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**Department
of Management**

Working Paper Series

Paola Trevisan

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arts in the era of creativity.
The case of an Italian opera
house**

**Working Paper n. 1/2017
February 2017**

ISSN: 2239-2734

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The managerialization of the arts in the era of creativity. The case of an Italian opera house

Paola Trevisan
paola.trevisan@unive.it
Dept. of Management
Ca' Foscari University of Venice
January 2017

Abstract. This paper investigates how management discourses developed in the arts industry. The theoretical background applied to answer this question, is rooted in the deep discussion on the role of managerial thinking in capitalistic societies which is provided in Boltanski and Chiapello's "The new spirit of capitalism" (2005; first version in French "Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme", 1999), and it is enlarged by a discussion on how managerial discourses have affected the creative and the arts sector in more recent times.

The theorizing provided in this paper is based on the analysis of the managerialization process of an Italian opera house. The case study is described by reporting both the "official version" and less official voices, putting particular emphasis on the role played by managerial discourses. The results show how the vocabulary of management is used internally to justify the managerialization process, and externally to communicate with potential investors of the private sector. However it is contrasted internally by some "voices out of tune" which see management principles as conflicting with the artistic mission of the opera house, and their application as detrimental for the artistic quality and as source of frustration for artists and creative professionals.

After the analysis of the case study, I provide a discussion of what seems to be a managerialization process investing the arts sector, in contrast to the artification of management which is undergoing in the profit-seeking creative sectors. Following Boltansky and Chiapello's reasoning, I conclude by questioning about the possibility of a revival of the artistic critique in the cultural sector.

Keywords: arts management, managerialization, creativity.

Correspondence to:
Paola Trevisan
Dept. of Management, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia
San Giobbe, Cannaregio 873
30121 Venezia, Italy
E-mail: paola.trevisan@unive.it

The managerialization of the arts in the era of creativity. The case of an Italian opera house

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Introduction

This paper investigates the role played by management discourses in modern societies, in particular in the light of the increasing demand for emotional and aesthetic contents. The question is how has management discourse developed in the arts industry, which has traditionally been the main deliver of emotional and aesthetic goods? The theoretical background applied to answer this question, is rooted in the deep discussion on the role of managerial thinking in capitalistic societies which is provided in Boltanski and Chiapello's "The new spirit of capitalism" (2005; first version in French "Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme", 1999), enriched by a discussion on how managerial discourses have affected the creative and the arts sectors in the era in which the "creative industries" have gained strong political and economic relevance.

The theorizing provided in this paper is based on the analysis of the managerialization process of an Italian opera house. The case study is described by reporting both the "official version" and less official voices, putting particular emphasis on the role played by managerial discourses. The vocabulary of management is used internally to justify the managerialization process, and externally to communicate with potential investors of the private sector. However it is contrasted internally by some "voices out of tune" which see management principles as conflicting with the artistic mission of the opera house, and their application as detrimental for the artistic quality and as source of frustration for artists and creative professionals.

After the analysis of the case study, I provide a discussion of what seems to be a managerialization process investing the arts sector, in contrast to the artification of management which is undergoing in the profit-seeking creative sectors. Following Boltansky and Chiapello's reasoning, I conclude by questioning about the possibility of a revival of the artistic critique in the cultural sector.

The paper is structured as follows. In the first section I outline Boltansky and Chiapello's theory and I link it with the discourses on the creative industries that are going on in the political arena and in management studies. In the second section I retrace the literature on arts management from its origin to the more recent concern about the dualism between artistic and managerial cosmologies. I then discuss the case study, including methodological consideration and an introduction of the context. Finally, I discuss the results of the case study under the lens of Boltansky and Chiapello's framework.

Management discourse in the creative era: *the artification of management*

Boltansky and Chiapello, in their “The new spirit of capitalism”, looked at management discourse as the main instrument through which the dominant capitalist ideology had been legitimized and incorporated in modern societies. Management, in their view, serves to provide both justification and prescription for capitalism. The capitalist order, however, changes with time as a response to the critiques it faces. Boltansky and Chiapello distinguish two kinds of critiques to capitalism: the social critique and the artistic critique. The social critique accuses capitalist systems to be a source of poverty and inequality (it is on this ground that theories of exploitation have developed), and to have contributed to the erosion of social bonds and collective solidarity by fostering opportunism and the egoism of private’s interests. The artistic critique accuses capitalism, and in particular the standardization and commodification processes that it incorporates, to be a source of disenchantment and inauthenticity in the kind of existence associated with it, which denotes a general loss of meanings; and to be a source of oppression inasmuch as it is opposed to the freedom, autonomy and creativity of human beings which are subjugated by the dominance of the market and by the subordination typical of wage-labour (Boltansky and Chiapello, 2005: 37-38).

Consequently, as the critiques contribute to shape a new capitalist order, management discourses must change accordingly in order to continue providing the justifications to the “new” capitalistic order.

In their analysis on the evolution of management discourse from the 1960s to the 1990s, Boltansky and Chiapello focused in the changes of topics mainly addressed by management studies. So, while in the 1960s management discourses developed around the need to motivate managers (*cadres*), through measures such as target management and management by objective, characterized by strong rational thinking and oriented towards the maximization of efficiency, in the 1990s the focus shifted towards the motivation of employees, and managerial innovations were introduced with the aim of fighting the old bureaucratic organizations which were based on hierarchy and control. In the 1990s keywords and meanings changed with respect to the previous period. New themes developed around the need of more flexibility and continuous innovation, introducing concepts such as network, trust, vision, leadership, teamwork, creativity, and commitment. These changes in management discourses signaled, according Boltansky and Chiapello, the assimilation of the artistic critique by the new spirit of capitalism.

When Boltansky and Chiapello were writing “The new spirit of capitalism”, in the late 1990s (the first publication in French is dated 1999), the new spirit of capitalism was indeed taking a written form in several policy documents under the label of “creative industry”.

