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Narratives of Organisational Performances

HERVÉ CORVELLEC

ABSTRACT

Whereas management theory and practice tend to adopt an objectifying perspective and regard an organisation's performances literally as what the organisation achieves, I introduce in this paper a distinction between organisational life and the various accounts that are made of this life or its impacts on the organisation's environment. Reminding the reader that what is achieved within an organisation is, with rare exception, accessible to our understanding only through accounts that are made of these achievements, I suggest that it would be more correct to approach an organisation's performances as accounts rather than as objectified acts or results. Having redefined an organisation's performances as accounts, I then explore the structural qualities of performance accounts. I emphasise that they are narratives of achievements and that they are specific enough to constitute a genre. Turning thereafter toward the societal role of performance narratives as a genre, I introduce the conclusive argument of the paper. Taken together, the millions of performance narratives that management produces and consumes daily constitute a vast narrative fresco aimed at reassuring us that late modernity actually manages fulfil its promises of progress. Performance narratives, far from being politically neutral, keep the modernist dream afloat and contribute in a decisive manner to maintain the social order that is attached to it.

Introduction

Few management¹ notions are evoked as frequently as is the notion of *performance*. Managers spend considerable time planning, preparing, trying to achieve, reporting, or discussing individual and organisational performance in the hope of improving future performance. The management literature² is likewise rife with analyses, comments, and recommendations pertaining to the financial, commercial, environmental and social performances of corporate, public, or not-for-profit organisations, in never-ending praise of strong performance and criticism of weak performance. The notion of performance enjoys a broad and sustained success in management – a success that is indeed comparable, albeit only partly related, to the founding role that the notion has had in the performing arts. This role is so central that the term ‘performance’ actually contributes to the semantic definition of the field.

The *raison d’être* of this paper is a call for reflection on the success of the notion of performance. I approach performance at a broad level that encompasses the various occurrences of the notion and use of the term in management practice and literature. I claim that performance has enjoyed such success in management because it provides an excellent expression for the specific form of competition, achievement, and selection processes that typifies management – a process that I label modern *agon*. My reasoning runs as follows. Whereas management theory and practice tend

¹ The term ‘management’ is used in this paper in quite a broad sense. It refers to the various fields of knowledge (management theory) or specialized professional activities (managerial practice) pertaining to the administration of corporations (corporate management), the public sector (public management), or even third sector organizations (not-for-profit management). Examples of such fields of knowledge or professional specialties would be accounting, auditing, marketing, finance, human resources management, consulting, and even what is sometimes referred to as general management. In educational terms, this would correspond to what is taught for an MBA, in the French *écoles de gestion*, or what the Swedes call *företagsekonomi*.

² Management literature refers here to the wide range of texts dealing with the running and destiny of corporate, public, or not-for-profit organizations. The term encompasses scientific papers and learned books (scientific management writings), popular management book or articles (popular management writings), and even the consequent amount of articles in the economic press that deal with the administration of businesses and other organizations (press management writings).

to adopt an objectifying perspective and regard an organisation's performances literally as what the organisation achieves, I introduce a distinction between organisational life and the various accounts that are made of this life or its impacts on the organisation's environment. Reminding the reader that what is achieved within an organisation is, with rare exception, accessible to our understanding only through accounts that are made of these achievements, I suggest that it would be more correct to approach an organisation's performances as accounts rather than as objectified acts or results. (I beg the reader to disregard situations in which the production of an account is an act in itself.) Having redefined an organisation's performances as accounts, I then explore the structural qualities of performance accounts. I emphasise that they are narratives of achievements and that they are specific enough to constitute a genre. Turning thereafter toward the societal role of performance narratives as a genre, I introduce the conclusive argument of the paper. Taken together, the millions of performance narratives that management produces and consumes daily constitute a vast narrative fresco aimed at reassuring us that late modernity actually manages to select the *aristons* (literally 'the best one') in all fields and therefore manages to fulfil its promises of progress. Performance narratives, far from being politically neutral, thereby keep the modernist dream afloat and contribute in a decisive manner to maintain the social order that is attached to it.

Before I detail what identifies performance accounts as narratives (Section 3) and what characterises modern *agon* (Section 4), let me first review the ways in which management deals with the notion of organisational performance, thereby identifying some theoretical shortcomings of the current approach to organisational performance (Section 4) and some remedies for improving these approaches (Section 2).

