which contrasts with a more rigid notion of ‘work’ time wherein writing is associated with toil. For many of the artists the joy of creativity is in exploring new ideas and taking risks, but this often contrasts with feelings of drudgery or routine associated with producing the actual output.

At times Miles’ book can be an intimidating read, such is the theoretical depth and richness of the ethnographical material and data. The switching between ethnographic material and theoretical explication can mean the reader has to do a lot of work to keep up with the narrative being told. Overall, however, the book provides an important contribution to wider cultural labour studies. There is often a tendency in studies of cultural production to focus on youth cultures or subcultural studies at the expense of exploring the later stages of life. Indeed, media and cultural studies more generally tend to be concerned with the activities of young ‘creatives’. Taking age seriously is a particular strength of this book and focussing on time allows for an implicit exploration of the intersections between age, class and gender. In this sense, Miles’ book provides a welcome antidote to the kinds of over-socialised accounts of cultural production that occupy the post-Bourdieu terrain. While the focus of the book is on the creative process, Miles certainly does “pay respect” to the object of cultural production in a way that few other studies have done previously (Banks, 2017).

## **REFERENCES**

Banks, M. (2017) *Creative Justice: Cultural Industries, Work and Inequality*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.