The concept of creative industry origins in UK policies in the mid-to-late 1990s, in which it was defined as “those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property” (Creative Industry Task Force, 1998). The industries included were advertising, architecture, arts and antiques market, crafts, design, designer fashion, film, interactive leisure software, music, performing arts, publishing software, television and radio. Other countries, notably Australia, New Zealand and Scandinavian countries, and international agencies such as the United Nations (UNCTAD, the UN’s trade and development body), following the UK’s example, took up the same notion of creative industry.

Few years after, the urbanologist Richard Florida, published his bestseller “The Rise of the Creative Class”, in which Florida argues that creative people are the key resource to power regional and economic growth, and thus advises policy makers to take adequate measures (specified in the three Ts of Technology, Talent and Tolerance) to attract them in their cities. Florida defined people of the creative class as those “who add economic value through their creativity” (Florida, 2002: 68). It is a broad definition that includes a wide range of high-skilled and knowledge-based workers, from artists to scientists, including also the workers of knowledge-intensive industries, legal and health care professionals and business management.

Basically, the creative industry is the new word used to address what was until then defined the “knowledge economy”, while creativity is gradually replacing the notion of innovation.

Even if Boltansky and Chiapello didn’t mention the creative industry in their attempt to define the new spirit of capitalism, since it was a concept under development at the time of their writing, some authors, such as Gill and Pratt (2008), and Ekman (2014), have more recently addressed the creative industries as the new moment of capitalism. Indeed, in the “projective city” described by Boltansky and Chiapello as the new dominant “normative fulcrum” that justify the new spirit of capitalism, we can find the same vocabulary applied to the concept of the “creative city”, such as: networks, flexibility, autonomy and, of course, creativity.

With the mounting interest in the creative industry, the new capitalist order finds legitimation in new management discourses, who outlines technical and normative models for the functioning of the world of creative enterprises.

Having a look at management studies on the “creative” industries, we could see how management discourse has indeed take the form described by Boltansky and Chiapello: the figure of the hierarchical boss is substituted by that of the catalyst, visionary, and creative leader; the old control mechanisms are abandoned to leave space to forms of self-control based on strong employees’

motivation and commitment achieved through the development of shared organizations' visions; the work is organized in teams and based on projects, in which everyone should be able to develop themselves, increase their employability, and find a personal fulfilment (Boltansky and Chiapello, 2005).

Managing creative personnel and creative processes becomes, thus, essential capabilities for creative businesses to innovate and succeed in a competitive context (De Filippi et al., 2007). As managing creativity becomes the mantra of the new capitalistic system, arts management – already familiar with the complexity of arts organizations, in particular in terms of conflicts between the needs of management and artistic exigencies – becomes a relevant source of knowledge. In general, Evard and Colbert (2000) defines four areas in which arts management can contribute to general management studies: strategic management (especially on project and innovation management); human resource management (regarding topics such as dual management; leadership for creative works; dealing with intermittent workers); finance and accounting (on the evaluation of immaterial assets); marketing and consumer behavior (for the commerce of non-utilitarian commodities and experiential goods). Some management studies have started looking at arts organizations in order to better understand how they manage the creative people and processes that lie at the core of their activities. For instance, management studies on creative businesses often describe how managers foster innovation by setting peculiar working spaces (Martens, 2011), by hiring artists as leaders or project managers (Child, 2012; Adler, 2006), by setting up heterogeneous teams (Perretti and Negro, 2007), by engaging with external communities of expertise (Cohendet and Simon, 2007), or by developing a precise corporate culture (Kunda, 2009). Some studies have very evoking titles containing art-business metaphors, such as the books “Jamming: art and discipline in business creativity” by John Kao (1996) on the similarities between jazz and management, and “artful making: what managers need to know about how artists work” by Austin and Devin (2003) on the parallelism between knowledge management and theatrical plays direction; or the paper “managing musically: how acoustic space informs management practice”, by Bathurs and Williams (2013). Management, in the creative industry, is, thus, creative itself. Some authors have called this tendency the “artification” of businesses (Naukkarinen, 2012; Naukkarinen and Saito, 2012).

The arts sector in the creative era: The *managerialization* of the arts

The sociologist Paul DiMaggio, in his study on arts managers conducted in 1981, highlighted how, in the cultural sector, administrative roles were becoming more formalized, and how new arts managers were more likely to have administrative experience and managerial degrees than their

senior peers (DiMaggio, 1987). His findings underlined the beginning of a managerialization process that was required by the need of arts organizations for stronger management.

Indeed, in the two decades preceding DiMaggio's study, arts management begun moving its first steps in the US, as a sub-discipline of management. In 1969 the first arts management journals were established (*Performing Art Reviews* and the *Journal of Arts, Management, Law and Society*), and arts management training programs begun to flourish (Evard and Colbert, 2000; Chong, 2000). As the number of specialized journals grows, so does the number of publications on arts management (Rentschler and Shilbury, 2008).

Among the publications, Raymond and Greyser's paper entitled "The business of managing the arts" and published in 1978 by the *Harvard Business Review*, represents an evocative example of the approach adopted by many arts management scholars. Here is the abstract:

"It is folly to rely on the taste of the public for a particular "product" of an arts organization, be it a theater, museum, dance group, or whatever. In view of the competition for the public's attention and entertainment dollars these days, any arts institution needs to market itself. It is also folly to fly financially by the seat of the pants; a realistic budget, strictly adhered to, is a necessity. A clearly stated and clearly understood purpose and a formalized structure (not dependent on the artistic driving force) are other prerequisites to the vitality of the arts institution that permits it to continue offering its product to the community." (Raymond and Greyser, 1978: 123)

Raymond and Greyser stressed how arts organizations, as any other business, need things such as a business model, a careful planning, a sensible financial administration, marketing mechanisms to develop the customers, and so forth.