1. Organisational performance in management

The notion of performance is in intensive use in all the professional specialities of management, which any business database search or casual reading of the economic press will confirm. It is standard within management theory and practice to define organisational performance as the organisation's ability to attain goals, and the measure of this performance is attained by comparing actual levels of achievements to set objectives.³ As an author or as a manager, one can take a short cut by equating performance with profitability. One may even refer to financial performance with reference to the maximising (long-term) shareholder value, to commercial performance through market position, or to operational performance as the capacity of the production process. It is still possible to address the responsiveness of organisations toward all stakeholders rather than limiting it to shareholders, and to include societal issues such as discrimination or contribution to the community rather than limiting one's consideration to the performance of a specific function such as finance or marketing. Social, environmental, or ethical performances have all made their entry on the stage of organisational performance, and it is probably only a matter of time before we speak of the aesthetic performance of organisations.

Organisational performance has been approached theoretically in terms as diverse as the organisation's ability to secure scarce and valued resources, as a matter of efficiency, and as a subset of effectiveness. It has been approached in terms, not only of outcomes, but also of such processes as the behaviour of the organisation's participants. An organisation's performance, then, refers to the ways in which its members manage appearances and act according to the roles they are accorded in the organisation – a use of the representational dimension of the notion in management

³ For examples and a systematic review of the use of the performance notion in management literature, see Corvellec (1997: cha 2)

writings that directly reminds us of the definition of performance in the performing arts (e.g., Schechner [1977/1988] and Carlson [1996]).

The notion of ‘organisational performance’ points to varied referents, and it is not always easy to assess which. Not all management writings, either scientific or popular, are explicit as to the type of achievement to which they refer when they speak of performance; nor are they necessarily consistent in their usage. Management is richer in its recommendations for achieving performance than in its clear definitions of performance. It is by looking case by case at the operationalisation of the notion that one can assess how performance is conceptualised in a given case ⁴.

The notion of organisational performance often appears as a measurement construct rather than a theoretical construct. Among the most frequently used measures are financial: accounting-based measures and market-based measures. Accounting-based measures include, for example, sales, revenue, operative income, residual income, profit, cash flow, sales growth, growth in net assets, return on sales, return on investment, return on assets, return on equity, and earnings per share. Market-based measures include percentage change in stock price, market-to-book value, stock-market returns, and various other statistical ways of evaluating the firm’s performance on the stock market, sometimes balancing risk against return. An intensive debate places proponents of accounting-based and market-based measures in opposition. And considerable theoretical as well as practical efforts are devoted to the development of accurate and reliable measures of performance

⁴ One could say that managers and management writers make use, without necessarily being aware of it, of performative as opposed to ostensive definitions of performance. This is a distinction that Latour (1986:271) makes and that Czarniawska-Joerges describes as follows: “Ostensive definitions assume that social processes are basically identical with physical objects, that they have a limited number of determined properties which can be discovered and described ‘from outside’, and then demonstrated to an audience. (. . .) Performative definitions, on the other hand, are creatures of language and thus always created ‘on the inside’, by people using the language” (Czarniawska-Joerges 1993:8).

(with good reason, it seems, considering the fantasy stock prices attained on the NASDAQ at the turn of this century or the criminally inflated performances of Enron or Worldcom).

All performance measures are not financial measures, however, for there also exists within management a strong interest in non-financial performance indicators. This interest is emblematised by the popularity of Kaplan and Norton's (1996) balanced scorecard, which is a simple multidimensional approach to organisational performance integrating a company's financial situation with key strategic dimensions such as innovation, quality, or customer relationships. The interest in alternatives to financial measures is exemplified by an interest in performance measures pertaining to the management of quality (e.g., defect rates, response time, and delivery commitment), customer satisfaction (e.g., customer retention rates, perceived value of goods and services), or an organisation's environmental impact (e.g., energy consumption for production and operation, carbon dioxide [CO₂] emission per employee, or environmental impact per customer). Thus, in recent years, the measurement of performance has increasingly reflected the multidimensionality of corporate activities and their impact on the societies and environments in which and around which they evolve.

I would like to emphasise the fact that many management writers approach organisational performance by applying objectifying measurement procedures to an idealised object. On the one hand, despite the fact that they frequently work with what is obviously a measurement construct (often one that follows the availability of data rather than theoretical motives) management writers tend to systematically disregard the impact of their own measuring practice on that which they claim to measure. Many management writers subscribe to a pre-quanta correspondence theory of truth and ignore the inseparability of the measure from its object. They simply deal with organisational performance as if it were constructed of objective qualities that could be indifferently and without

consequence approached and measured in hundreds of different ways, in whole or in parts, regardless of the contexts and purposes at hand.

