Taking a Critical Approach to Arts Management

Author: Hilary Glow
Deakin University

Keywords: arts management, critical management studies, audience engagement

Abstract
This paper argues that the task of arts management entails a critical engagement with the discourses of management. The promulgation of economic rationalism across the arts and cultural sector is identified in the context of the general deployment of economic criteria to judge the success of diverse organisations. In particular, the notion of the creative industries, concerned with commercial cultural production, and its impact on the arts sector is highlighted as a dominant discursive practice. The paper makes the case that the task of the arts manager must be to argue for the cultural value of the arts, and take a critical approach to the dominant discourses that currently define the field. Finally, it is argued that one of the key challenges for the future of arts management is to also take a critical approach to the conventional discourses of arts marketing in order to deliver a new focus on audience engagement.

Biography
Dr Hilary Glow is Senior Lecturer and Director of the Arts and Entertainment Management Program at Deakin University. She researches issues around cultural policy and its impact on artists, arts practices and organisations. She is the author of two books: Power Plays: Australian theatre and the Public Agenda (2007) and (with Katya Johanson) Your Genre is Black: Indigenous Performing Arts & Policy (2009).
Management Discourse

In the early twentieth century management theory was principally interested in accounting for the functions of management. For writers such as Taylor and Fayol, management meant the smooth execution of a series of functions to facilitate the efficient running of an organisation. Such accounts helped to build the view that any organisation, regardless of its type, process, or context could be managed in the same way. Thus the principles of management were seen to be trans-cultural and universally applicable (Urwick 1943). We are all now familiar with Fayol’s classical typology which sees the task of management in terms of planning, organising, commanding and controlling (Fayol 1949).

In the light of today’s complex globalised workplaces, new ways of thinking about management are in evidence. Mintzberg’s (1975) critique of classical management theory argues that these descriptors - planning, organising and controlling - do not sufficiently describe the fundamentally interactive nature of the task of management. Rather, in the context of what Drucker (1993) identifies as the ‘knowledge society’ where information and knowledge are the central commodity, we expect managers to be problem-solvers, and to have an appetite for new knowledge, knowledge transfer and creative thinking. Effective management has come to be associated with organisational learning and the development of self-reflexive practices by which one’s assumptions, identity and values are frequently re-thought (Senge 1990). We now commonly understand management as the management of relationships – that is, a relational practice that is appropriate and effective in new more organic and flexible forms of organizations.

What we learn from the evolving theoretical discourses around management throughout the twentieth century is that its defining features are to some extent historically determined; there is no ‘natural’ or fixed defining characteristic of management. Rather, what we think of as the habits, dispositions, activities and characteristics of management is a function of the context, exigencies, techniques and practices of a particular period. In other words, how we define and understand ‘management’ is a function of discourse. Here, discourse refers to a language that is used in reference to a subject matter which produces (and reproduces) a particular kind of knowledge about that subject. As du Gay et al have noted, discourse refers to ‘both the production of knowledge through language and representation and the way that knowledge is institutionalized, shaping social practices and cultural technologies and setting new practices and technologies into play’ (1996: 266).

Critical approaches to management have acknowledged the importance of problematising the apparent impartiality of management practice, and points to the need to counteract discursive closure. Alvesson and Willmot note that a critical approach to management is one which ‘critically explore[s] taken-for-granted assumptions and ideologies that freeze the contemporary social order’ in such a way as to question and open up for debate ‘what has become seen as given, unproblematic and natural’ (1992:13). In this way, a critical approach to management is one which identifies and interrogates discursive closure.

Through an investigation of the notion of the ‘creative industries’, this paper argues that it is a discursive entity that arts management must grapple with. The discourse of creative industries has become institutionalised over the past two decades and has been a dominant force in shaping cultural policies, practices and technologies. However, just as evolving theories of management show the limitations of a positivist view (that is, a socially determined instrumentalism), so too does the notion of ‘creative industries’ require a critical review of its assumptions. In calling for a critical approach to arts management, this paper sees the arts manager as not simply concerned with the
technical function of management, but playing an intellectual role in critically reflecting on the construction of knowledge in the cultural domain.