The idea was that, independently on the characteristics of the arts sector that—as cultural economists stressed—limits the ability to reach productivity gains (Baumol and Bowen, 1965) and without necessarily advocating for more public funding, there must exist ways of overcoming the financial problems of arts organizations by economizing, eliminating inefficiencies and wastes, rising income and finding alternative financing, and by increasing scale and technical efficiency. These ways, thus, had to be found in a better management, where "better" seems to mean "business-like".

For this reason arts managers are required to have knowledge on planning, organizing, leadership, and control, and should possess skills on financial management, labour relations, marketing, and fundraising (Martin and Rich, 1998; Sikes, 2000; Rhine, 2006). Artistic sensitivity and aesthetic expertise, even if important, are qualities that are no longer considered enough for arts managers to properly manage an arts organization.

Mainstream arts management literature bases its argument on the assumption that there is a parallelism between arts organizations and traditional businesses and, thus, that there exists a positive relationship between management and (artistic) results. In this sense, arts management can simply be seen as general management applied to a specific field of practice.

However, in arts management, many studies have increasingly focused on the dichotomy between the artistic and the managerial cosmologies coexisting in arts organization, highlighting the potential conflicts between the two. The dualism that seems to characterize arts organizations have been highlighted by several studies in arts and cultural management, as it can be detected by two special issues published in different journals and in different years. The first special issue appeared in *Organization Science* in 2000 and it was titled “*Cultural Industries: Learning from Evolving Organizational Practices*”. It focuses on some intrinsic polarities of the cultural industry and calls for a “balancing act” between the “opposing imperatives” that characterize cultural industries (Lampel et al., 2000; 263). The second special issue, titled “*Paradoxes of creativity: managerial and organizational challenges in the cultural economy*”, was published in 2007 by the *Journal of Organizational Behavior*. Here, the need for a balancing act is renewed in order to solve the paradoxical challenges and dilemmas faced by managers and other participants in the cultural industry (DeFilippi et al., 2007). Adopting the term creativity, the special issue covers various activities (not only the artistic core sector, but also craft and design industries).

The oft-cited need to balance artistic and managerial imperatives in arts organizations, lies in the recognition of the opposition of the two views. But what is the desired objective of such balancing act, is not given. Equilibrium can change according to the prevailing view, and shift more towards one pole or to another. When a managerial logic enters arts organization, the equilibrium is defined as the point where the enterprise shows good financial and economic results that allows it to continue to pursue its cultural activity in the future without fail. At the same time, the acknowledgment of the dualism typical of arts organizations as a distinctive characteristic of this field, should suggest that management should take a “modest approach” (Zan, 2006: 7), rather than trying to impose its paradigm. This, however, would imply abandoning the initial spirit of conquest that seemed to motivate general management when it first approached the arts sector, and acknowledging the relevance of artistic, aesthetic, and social aspects that differentiates arts management from general management.

With the rise of the creative era, the traditional arts sector (such as museums, theaters and opera houses), with all its peculiarities that arts management scholars had highlighted, becomes to be included in a wider discourse. As clearly stated by the British Council’s Creative Economic Unit,

the development of the creative industry concept was an attempt to change the terms of the debate about the value of arts and culture:

“While the arts were supported to some degree or other by most governments, they tended to be seen as marginal to economic life and dependent on public subsidy. Advocates of the creative industries idea believed that this was too narrow a view – the totality of economic activity stemming from creativity and culture, including their commercial forms, needed to be considered to understand their true contribution. This activity included not just the traditional art forms, such as theatre, music and film, but service businesses such as advertising (which sell their creative skills mostly to other businesses), manufacturing processes that feed into cultural production, and the retail of creative goods. It was argued that the industries with their roots in culture and creativity were an important and growing source of jobs and wealth creation” (British Council, 2010: 15)

What is important here to point out is that, as clearly state by the British Council, the emergence of the concept of creative industry marked a turned point for the arts sector. First, the arts sector is now evaluated as an industry, hence in economic measures (Major and Connell, 2006). On one hand, this has contributed to give the arts sector and the artists a more legitimate and serious role in society (Garnham, 2005; Banks and Hesmondhalg, 2009), but it forced to re-imagine the art sector in terms of its expected contributions to economic growth and occupation. Second, creative industry policies are based on the idea that creative industry, with its cultural roots, covers both economic growth and social good. This means not only that the art sector will be evaluated also on social indicators, but also that commerce and arts are not perceived as conflicting values (Banks and O’Connor, 2009). Third, the industry-wide focus on creativity, replace the prior emphasis on artistic excellence, and on the art for art’s sake, that were peculiar of arts policies (Dewey, 2004; Garnham, 2005). Fourth, with creativity as the unifying trait, boundaries between diverse cultural sectors are becoming more blurred, by putting together commercial and applied arts with fine arts and heritage (Dewey, 2004; Towse, 2010). Organizations operating under different rationalities (art, market, public sector) and with different structures (nonprofit and profit oriented), are unified under the same label, and the distinctiveness of arts organization is lost in the big mixed group (Lampel et al., 2007).

These shifts in the arts and policy systems have a strong impact on arts management: with the focus on the industrial aspects and the clear economic expectations put on arts organizations, management principles become unquestionably part of the process of artistic creation (Major and Connell, 2006), and the blurred boundaries between art and commerce, legitimize arts organizations to engage on commercial strategies. Hence cultural administration is enriched with new skills, such as those related with sponsorships and marketing (McNicholas, 2004).