In order to measure performance, management writers tend to objectify what they often refer to as ‘an organisation's performances’. They are inclined to approach performance as if it were some near-physical object that exists independently of one’s will, representations, or understanding of it – as if organisational performance were an object waiting for precise, rapid, and reliable measurement procedures in order to show its true nature.

On the other hand, management writers treat performance as an ideal. The objectifying of performance in measurement procedures is not followed by a corresponding effort to provide a concrete expression for what is meant by organisational performance. Management writers seldom apply several measurement procedures to the same organisational performance, provide specific criteria for what constitutes a performance, or produce detailed narrative descriptions of that which they aim to measure. Although they claim to measure performance precisely and accurately, management writers tend to refer to an organisation's performance as a vaguely defined universal abstraction, which is less precise than a Weberian ideal-type and more like a Platonic ideal. In complex simultaneous moves, that which they objectify they also abstract and idealise.

The passage from objectification to idealisation through abstraction is at work in academic management articles aimed at reviewing a given field, be it strategy or management accounting, in order to assess its advances. Authors of review articles compare previously published articles dealing with, for instance, a new strategy or managerial accounting tool to see if they can make conclusive statements about the superiority or inferiority of these strategies or tools. The rationale of review articles is to compare some corporate performance defined in a first study according to Theory A and measured with Procedure B, with some corporate performance defined

in a second study according to Theory C and measured with Procedure D, and with some corporate performance defined in a third study according to Theory E and measured with Procedure F, and so on. Yet, to draw a conclusion from such comparisons one must assume that all the studies that are reviewed and compared, regardless of their theoretical and methodological differences, actually refer to the same phenomenon when they speak of organisational performance. And this can only be done if one adopts – along with a non-critical view of measurement – a view of organisational performance as an abstract ideal that transcends every study, theory, or measurement procedure. In a move that is emblematic of management writings, review articles integrate the objectifying approaches of the performance characteristics of the various studies they incorporate into an abstract and idealising approach of the notion. And it is on the basis of this idealisation that their writers produce general statements on organisational performance at large – statements that are presented as being independent of the ways in which every management study has approached the notion of performance.

Although this combining of materialism (objectifying measurement procedures) and idealism (dealing with abstract ideal) might be theoretically bewildering, it is efficient. Thanks to their combining an idealised view of organisational performance and a straightforward approach to measurement, management writers have built a convenient universal yardstick with which they can assess the goodness of any management actions, tools, and ideas – even a moral norm if necessary. One must merely posit that organisational performance is a universal abstraction open to all types of measurements, then develop some adequate and convincing measurement procedure, and finally ignore or accept any eventual philosophical contradictions that such a position may elicit.

2. Toward a redefinition of organisational performance

A major weakness of management's approach to organisational performance is to ignore the fundamental difference that exists between what happens in and around an organisation, organisational life in itself, and the various accounts that can be made of this life. Inversely, as I suggest this section, considering the difference between life and accounts of this life involves completely redefining the nature of organisational performance.

Even if one disregards everything that socially determines our perception of reality (from the social nature of language to the structuring of collective consciousness and unconsciousness by myths, through the existing of fashions, ideologies and doxa), one must acknowledge that we can hardly have a direct (in the sense of not being socially mediated) understanding of what happens within organisations. Organisations are far too complex to invite direct witness to all their happenings (Boje 1995). They involve too many people and operate too many hours a day in too many places simultaneously for it to be possible for anyone to physically follow more than a small slice of organisational life. Moreover, organisations comprise many private territories and areas placed under signs of confidentiality, secrecy, and restricted access. Indeed, one cannot even be sure where the organisation begins or ends, or, in fact, what constitutes an organisation.

With these restrictions in mind, one's experience of an organisation as a work place or a service provider is insufficient for understanding what happens in it, except for borderline cases of extremely simple activities taking place in transparent micro-organisations. One's understanding of what happens within an organisation is dependent upon the financial, accounting or commercial accounts that one can obtain from, e.g. the company itself, customers, competitors, auditors, researchers, supervising authorities or the media. It is by organising these accounts and our own experiences into a meaningful whole that we make sense of the organisation.