Creative Industries

One of the key factors that shapes the current field of arts management is the discursive frame of ‘creative industries’ which has been defined as ‘an emphasis on the specific dynamics of making profit from the production and dissemination of primarily symbolic goods’ (Hesmondhalgh 2007: 68). Writing about the discursive development of the notion of ‘creative industries’, Garnham notes that what underpins it is the belief that these industries are ‘the key new growth sector of the economy, both nationally and globally, and thus, against a background of manufacturing sector decline, they are the source of future employment growth and export earnings’ (2005: 25). Stuart Cunningham (2006) and John Hartley (2005) have argued that the concept of creative industries is a step away from the old strictures of arts subsidy to meet the new demands of a globalised world where creativity and innovation are the basis of the new economy. In Australia we are familiar with the way in which the creative industries has become a framework for policy whereby financial or regulatory support for cultural organisations and projects is (to some extent at least) based on the criterion that they can be considered a sound financial or social investment. Having the potential to become financially self-supporting or by providing sufficient benefits to the economy or society as a whole (such as through cultural tourism or social therapeutic benefits) is seen to justify the investment of public or private sponsorship (Jeffcutt, Pick and Protherough 2000).

The cultural sector is not alone, of course, in experiencing this new economic rationality. All sectors and organisations – schools, prisons, businesses, hospitals, and government departments – have had to respond to the introduction of market mechanisms and relationships within their organisations. As du Gay et al have pointed out for organisations of all kinds, regardless of their purpose, enterprise and entrepreneurialism now ‘occupy an absolutely crucial role in contemporary discourse’ (1996:268).

The creative industry has delivered a serious challenge to the notion of ‘the arts’. As Justin O’Connor has identified, two charges against the arts stand out: ‘First, that the arts are the cultural preference of the “elite” and hypocritically set themselves against “shallow” commercial popular culture. Second, that this opposition of art to “industry” and “money” is an obstacle to the unleashing of a wider creativity set to transform both our culture and our economy’ (2010: 5). In answer to the perceived limitations and deficiencies of ‘the arts’, the notion of creative industries is seen as a wider and more inclusive category of cultural activities that falls within the ‘cultural economy’ (2010: 5).

In her paper, Caust seeks to interrogate some of the specific outcomes for the arts of this reification of the notion of creative industries (Caust 2010). She suggests that this discursive formation, now so commonplace, has led to the disempowerment of the arts sector; ‘The “arts” are seen as a sub-set of the “creative industries”’ and that while there is ‘much talk about “creativity” there is little understanding of what it is or how to achieve it’. Further, she argues that one of the consequences of the diminishing status of ‘the arts’ in the face of the dominant discursive frame of ‘creative industries’ is the instrumentalist focus of much cultural policy. Instrumentalism in cultural policy, defined by Jennifer Craik as a method by which ‘cultural and creative activities are used to leverage solutions to a variety of social problems’ (2007:25), emphasises the useful ‘outcomes’ of cultural practices rather than their aesthetic qualities or intrinsic value. Caust points out that such a policy focus has seen an intensified commodification of the arts, and the broad promulgation of the view that culture and economics are happy and ‘natural’ (if not inevitable) bedfellows (Caust 2010).
It should be noted that economic criteria appear to have become critical in the judgement and calculation of value for a great diversity of institutions, services, goods and practices. Gordon writes: ‘Economics...becomes an “approach” capable in principle of addressing the totality of human behaviour, and, consequently of envisaging a coherent economic method of programming the totality of governmental action’ (Gordon 1991: 43).

An outstanding example of the totalising discourses of economics – in this case harnessed to cultural endeavour - is in the success of Richard Florida’s writings around the ‘creative class’ (Florida 2002). Florida’s view, subsequently supported by other writers such as Cunningham (2006), is that the key to economic growth lies in a ‘creative class’ of people producing creative economic outcomes by generating new ideas, new high-tech businesses and regional growth. This view has been notably successful in persuading politicians, businessmen and corporate CEOs that creativity is critical to the success of the global capitalist economy.