The managerialization of the arts: the case of Italian Opera

Methodology

This study takes an interpretive approach. Interpretive theories differs from positivist theories which objects are explanation and prediction. Interpretive theories “allow for indeterminacy rather than seek causality and give priority to showing patterns and connections rather than to linear reasoning” (Charmaz, 2006: 126). Charmaz stated that grounded theory offers a guide to interpretive theorizing (Charmaz, 2006: 128). Grounded theory was introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967) who defined it as “the discovery of theory from data”. They suggested that the discovery of theory from data was more useful than testing or verifying existing theories. Grounded theory is thus presented as a methodology for analyzing qualitative data to construct theories “grounded” in the data themselves. Guided by grounded theory principles, I have conducted a field study in one Italian opera house, I collected data and I analyzed them. I got a formal access to the organization for six months, from the 1st of April to the 1st of October 2014. After that period of time, in which my presence in the organization was on a daily base, I came back to the opera house from time to time until June 2015, to conduct interviews or to attend rehearsals.

During the fieldwork I collected field notes from both participant observations (me as a co-worker) and direct observations (me as an observer). They include reported dialogues and conversations, descriptions of facts and events, personal considerations and feelings, and technical notes related to the work activities in which I was involved. Towards the end of my staying, I started conducting intensive interviews with key people, which I recorded and transcribed. I made a total of 13 interviews from August 2014 to June 2015. The scope of the interviews, thus, was to deepen the understanding of the topics that arose during the fieldwork, and, particularly for the directors, to have a more formal and official position with respect to the opera house’s strategy and performance. During and after the fieldwork, I collected press documents and media contents divulged by the organization, that I consider as part of the official narrative of the organization. In addition to qualitative data, I collected the financial statements and the season’s programs from 2005 to 2013 (the financial statements) and to 2015 (the season’s program).

I began the process of analysis while in the field, even if in a more intuitive and less structured way. This was needed for the continuous process of sense making required by grounded theory principles. Only at the end of the six-month stay in the field I started to analyze field materials in a more structured way, even though I returned to the field from time to time when I thought I needed

to collect more materials. Texts were divided in observations; conversations and discussions; technical notes related to work activities; interviews; and research diary. I then proceeded by coding the data, following the example provided by Kunda (2013). The activity of coding refers to the process of moving from data to more abstract categories, and it took different steps. With the first step I went through the data following a chronological order. I associated one or more categories to the incidents by keeping a low level of abstraction. Categories were thus very close to the data themselves. At the end of the first round, I got 357 categories. I then grouped them in second-level categories. Some of them were linked to topics covered by management studies (e.g. “bureaucracy”, “professionalism”, “organizational culture”). Some other, apparently still very related to the context, were used as metaphors, synecdoches or metonymies (e.g. “La Traviata” used to define the commercial strategy of the theater). I then made an analogous analysis keeping separated the material coming from official sources (including interviews with the top management) from observations and informal conversations. From this step I got categories related to what I called the “official version” on one hand, and the “less official voices” on the other.

The Italian Opera sector: a fall from grace

Italy is the opera’s motherland and the country which provided the world with some of the most famous and still performed operatic works. It has always been an expensive and financially problematic business, but it is still alive after more than four century, thanks initially to the support of the aristocracy, and later to the support of the state. After a period of crisis that followed Italian Unification (1861), the Opera started to be massively supported by the public sector, especially during Fascism (when Opera Houses became public entities, in 1936). Public financing continued after WW2, and with Law 800 in 1967 the Opera was recognized as a “pre-eminent national interest”. In the mid-90s, as a response to the manifested inefficiencies of the Opera Houses, that resulted in great and continuous deficits, and to their criticized reliance upon public endowments, a strong legislative intervention obliged them to become private non-profit foundations and to adopt managerial criteria and tools typical of the private for profit sector. The funding system has also been modified in order to overcome the old distribution of resources, mainly based on historical expenditures. New parameters are thus introduced, which are supposed to measure and reward efficiency and productivity (Sicca and Zan, 2005; Balestra and Malaguti, 2006; Brunetti and Ferrarese, 2007). The last legislative intervention, in 2013 (Decree 91/2013), introduced the balanced-budget obligation and gave more power to the General manager with respect to the board of governors. This last reform, in particular, introduce the mechanisms of “Compulsory

administration” to help lyric foundations in serious crises to receive special funds on the basis of a recovery plan. It was due to this latter instrument that some of the Italian Opera Houses began radical transformation processes with some dramatic effects in terms of increase conflicts between the management and the unions that received great echoes in the national press. In Italy, currently, there are 14 opera foundations recognized by the law, which differs each other—often considerably—in size, production level, and financial results. Eight of them applied for the additional financial support foreseen by the last reform.

The financial performances of the foundations are monitored by the national court of auditor, which every year publishes a report. The last report, approved on April 2015, analyzed the financial statements of the foundations referring to the year 2013. The analysis confirms an overall problematic situation of the entire sector (already declared in the previous reports) such that the court started questioning about the ability of the national opera system to support the existence of all the 14 foundations. Overall, the 14 foundations, produced in 2013 a deficit of 26.5mln euros, worsening the already negative result of 2012, and, as a result of a continuous erosion process, they show an overall deficit in available assets of 52,5mln euros. Aggregate values do not take into consideration the wide heterogeneity of the national sector, nonetheless, as specified by the court of auditors, the analysis of aggregate values is helpful in describing an overall picture of the general situation of the sector, and some common features typical of the Italian opera foundations. In particular, the Court of Auditors highlights the following critical points: first, the structural financial problem associated with the erosion of available net assets and the increased level of debts; second, a strong dependency on public grants—which demonstrates a inadequate ability to self-financing—and a marginal participation of private capitals; third, an high level of structural costs, in particular concerning the personnel, which are not efficiently distributed on the number of performances.

The opera house meets management: the story

In the context of the persisting crisis of the national sector, that resulted in dramatic events for some opera foundations, the opera house object of this study seems to represent a successful case of “good management”, and a good example for the other Italian opera foundations. Precisely because it represents a successful case, it serves as a paradigmatic example that enable us to better understand the role of management discourse in the contemporary artistic field.