I simply restate here the Wittgenstein-inspired argument that reality might be out there in order for us to understand it, but that we can only understand it by entering the collective games of language that deal with it (see, e.g., Gergen (1999; cha 2)). The argument involves a radical redefinition of what it involves to speak of organisational performance. The mere evoking of the distance between reality and accounts, involves namely that rather than denoting, as the management literature claims, some form of organisational achievement *per se*, organisational performance denotes *an account* made of organisational action⁵. More specifically from regarding an organisational performance as something that one has achieved within the organisation, we are lead to regard it as being the naming of this achievement.

The difference that *naming* introduces here is a significant one: from defining organisational performance in terms of acting/result to defining it in terms of account/meaning. With respect to research strategies, this means that organisational performance is suddenly open to the concepts and methodologies that the social sciences and the humanities have for centuries developed to help them study oral or written accounts: how these accounts are produced, what they say, what they mean, what is involved in reading, how they can be interpreted, how they can be translated, how to deal with older accounts, how to determine the tradition to which they belong to, and so on... This opening of organisational performance on the humanities augurs so many new possibilities that I feel like launching the following invitation:

⁵ To be more precise and to consider the correspondence between texts and acts that Paul Ricoeur (1986: 183 ff.) has shown to exist, I suggest a redefinition of organizational performances from referring to organizational life *per se* to referring to the act involved by the recounting of organizational life in a text. I choose, however, not to

Dear colleagues of the social sciences and humanities,

Following the recent discovery of a new type of text, the organisational performance account, you are kindly invited to make the best possible use of your erudition; stringency; cunning; and, broadly speaking, talent; in order to study it in any way that you will find appropriate. Transdisciplinarily yours.

While waiting for answers, I will discuss some structural and cultural aspects of organisational performance. By so doing I hope to illustrate how a redefinition of organisational performance (one that refers to *accounts* of organisational performance rather than organisational achievements *per se*) prompts radically new insights on organisational performance.

3. For a poetics of organisational performance

Looking at organisational performance as accounts of achievements opens a vast research program. I would like to inaugurate this program by introducing some elements for a poetics of performance narratives, i.e. a theory of the form and principles of these narratives (compare Gabriel 2000).

Generally speaking, performance accounts recount the successful passage of an individual, a group, or an organisation from State A to State B, where State B is in some way preferable to State A. It is of little importance whether this passage involves causality (first A, and because of A, then B) or chance (first A and then B, although no one can say why). The point is that performance accounts bind A to B in chronological order (first A and later B), where B is seen as the outcome of a process initiated at A. Performance accounts are, in this regard, narratives.

develop this precision here, as it would considerably burden the formulation of the paper without noticeably improving its main argument. I hope the reader will show some understanding for my choice.

The standard plot of performance narratives focuses on the way in which some particular results have been attained. Linking Situation A to Situation B in a meaningful way, performance accounts describe the process of organising results, whether it be how the latest information system has increased or decreased the organisation's ability to adapt itself to a changing environment, how core values of the organisation enact or no longer enact a tradition of quality and customer satisfaction, why a certain person had to be placed in or removed from office, or how a either judicious or inappropriate strategic move led to a rise or a fall in the value of the company's stocks. Faced with a slew of organisational events, performance narratives select and order individual events in terms of some result that is singled out. In doing so, performance narratives provide – sometimes retrospectively – individual events with an identity and attach a meaning to them in relation to some chosen outcome. Events that would otherwise be difficult to disentangle from overall organisational life, or events that would not even be regarded as such in their own right, acquire a specific meaning when they are part of a performance narrative. Daily routines are interrupted and meaning is introduced into the flow of ongoing contingencies and imperatives. The narratives presented in performance accounts create contexts, formulate units of meaning, and provide action with a particular direction. In so doing, they help managers make sense of their activities – one reason why managers keep producing and consuming a steady flow of performance accounts.

Performance accounts follow a similar narrative pattern. The narratives they present begin with some sort of competitive challenge. This trait is particularly obvious in sport, wherein performance narratives deal with the two main questions in all competition: who will win and how. This is obvious, too, in organisational contexts, wherein performance concerns the competitive evolution of individuals among peers, the fight for market shares, the relative values of stocks, and

the like. Performance narratives recount battles for scarce resources, whether it be the attention of a supervisor, the tastes and desires of the consumer, or the approval of a financial analyst. Such narratives provide accounts of the fight against adversity, be it the difficulties in developing a new product, in implementing an organisational reform, or in reversing a negative trend. There is an idea that is to be realised, but one that is threatened, either by the pugnacity of others, by one's own shortcomings, or by the mere resistance of things. A task, a project, a call, a quest, or merely one's survival is at risk. How far are we from folktales?