The extent of the take-up of the notion of ‘creativity’ is evidenced in the academic literature everywhere. The idea that organizations need to adopt structures and practices that facilitate ‘creativity’ has become a central theme, not only in the popular business press, but also in the academic management literature on organisational innovation and success (Summers and White 2001; Unsworth 2001; Drazin, Glynn and Kazanjian 1999; Ford 1996; Woodward, Sawyer and Griffin 1993). This idea has been deployed in management, HRM, marketing and other functional domains of organization studies (e.g., Farmer, Tierney and Kung-MacIntyre 2003; Dennis and Macaulay 2003). The attributes of ‘creative organizations’ (e.g., Oldham and Cummings 1996), ‘creative groups’ (e.g., King and Anderson 1990), ‘creative teams’ (e.g., Feurer, Chaharbaghi and Wargin 1996), ‘creative individuals’ (e.g., Amabile 1998) and ‘how to become one’ (e.g., Albrecht 1987) have been the subject of countless books and articles.

Florida and many scholars in the field of organisational innovation link creativity to innovation, and innovation to increased commercial profit. This linking of creativity to innovation, and the (almost) universal application of the notion of creativity to all manner of commercial activities means that the arts struggle to position themselves as a distinctive set of creative practices. As ‘creative’ become synonymous with any new product in the marketplace, what is disappearing is any special claim that artists might reasonably make about what they do, how they go about it and what its value is. If everything is creative then nothing is.

**Arts Management**

These arguments suggest that one of the key tasks for arts management into the next decade is to advocate for the *distinctive* capacities of art to produce cultural value; value, as John Holden has identified, that is symbolic, aesthetic, spiritual and expressive, but may not equate with economic value (Holden 2004). Robyn Archer has reinforced this, pointing out that the arts need resources for creative activities that may either produce no results whatsoever, or produce outcomes that are unfamiliar, uncomfortable and ‘almost certainly unpopular’ (Archer 2009). Holden and Archer are, in effect, laying out a major challenge for the arts sector to re-capture the idea that creative activity can and does exist unhampered by the rational calculation of end use value.

Further, O’Connor makes the point that economic value is inextricably tied to cultural value; that there is a critical co-dependency such that: ‘as with the creative industries themselves, whose economic value derives from their cultural value: to focus on economic models and tools without due consideration of how this cultural value is created and sustained ultimately undermines economic value itself’ (2010: 8).
O’Connor sees there is a need for the arts and cultural sector to make ‘a confident assertion of the importance of art’ as a critical component of the ‘holistic vision of a democratic and diverse culture’ (2010: 8).

In a similar vein, Caust argues that there is a great and current need within the arts for leadership; that arts leaders must be able to ‘recognise and acknowledge the unique nature of the undertaking’ (Caust 2010). Such a view is confluent with the notion, argued here, of the importance of taking a critical approach to the task of arts management.

So, how is this to be achieved? As the first part of this paper identifies, management discourse is not a fixed or ‘natural’ entity; it is a product of the historical moment in which it is formed. Thus, a critical approach to arts management is one which is cognisant of the fundamentally ephemeral and discursive nature of the field. While management is a skills-based activity predominantly concerned with the management of things (including resources), it needs to also be seen as a critical activity; a reflective or self-reflexive practice able to identify and challenge assumptions.

A critical approach to arts management would, for example, problematise the discourses of creativity that have been spruiked by Florida, for example, and understand that creativity cannot be ordered; that it is a form of ‘deviation [which] has always been a problem of governance’ (Lovink & Rossiter 2007:14). An arts manager taking a critical approach to the task will be concerned to negotiate the autonomy of creative workers with the management of the organization’s internal culture and its external reputation – as all of these elements will have an impact on future employees and audiences. As O’Connor puts it, management in the cultural sector ‘has to be aware of the large cultural dynamics within which its products gain value and the complex ways in which its management of creative input and audience perception… affect these values’ (2010: 60). This suggests that the task of managing audiences and their perception or experience of the value of cultural products is a critical area for arts management.