In line with the traditional Italian opera production system – also known as the “stagione” system – the opera house used to have a season’s program made of 8-10 titles, which were usually performed sequentially (i.e. an opera goes on stage only when the previous has ended, and it stays on stage for

few weeks). The titles were usually new productions of already existing operas, which could be classics of the XIX century, but also less famous and more original titles. The problem with this system it is burdened by many “dark nights”: since singers cannot sing every night, only 2-3 performances per week are possible. Moreover the production costs are high and not sufficiently spread to the number of reruns, which, especially for the less famous and attractive titles, are usually not more than 5-6. On the other hand, the stagione system is favored because it supports innovation and experimentation, rather than standardization and replication.

However, given the already mentioned difficulties of the sector, the shrinking of the public fund for the performing arts, and the government’s call for the adoption of a more entrepreneurial style, the management of the opera house decided to modify its strategy in order to make better use of scarce resources and to increase private sources of revenue, trying to achieve a sustainable economic condition while striving to maintain a good artistic and cultural level. The strategic shift was started by the artistic director, appointed in 2007, with the first evident changes proposed for the 2009 season (the first program that can be entirely ascribed to him), and the current chief executive (appointed in 2010) fully espoused this strategy. By changing the artistic programming strategy the opera house has been able to increase productivity and efficiency, to increase ticket revenues and to lessening the dependency over public funds (which accounted for 68% of total revenues in 2005, and 56% in 2013). The increasing number of spectacles (from 51 in 2005 up to 124 in 2015, +143%) has led to an increase both in sales revenues, and in variable production costs, but the two items have grown at different rates, showing, from 2010, a positive margin. As a result, after years of deficit, from 2011 the financial statements have shown small but positive incomes (18.000€ in 2011, 12.000 in 2012, and 21.000 in 2013).

The artistic strategy has become a hybrid form, mixing the traditional Italian stagione approach, with the repertory strategy typical of the German system. This latter system is considered more efficient, since it consists in two-three operas rotating nightly on stage, with almost no dark nights, and each production is performed over a period of several months. However it is more suitable for popular works, able to attract a wide audience.

The adoption of the new mix-strategy pushed for a reasoned selection of the new productions which could be used to enrich the theater’s repertoire. Repertories are built around the names of famous composers with some of their most famous operas, that could attract customers from all over the world and could ensure sold-out dates for long periods. Some of them, as *La Traviata*, can be easily performed every year and still guarantee sold-out shows; others can be profitably replicated only within a longer distance, in order to be attractive also for the local public. At the same time, to

remain loyal to the local audience and to the innovative tradition of the theater, the opera house presents every year new original productions (that could be performed in the future but don't have the same appeal of repertory pieces). Some of them represent heavy investments, especially for the season opening operas, and are often made in co-production with other opera houses in order to share the expenses, while some others pieces can be produced in collaboration with local institutions, such as the university and the school of fine arts, and engage young singers and artists, with a great saving of resources.

The willingness to have the theater open as many days as possible has also stimulated the development of new technical abilities. The organization has been able to increase the production activities (in terms of number of spectacles) despite the permanent staff has been maintained at the same level, suggesting a more efficient use of the workforce. On average, the theater offer a spectacle every 3 days but, during the most productive periods, can offer up to 6 shows per week.

The management has also developed a better and more accurate budgeting and reporting system. Despite its rudimental form, it is able to provide the top management with prompt information about variations between actual and budgetary values. The implementation of such system required an enhanced awareness of the cost structure of each department, as it can be detected by the adoption of business terminology like "variable" or "direct", and "fixed" or "indirect" costs with respect to the production activity, or by the recourse to "capitalized costs" and "depreciation" when referring to investment in repertory scene.

Management discourse in the official version

Gherardi and Jacobsson (2000) coined the word "managerialese" to define the language that makes use of managerial ideas and vocabulary. The spread and dominance of managerialese in any administrative system, with particular reference to the Italian public sector, pushes them to define it as "the Latin of our times".

In line with the management language, the positive financial and productivity performances obtained in the last years are used to indicate the potential success that rational and efficient management can bring to cultural organization. The description of the managerial shift undertaken by the opera house, in the official version, minimizes the conflicts between artistic and financial goals. On the contrary, artistic and financial requirements seem to intertwines into a virtuous circle in which the more the organization replicates repertory operas, the more resources can be obtained that can be invested in other more original operas. The clear message is that the semi-repertory strategy provides the organization with positive margins, since it has positive effects both on the

revenue side (increasing revenues from tickets) and on the cost side, thanks to economies of scale and experience, and to the exploitation of the investments made on the stage set, costumes and props. Moreover, thanks to a more efficient use of the workforce, as the most relevant resource, productivity can be increased keeping the stable organizational structure unmodified, and in particular without incurring additional personnel costs. Getting higher scores in productivity indicators also leads to an advantage with respect to the other opera houses in the competition for the national funds for the performing arts. The artistic quality of the programs is preserved thanks to the resources released by the revivals of repertory pieces, that are invested for new productions for frequent customers and for some new or original titles.

It looks like a win-win solution, a rational and replicable strategy, as described by the general manager:

“Why have we developed a replicable model? Because we are normal! There is nothing extraordinary in what we did. We looked at our resources, in particular to our workforce, and we developed our productive model on it. [...] Why don't the others [opera houses] do the same?” (general manager).

Not only number and tables, or cause-effect formulas, but also music history stories narrated in managerial language were used to legitimize the change of strategy:

“I have deeply studied Opera History. Mozart, Verdi and other big composers, were all concerned about, not only political, but also financial limits. Don't you think that Puccini would have loved to have the choir on stage during the second act? He couldn't because the costumes would have cost too much! If Verdi and Puccini had such kind of concerns, who am I to disregard them?” (artistic director)

Another concept used to neglect the tensions between the art-world and the business-world is that of culture industry. In defense of culture as an industry, the artistic director used historical and musicology anecdotes.