The challenge presented by performance narratives is expressed in terms of comparison. One industry is compared to another (e.g., tourism with telecommunication), one group of companies with another (e.g., the US vs. the British finance sector), one company with another (e.g., Nokia vs. Ericsson), a company with itself but on two different dimensions (e.g., financial vs. commercial results), or a company with itself on the same dimension but on two different occasions (e.g., budget years 2002 and 2001). Likewise, one compares people (think of the success-and-failure-story columns of news magazines), machines (think of the numerous comparative product tests), ideas (e.g., whether Business Process Re-engineering [BPR], which is a procedure for radical redefinition and re-organisation, is preferable to Kaizen, which is a Japanese-inspired procedure for continuous improvement), or places (e.g., Paris vs. Copenhagen as a city in which to base an Australian distance teaching program). Comments clarify first one side, then the other, and bind the two together. Performance accounts are comparative heuristics.

Any comparisons, however, presuppose some form of homogeneity among contestants. One can only stage a comparison by adopting some criterion for commensurability. In the examples outlined in the paragraph above, one could, for instance, use as a criterion the respective economic weight of the involved industries or companies; the reliability of the control

procedures; the innovative capacity of each or both of the companies, their long-term sustainability, income, potential, or technical reliability; their difficulties in implementing things; or their symbolic and logistic qualities. The choice of a performance criterion depends on the intentions, preferences, and strategies of whoever produces the performance account. It is a choice that is largely arbitrary and dependent upon the emphasis taken by the producer of the performance account, who will undoubtedly mobilise all available resources of rhetoric and metrology. And because of this arbitrariness, should one regard the choice of a commensurability criterion as the starting point of any performance narrative. Intrinsic qualities of contestants will create an impact only insofar as the relevant criterion allows them to, any change of criteria turning the comparison into another, completely different assessment. This means that what is regarded as a performance is settled long before the performers display their skills. In fact, the outcome of any comparison is determined by the choice of the commensurability criterion, winners and losers being selected long in advance by the design of the comparison. One becomes a high or a low performer *first* in the eyes of the designer of the performance assessment procedure, as soon as the terms of the comparison among contestants have been settled.

Following one's choice of a criterion for commensurability, one must then develop a measurement procedure. Commensurability is only a potential, and must therefore be activated. And this activation takes place through measurement. Measurement gives written expression to the intentions and preferences expressed in the criterion for commensurability. Correspondingly, there are as many ways of measuring performance as there are intentions and preferences of those producing performance accounts (see Section 1). The choice of a commensurability criterion is the starting point of any performance narrative, but no performance narrative can be developed without the availability of functioning measurement procedures. Measurement is that which enables the

passage from an act or a situation to a sign, such as a rating or a number. By so doing, measurement gives expression, and thus meaning, to the between-agents differences and similarities that commensurability assumes to exist. Measurement textualises the competitive challenge that stages commensurability. The writing of performance accounts can begin.

Using a poetic and literary vocabulary will strengthen my argument. A performance narrative recounts the story of a competitive challenge. The main characters of this story are the contestants in the competition. Once they have been introduced, a commensurability criterion is established in order to clarify the characteristics of the competition and on what basis the contestants/characters will be compared. It is, however, only through measurement that these contestants/characters can make their voices heard, demonstrate what they stand for, and meet each other. Measurement is that which actualises the potential in commensurability, allows the competition to begin, and thus makes the occurrence of events possible. Measurement also provides the narrator with multiple occasions for comments and allows the performance narrative take form.

One does not produce performance narratives for the sake of comparing, however. Performance narratives are narratives about how processes lead to outputs. They are intended to stage a competitive challenge and to present the results and the ranking of various contestants/characters in it. Just as a fable leads to a moral, a performance narrative leads to a list of what is better and what is worse. Performance accounts present managers and whoever else might be interested with hierarchies of high and low performances, top and bottom performers, valuable and worthless outputs, better and worse managerial tools, high and low potential shares – purposely meaningful hierarchies of achievement. Provided that the meaningfulness of these hierarchies is ensured – and it is essential that the entire measurement procedure, from the choice of

commensurability criterion to actual measuring, appears to be fair if the story is to be interesting – performance narratives have come to their end and fulfilled their *raison d'être*.