**Arts Audiences**

Following Holden, Archer and Caust, it is argued that artists and arts managers, policy makers and academics need to articulate a renewed sense of the cultural purposes of the arts. To do this, arts management needs new models for understanding the public, and in particular for understanding the creative and participatory needs of arts audiences. The Australia Council’s recent report *More Than Bums on Seats* (2010) provides evidence that there is work to be done in this regard. The report examines the attitudes of Australians around participation in the arts in order to see what steps might be taken by arts marketers and policy makers to enhance future levels of arts participation. Intended as a benchmark for the health and significance of the arts in Australia, the report finds that while attitudes towards the arts are increasingly positive, there remain ‘significant opportunities to build Australian arts audiences’ (Australia Council 2010).

In considering some of the future challenges for arts management, one of the report’s most interesting findings is discussed in the section ‘The benefits of the arts’. Here the report notes that while respondents linked the arts to individual and community benefits, they had trouble articulating those benefits (2010: 30). There is, the report notes, amongst respondents ‘a struggle to describe the benefits of the arts when asked’ (2010: 30).

Recent qualitative research into the ways arts organisations gather and use information about their audiences further illuminates this issue. Radbourne et al have found that managers of performing arts organisations are not always able to articulate what their audiences get out of the experience (Radbourne, Glow & Johanson 2010a).
As Brown & Novak put it: ‘Many who work in the arts, including those of us who do so because of our belief in the transformative power of art, lack a vernacular for communicating its impacts’ (2007: 12). While arts managers often know a great deal about audience demographics - the gender, age, postcode, and other subscriber habits of the people who attend their shows – they tend not to have a language for describing what audiences are getting out of the experience (Radboursne, Glow & Johanson 2010a). Perhaps in this context it is not surprising that audiences are themselves unsure about the benefits.

Coming to grips with the audience experience is a significant part of the task of arts management. It requires a critical engagement with current conventional arts marketing discourse which uses the notion of service quality as a tool for measuring levels of satisfaction (Conchar et al, 2004; Grayson and Martinec, 2004) but it does not measure audience experience (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1983; Kotler and Scheff, 1997; Radbourne, 2007). As US arts philanthropy expert Diane Ragsdale has argued in relation to Australian performing arts organisations: ‘We must understand that audience development is not about derrieres in chairs, but rather about brokering a relationship between people and art’ (Ragsdale, 2008). Where once audiences were seen as primarily passive (Wheeler, 2004; Boorsma 2006), now it is acknowledged that the audience contributes to what Lusch and Vargo refer to as the ‘co-creation of value’ (cited in Etgar, 2008, p. 108). This view is confluent with a significant shift in marketing theory which, informed by the seminal work of Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), has looked at the increasing trend towards personalised consumer experiences and the co-creation of value. Similarly, research by Radbourne (2007) identifies that ‘the new arts consumer is on a quest for self-actualisation where the creative or cultural experience is expected to fulfill a spiritual need that has very little to do with the traditional marketing plan of an arts company or organisation’, demonstrating that ‘[a]udiences … will be fiercely loyal if they can experience fulfilment and realisation in the arts experience’.

The research of Radbourne et al is premised on the notion that there is value in eliciting the audience’s stories about their experience of performances, in order to identify the qualities that build creative engagement, self-expression, self-actualisation and loyalty amongst attenders (Radbournie, Glow & Johanson 2010b). Rather than focusing on collecting data on the size of the audience and their satisfaction with the performance, audience research of this kind asks arts managers to understand how attending the arts produces the intrinsic benefits that have been identified by Holden. Eliciting such stories is no easy task; as Pitts points out, for audience members to articulate the value of their experience is often ‘a challenge, since part of its appeal lies in the wordlessness with which it connects participants more deeply with themselves and other people’ (Pitts 2005: 10). However, despite the difficulties inherent in the process, research is needed into the key aspects of the felt responses of audiences to performances and the way these are generated by individual experiences.