“A thing that is often ignored is that until the first decades of the XX century music was the main Italian industry. In the same years in which Verdi was writing Simon Boccanegra, the Opera was an industry simply as Fiat would have become later [...] When Verdi wrote their music, he wanted to achieve the same success as Coca Cola [...] Great composers were also great entrepreneurs!” (artistic director).

At the opera house, managerialese is also the language used to communicate with the external environment, and in particular with potential investors and partners.

The general manager often recalls, in public occasions, the fact that the opera house is a cultural enterprise, and, when he does it, he always stresses the word “enterprise”. He wants opera to obtain such status among its stakeholder. In a public event, he said:

“We want to realize a model in which the opera house becomes a business. As a business, the opera house must produce. Only in this way we can make profit, that, for us, is the value we provide to the city and to the society” (general manager, interview dated 10/05/2013, available on the website)

In particular, managers seems to love playing with words. The result is a language made of double-meaning slogans and sentences that can be read in different ways.

The Italian word “impresa” serves divinely such purpose. Impresa means both enterprise (or business), and challenge (like the ones in which the heroes engage). During the 2014 meeting with the season ticket holders, the general manager projected a slide presentation entitled “L’impresa di un teatro-azienda”, that can be translated “the business/challenge of a theater-enterprise”.

“When they [the subscribers] accuse me because I planned 40 reruns of La Traviata in one season, I show them this. [...] La Traviata is only one of the titles in the program, there are other 16 titles! How many theaters can offer 17 different titles in one season?” (general manager).

The recent 2015 campaign to incentive the engagement of private business and entrepreneurs in the opera house’s activities, has a slogan that also contains the word impresa: “la bell’impresa”, literally “the beautiful enterprise”. The play, here, is in the combination of words traditionally attached with artistic or aesthetic sense, with business vocabulary

More recently, the opera house contributes to the “national week for business culture” promoted by the Italian federation of industry, with a performance entitled “L’impresa va in scena”, in English “the business goes on stage”. The event put business and culture together, in the form of “the art of business”. It has the intent to foster the idea that, as written on the promotional flyer, “business is culture.”

The use of managerialese can be seen as a strategy to renovate the organization’s imagine inside the business world. Moreover, its use in a more creative way, a variant that we can call “artistic managerialese”, is part of the communication strategy that intends to talk with traditional business (seeking new partners and investors) by speaking their own language, and, at the same time, wants

to highlight the value added of the arts field, i.e. the beauty and the creativity, which can attract traditional businesses to collaborate with the cultural field.

Voices out of tune

View from outside, the opera house represents a symbol, a virtuous example of efficiency and good management, which can obtain positive results despite all the deficiencies characterizing the national opera sector. It provides the external world with a rational and replicable win-win solution to the problems affecting Italian opera.

But, as I have already outlined, one of the peculiar features of cultural organizations is the coexistence of an artistic and a managerial cosmologies, which can be conflicting.

The managerial paradigm, which often speaks through numbers, neutralize the conflicts by showing the increased amount of performances and the positive financial results. But, behind the scenes, numbers count much less. Not all the productions counts as “one”, as this voice out of tune wanted to tell me:

“How should we count the productions? one Die Walküre is not equal to one Scala Di Seta, and one La Traviata of 50 thousands euros is not equal to one Traviata of 150 thousand euros, even if the tickets are equally sold” (someone from the artistic department).

Given the difficulty of objectively judging the artistic quality of a season program, and the awareness that financial principles have started to inform the artistic programming, internal debates about the potential conflict between artistic and financial logics are inevitable, despite the dominant discourse about the virtuous circle that is conveyed by managers both inside and outside the organization.

The perceptible fear wavering in the corridors, is that the equilibrium between the artistic and the financial logics can move too much towards the second direction:

“We have reached a good compromise, but we should not forget that our product is essentially artistic”
(someone from the artistic department).

It can be argued that state intervention should support artistic quality because of its public value, but governments tends to link cultural policies and funds to indicators of efficiency, cost cutting, productivity, and ability to attract private funds, supporting, in practice, the managerial logic. In this situation, voices out of tune say:

“...today nobody cares about quality, everything is about numbers. First of all at the Ministry. This approach to culture is a vicious circle, where also the public arrives less prepared and consequently the demand for quality decreases.” (a stage maestro)

The stage maestro mentioned a “vicious circle” which strikingly emerge as opposite to the “official” description of the “virtuous circle”. In doing so, he added another element to the discussion which is strictly connected with cultural policies, i.e. the level of cultural education of the audience. This, integrated with this other voice out of tune:

“People outside there will never understand how much an opera costs and why it is so expensive. People will not understand all these small details. Opera is simply out of the time...” (a stage manager)

suggests that even taxpayers will not support great investments in the arts, if cultural policies do not give them the instruments to benefit (and understand) the results of such investments. The value of the artistic product, thus, is vague, and, once again, cannot rely on cold computations, but it is rather a matter of each person’s own subjective definition of quality.

Another aspect that emerged from the less official voices, is the sense of frustration expressed by the artistic and creative professionals as a result of the increased recourse to repertory works. The commercial trend that artistic programs are taking (e.g. planning 35 reruns of *La Traviata* in one season), contributes not only to the degradation of the professional category of musicians (who are becoming more executors than interpreters), but also to the individual frustration of being submitted to such commercial logic. The conflict between commerce and art is interiorized by creative professionals, taking the form of professional frustration. Even though orchestra and choir artists acknowledged the positive results that the new strategy has produced and recognized the value of having a balanced budget that allows them to play and to be paid a salary, there seems to be some bitterness and resignation in the artistic groups, as if the requirement of guaranteeing a balanced-budget represents an inevitable constraint that unfortunately has to be respected.