In summary, the plot of performance narratives is about some type of achievement. A performance narrative begins with the staging of a competitive challenge, characteristically framed in terms of some form of comparison. A commensurability criterion needs to be chosen and a measurement procedure needs to be developed. Characters of the narrative are the contestants, whoever is required by the competition to function (e.g., referee and other supervising authorities, the media, and the audience), and anyone involved in the challenge. All sorts of events, both inside and outside the organisation, can take place; although the action is related to the measures that one produces. The narrative ends when a comparative hierarchy of better and worse achievements can be presented, preferably one that respects decent conditions of fairness.

To characterise performance accounts further, they ban pure invention. Performance narratives must give the impression of providing a faithful and trustworthy rendering of the organisation's activity. Even though performance accounts may involve the creative presentation of activities (creativity is, indeed, an integral part of the work of inventing new criteria for commensurability and developing innovative performance measurements), invention is not allowed to be the main vector of performance narratives. Authors of performance accounts are bound to the demands of an audience that still largely adheres to a 19th century positivist ideal of truth, and is strict in its demands for objectivity. One can invent neither characters nor achievements in performance accounts and approaching fiction is a cardinal sin – as some Andersen auditors and others versed in overly creative accounting have experienced. Likewise, must performance accounts be explicit. Ideally, their public requires them to provide an immediate and integral access to what is an outcome and at least implicitly to what is not, to the context of competition, to the terms of the comparison, to

background information, and to causal links. Clarity is a requirement for performance narratives, something witnessed, for example, by the impressive number of notes appended to the financial statements of private companies.

Performance accounts are commanded by strict narrative rules if they are to be acknowledged as meaningful by their audience. They constitute a strict genre in which it is not easy to be highly innovative.

4. *The grand narrative of modern agon*

After having sketched some structural qualities of performance narratives and the genre of performance accounts, I now deal with what one could call, to use Paul Ricoeur's terminology, the world [*monde* or *Welt*] of performance accounts (1986:188), i.e. the world that performance accounts, taken as a whole and beyond any specific account of any specific situation, open for us and bring to our minds. Considering that millions of performance accounts are produced each year and that great importance is attached to at least some of them, analysing the role of performance account in contemporary society should be a relevant concern not only for management scholars but also for a wide range of social scientists as well.

Performance narratives are indeed remarkable. They tell us about more efficient processes, better information systems, superior yields, stronger visions, or strengthened market positions. In so doing they recount why State B is to be preferred over State A, the conditions for progression from A to B, or how B improves upon A. Each higher performance is conceived as adding to its predecessors and as being a sign of an increase in management efficiency. Each superior performance account is the mark of a managerial progression toward the better. Progression of this sort is reflected in a series of leading management models, remarkable departmental results,

outstanding C.E.O. personalities, model companies, and national economic miracles. And speed – speed to market or the speed of a 10ⁿ MHz processor – is, as Paul Virilio (1977) has observed, the darling of our times.

At face value, performance narratives could be regarded as helping anyone interested – let say managers – make sense of organisational chaos and differentiate good solutions from bad. But because many performance accounts compete for attention and new performance accounts keep replacing the old (but not always that old) ones, something else happens. Managers are provided with a universal yardstick, but one that is neither easy to read nor particularly stable. Taken together, performance accounts depict a complex, contradictory, and rapidly changing world in which it is far from unproblematic to evolve.

To begin with, performance accounts are many. All sorts of organisations produce a steady flow of performance accounts based on various contingencies, various purposes, or various definitions and operationalisations of performance. And all these sources, all these accounts, are competing for attention. A manager can, on the same morning, receive a financial and a commercial performance report and two different financial analyses, and find several buy/sell recommendations in the economic press. These performance accounts may well be contradictory, some speaking of promising prospects and others of worrying outlooks. Our manager must, nevertheless, make sense of these accounts. How should one deal with the stress of contradictory performance accounts that both present themselves as true? How to choose between one criterion of commensurability and another – between market share and return on investment, for example? Should one rely upon convenience, experience, tradition, and efficiency, or should one flip a coin? Such questions touch on a key trait of the difficulties attached to the managerial condition. Managers must, in their daily practice, solve the arduous theoretical contradictions that are contained in their approaching

performance, both materialistically and idealistically. They may set aside the idea that performance accounts are objective accounts and deal with them in a practical manner by picking up the report that suits their concerns or matches their conjectures, or by presenting various audiences with different, even contradictory, reports. If they do believe in the objectivity of performance accounts, however, receiving contradictory ones can lead to stress, angst, or escapism (e.g. breaking the dead-end of contradiction by ordering new and more performance accounts). The approaching of organisational performance by management theory and practice both in objectifying and idealising manners (see Section 1 above) turns out to have a human cost in terms of a manager's psyche, health, and ability to decide – demonstrating that epistemological issues indeed have a significant bearing on social life.