Brown and Novak support this view and suggest, further, that a new focus on the arts audience experience is a critical feature of the role of arts management which will see ‘a shift in the traditional role of arts presenters from one of simply marketing and presenting to one of drawing audiences into the experience’ (2007:21). This point is implicitly reinforced by the Australia Council’s More than Bums on Seats report which states that: ‘if the link between the arts and the wide ranging benefits they deliver could be more strongly established it would add even greater value to the arts’ (2010: 30). Arguably, one of the most significant challenges into the next decade for arts managers (along with artists, policy makers, arts marketers, and academics) is to subject conventional arts marketing discourse to scrutiny and to better acknowledge leading edge thinking in experience marketing; that audiences increasingly want to shape their own experience, and that audience development means developing an understanding
of the creative and expressive needs of contemporary arts audiences. This will involve a critical refocussing of arts marketing and audience development strategies so that they are dedicated to empowering audiences, not targeting them (Newell, cited in Scheff Bernstein, 2007, p. 252).

**Conclusion**

Since 2004 John Holden has proposed a new paradigm of cultural value which ‘challenges policy makers and organisations to adopt a new concordat between funders, funded and the public’ (2004:60). This paradigm ‘recognises the affective elements of the cultural experience, practice and identity’ (2004:60). This paper has argued that arts management needs to play a critical role in asserting and demonstrating this new paradigm. It is not enough for the task of arts management to be seen simply as the efficient and effective management of things, but rather as a process of critical engagement with ideas in a complex field of activity.

For several decades, the dominance of marketing and creative industry discourses have been significant and defining features of the field of arts management. This paper argues for a critical approach to arts management – one that entails an interrogation of both the notion of the ‘creative industries’, and the conventional discourses and practices of arts marketing. Further, it has been argued that such a critical approach facilitates two important developments for arts management: one, the confident assertion of the importance of the arts, not as a sub-set of the ‘creative industries’, but as a distinctive and culturally valuable set of practices; and two, the focus on audience engagement and the creative and participatory needs of arts audiences.

The argument for a critical approach to arts management also encompasses the idea that, while there are certainly concrete management tasks that define the role of the arts manager, this is fundamentally a relational and reflexive practice. This is not a new idea; in the 1980s the Victorian College of the Arts, School of Drama’s Animators’ stream; a training program for artist/managers involved the bringing together of artists and communities in a variety of contexts to make work happen. They were ‘animators’ because they animated ideas, arts projects, performances, and community engagement; in other words, they helped to bring relationships into being in contexts that were organic and flexible.

Perhaps in an era where management theory is concerned with the task of describing and defining the fundamentally self-reflexive, relational and creative practices of management, the term ‘animateuring’ might be of some use. While the VCA’s Animators’ stream has a somewhat different focus in the present era, its early graduates (many of whom now manage arts organisations) understood how to channel the flows of energy, interest, knowledge and power in a dynamic field of constant change. Indeed, at its very best, arts management or ‘animateuring’ might be seen as leading the way in embodying the relational and interactive role of management.

The work of animators and other innovative arts managers is significant because here we can see evidence of an approach to cultural management which is not merely defined by the drive to produce profit from the production and dissemination of symbolic goods. Rather, this is an approach to management which understands the cultural value of the arts for the funders, funded and the public.
References


Australia Council 2010, More Than Bums on Seats: Australian participation in the arts, Australia Council, Sydney


Craik, J. 2007, Re-visioning Arts and Cultural Policy, Canberra: ANU Press


The Foucault Effect, Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf


King, N. and Anderson, N. 1990 ‘Innovation in working groups’. In M.A. West and J.L. Farr (Eds.) Innovation and Creativity at Work, Wiley, Chester, UK: 81-100


O’Connor, J. 2010 Arts and Creative Industries: A Report for the Australia Council, Australia Council, Sydney