“If it means that we will be paid our salaries, well... that’s fine. But it’s sad to drop your pants for economic reasons.” [a ‘cello’]

“For me, playing this music is like having a Ferrari and cannot drive fast.” [a ‘double bass’]

The frequently heard sentence “until I am paid my salary” when discussing of managerial choices that are perceived to have little artistic value but a big commercial potential, is a self-explanatory

example of the typical way to address these tensions both at individual and at professional group levels.

Conclusions

The analysis of the case study supports the idea that managerialism is not neutral, rather it has specific ideological connotations. Consequently, its alleged ability to create virtuous circles in which economic and artistic logics reinforce each other, is part of the same ideology, and, as such, can be exposed to critiques. The voices out of tune that I reported, demonstrate how managerial discourses, and in particular the use of numbers, are able to represent only a small part of the complex reality. As a consequence, management discourses cannot be judged as neutral, and the meanings it associates to words such as artistic quality, cannot be taken as absolute and objective meanings.

Another result of the analysis is that managerialism, when it enters nonprofit or public arts organizations, likely finds an hostile environment, at least until it becomes legitimized and, eventually, it converts to the dominant logic. The legitimation of the managerial discourse makes use of the rationality argument, that it is often opposed to the “passionate” feature of the arts. However, the recourse to what I have called “artistic managerialese”, is always made as a way to “defend” management from the critiques, as if managers attempt to convince the interlocutor about the goodness of their choices, and, thus, it also serves as a legitimation arguments. This rhetorical practice appears to be in contrast with the functionalist approach to management studies and with the vision of management as a rational discipline, which would not require any rhetorical support (Zan, 2006).

The managerialization of the opera house can also be read through the lenses of institutional theory. Opera houses are institutions that lie at the center of the artistic field, and, as institutionalized organizations, they operate according to rules that are legitimated by the field (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). As we have already seen, external pressures, coming mainly from the public sector, are pushing opera houses to become more efficient, more private oriented, to increase the amount of earned revenues and to attract more private investors. Italian opera houses have traditionally organized their production according to the stagione system which was a legitimated system in the national opera field. But this system is being delegitimized by the same institutions that operate in the field. The analysis of the current economic and financial situation of the Italian opera system, for example, made the National Court of Auditors to state that “an increased recourse to the repertoire would certainly contribute to reach better economic performances” (Corte dei Conti,

2015), clearly pushing toward a change in the production system. In the same report, the National Court of Auditors, focusing on the analysis of the indicators of efficiency, productivity and earned income, made a specific mention to the significant results obtained by our opera house thanks to its efforts to increase the production level through a semi-repertory strategy. Conventions of the field are thus changing, but not directly in the artistic aspects. Conventions are changing on a managerial dimensions. In this changing institutional context, performing arts organization are thus required to be innovative managerially, rather than artistically, in order to gain the legitimacy and thus to guarantee their survival.

Discussion

The Managerialization of the arts

We have seen how a branch of arts management studies has increasingly focused on the tensions between artistic and managerial imperatives in arts organizations and acknowledges such dualism as their distinctive feature, urging managerial culture to take a more modest and less authoritarian approach in entering such delicate sector. However, in the description of the long Italian reform process of the opera production system, we have seen normative provisions and direct recommendations – coming from policy makers, funding bodies, and auditors – pushing toward the incorporation of managerial principles, and following methods and contents typical of the New Public Management doctrine (with its claims of universality, rationality and neutrality).

In the previous section, we have seen how the managerialization of the Opera House has undoubtedly been good for its financial and economic health, which could guarantee the survival of the organization, the continuous offer of cultural production, and the maintenance of its workforce.

However, the management discourse that is entering arts organizations seems more in line with that described by Boltansky and Chiapello as typical of the 1960s, and thus related to a spirit of capitalism based on the idea of an accumulation regime which, thanks to its rationality, serves both the goals of economic growth and social progress.

Indeed, we can make a parallelism between the strategy of the opera house and the mass production typical of the Fordist mode of regulation, inasmuch as it puts emphasis on efficiency and economies of scale, it adopts of a “rational”, rather than “passionate”, management, and it is organized around a hierarchical bureaucracy that is perceived to be able to respond to the need of security through the provision of meritocratic and long term careers.

While creative profit-oriented businesses were looking with curiosity to arts organizations to see how they manage creativity, nonprofit and public arts organizations started looking at private

businesses to find managerial tools that could help them in reaching financial and economic goals. Thus, parallel to the artification process ongoing in the creative industry, we can detect a managerialization process affecting arts organizations. The case study analyzed in this paper is, indeed, a case of managerialization of opera.

The managerialization of the arts, reinforces the view of art as a “managerially underdeveloped area that would benefit from the import of management knowledge and techniques” (Evard and Colbert, 2000). Management, in this context, looks like the “prince charming” that could save the “sleeping beauty” from the threat of financial ruin.

Two spirits of capitalism?

We have seen how managerialism and public reforms have pushed towards the adoption of a strategy that is commercial in its basic principle, and how this strategy consisted in favoring the presentation of a classic repertoire through an increased number of revivals of few operas. This has surely had implications on the perceived innovative propensity of the opera house. I have also highlighted how, in implementing a conservative strategy, the organization has to deal with the frustration of its most creative resource, i.e. the employees. It is not clear whether this process will eventually weaken the creative potential of such organizations, the same creative potential that have made arts organizations interesting from the managerial point of view to the business sector.

What do we have, in practice? On one hand we have creative businesses, such as Google, who make the news for their peculiar recruitment systems¹, their quirky work spaces², and their human resource practices³, on the other we have arts organizations that make the news because they are accused to take the form of a “Disneyland of Opera”⁴.

The idea that seems to arise from this situation, is that it is irrational, in the managerial wave that is investing the cultural sector, to see arts organizations behaving as “creative businesses”. But, isn’t it a countersense to advocate for more arts managers with managerial background, while successful private businesses are hiring artists as managers and project leaders? Why performing arts organizations who invest in risky productions, who engage in long and unpredictable rehearsals processes and who collaborate with alive and unknown composers, are not considered in

¹ “Google has a Secret Interview Process... And It Landed Me A Job”, by Max Rosett for *The Hustle*, 24 August 2015 (available at www.thehustle.com)

² “Is Google’s Model of Creative Workplace the Future of the Office?”, by Alison Coleman for *The Guardian*, 11 February 2016 (available at www.theguardian.com)

³ “How to Get Ahead at Work: 10 Tips from Google’s Head of HR” by Laszlo Bock for *The Guardian*, 4 April 2015 (available at www.theguardian.com); or “Looking for a Lesson in Google’s Perks”, by James B. Stewart for *The New York Times*, 15 March 2013 (available at www.nytimes.com)

⁴ “Giving the Tourists What They Want”, by E.H.B. for *The Economist*, 24 March 2015 (available at www.economist.com)

management studies in the same way as creative businesses are when they engage, for instance, in the construction new prototypes?

Now that private profit seeking businesses have learnt from the arts that the “art of management” is irrational, that it is based on improvisation and scarce planning, that it relies on uncontrollable, unpredictable, unstandardized processes, and that it should deal with autonomous and free individuals, now that they have recognized the tensions between creativity and control, what can they teach arts organization? Why are arts organizations taking the “rational” management model of the 1960s? Is it acceptable?

A revival of the artistic critique?

As Boltansky and Chiapello stated, management discourse of the 1990s incorporated some of the critiques addressed to the Fordist capitalism system. In particular, by valuing autonomy, creativity, diversity, and personal fulfillment, the new spirit of capitalism, (that I associate with the emergence of the creative industry) responded to the artistic critiques of alienation, disenchantment, and commodification by incorporating demand of authenticity and freedom. However, according to the same authors, it set aside the social critique, in particular on the issues of egoism, inequalities, and security. At this point of their analysis, Boltansky and Chiapello ended the book by envisaging a revival of the social critique, in particular on the topic of exclusion, where the excluded are the “disaffiliated”, i.e. the immobile, rigid, and unadaptable people that do not succeed in creating networks. The egoism that is fostered in a uncertain and flexible world, and the permanent anxiety of being excluded, will thus stimulate the emergence of a new social critique.

As a matter of facts, critiques of the creative industry have already taken the form of a revived social critique that Boltansky and Chiapello foresaw, in particular in terms of exploitation and individualization of the creative workforce, which is becoming more and more precarious and without representation and protection (Banks and Hesmondhalg, 2009; McGuigan, 2010; Gill and Pratt, 2008).

However, while the artification process have incorporated some of the artistic critiques and set aside the social critique, the managerialization process of the art sector did exactly the opposite.

Reflecting on the case of the opera house, I think no one would associate the artists hired by the opera house with a kind of exploitation of the labour force. On the contrary, they can aim at a long term career, and can rely on the protection of the unions at local and national level. In addition, the organization of artists in “artistic masses” implies the incorporation of the social critique to individualism, and it provides an answer to the accuses of egoism and opportunism that have

invested the capitalist system in the 60s. Moreover, the offer of classic repertoire pieces to a large audience, is consistent with the demand of equality and democracy that are also part of the social critique.

On the other hand, the rationality of managerial innovations, and the coldness of financial calculus, are criticized today as they were in the late 60s and in the 70s by the proponents of the artistic critique. The frustration of the artists, represents a new source of indignation that mirrors that of alienation typical of the artistic critique of the late 60s. Similarly, the accuses of conformity and lack of innovation, are related to the critiques to the commodification, the disenchantment, and the loss of authenticity in capitalist societies.

Ironically, the artistic critique of the 1968 movements, that was supported mainly by intellectuals and artists, have gained room in the most profitable sectors of the creative industry, but was not able to enter in the “pure” art sector from which it arose.

This also explains the persistent relevance of philosophical classics such as the critiques to the culture industry proposed by the Frankfurt school, and the engagement of artists in the debates on arts and management. The members of the Frankfurt school Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, in their seminal work “Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” (1972) criticize the process of commodification of art, its transposition to the consumption and amusement sphere, and the standardization and reproduction of sameness that is investing the cultural sector, all trends that are apparently justified by technical rationality, which they define as “the rationality of domination”. Concerning the engagement of artists in the debate, a peculiar example is provided by dialogue between the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and the visual artist Hans Haacke, published in a book titled “Free Exchange” (1995). Bourdieu and Haacke touches several themes, among which the naturalization of corporate sponsorship, that is judged as harmful since it diminishes the autonomy of art producers and pushes them to be submissive to commercial demand. Haacke in particular, sees arts managers primarily as technocrats. He demonstrates to be aware of the fact that “no organization, certainly not a complex society like ours, can survive without managers”, but he added “I am also aware that the goal of management is to assure a smooth operation, rather than reflection and critique. These are contradictory responsibilities” (pg. 68-69). When I read these writings (in response to Chong’s suggestions made in 1997 and 2000) I was surprised to see how they still match some of the grumblings I heard during my fieldwork.

What the analysis of the case study seems to suggest us, thus, is that in the managerialized arts sector, a revival of the artistic critique is possible. However, I cannot foresee the direction that the art sector will take, and I cannot know whether and to what extent it will incorporate some of the

artistic critique at the expense of some of the conquests made by the social critique. Nonetheless I think that we have to resist to the temptation of merging the arts sector with the concept of creative industry, as policy makers do. We should also expand our horizon and look at what sociology and philosophy can add in order to reach a deeper understanding of the same field that we, as arts management scholars, want to serve. Only by doing so we can recognize the peculiarity of the processes that the art sector is undertaking, and what the critiques are actually trying to highlight.

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