Furthermore, performance accounts depict a world that is rapidly changing. The instability of financial and monetary markets is a daily reminder of the fluctuating character of any performance. A high performance one day can become a low performance the next, and vice-versa (think of the so-called 'Asian crisis' of 1997, when several high-performing countries plunged into durable economic troubles; the 2000-2001 crash of Internet stocks; or the hesitating evolution of the Euro vs. US-dollar conversion rate). Likewise, heroes can easily become villains (the French top-star manager Jean Marie Messier, C.E.O. of Vivendi-Univeral, fell from his pedestal in less than six months [Orange 2002]). Performance accounts systematically remind managers that they are working in a highly competitive environment, and of their need for facing and accepting the challenges of modern business. The standing flow of new performance accounts forces managers into an endless quest for optimal ways of doing things, turning every step and every decision into a permanently renewed life-or-death bet – even though no definitive result can be attained. Managers are permanently reminded by performance accounts that they are working in a competitive environment where rivalry is intense,

and of their need for facing and accepting modern business challenges. The flow of performance accounts keeps both the imperative of surpassing oneself in endless series achievements and the elusive character of excellence present in the minds of managers. How stressful and torturous!

Performance accounts align the professional lives of managers within a survive-or-perish-to-competitors pattern, requiring them to keep themselves continually informed of the position of their competitors and the criteria of success that currently apply – the keys to high performance. Good performance is the key to securing future financing of their activities, which is why managers are more than keen that their financing body read their performances as satisfactory. To perform well, managers must stay in touch with the latest and most fashionable performance narratives. Best-in-test performance tool kits and lists of top performers are permanently updated. There is much discussion of parallel lists that involve competing criteria of commensurability, competing measurement procedures, parallel channels of distribution, or various audiences. One can increase almost indefinitely the statements made about the characteristics of high or low performance in present-day terms. These temporary and multiple lists of possible approaches provide no definitive answers, but simply remind managers that the winning solutions on one day may be the losing solutions on the next. Performance accounts assert and re-assert the never-ending nature of the challenges that managers face. Thus the achievements described in one performance narrative always leave the possibility open for the appearance of new challenges. Because challenges abound, there are always new and different performance narratives to be told. The logic of the implied dynamics is flawless: every performance account contributes effectively to the self-sustaining dynamics of the genre. The development of performance measures and the production of performance accounts have every chance of remaining flourishing activities. Competition, fights, rivalry, achievements, superiority, and

excellence: that which performance accounts describe is a form of *agon*, more precisely modern *agon*.

To clarify what I mean by modern *agon*, I must briefly remind the reader about ancient *agon*. *Agon*, the male personification of contest in Greek mythology ⁶, stood in ancient Greece for a specific form of active quest for “the best one” or *ariston*. Ancient *agon* was underpinned by three main ideas: first, an intense spirit of rivalry and competition; second, an emphasis on individualism; and third, an extreme emphasis on the pursuit of fame, glory, and honour, all imbedded in the mythological, religious, and political spirit of ancient sport ⁷. One became an *ariston* by excelling over all others on the day of the competition. To gain such honor, contestants trained for, prepared themselves to, and placed at stake their self-esteem, moral character, and, at times, their very lives. The important point was to pit one’s best against one’s equals in the course of competition, beating the best of one’s peers in contests, and being the best through the acknowledgement that one is first among equals. And by attaining such excellence, the *ariston* acquired something nearly divine (after Loy and Hesketh 1984).

Modern *agon* of performance accounts reminds one of ancient *agon*, yet differs somewhat from its ancient ancestor. Modern *agon* is reminiscent of ancient *agon* in that both are geared toward selecting an *ariston*. In modern *agon* there is also a systematic and rational preparation to struggle, a participation in competitions, a quest for excellence, and a celebration of victory that typically reminds us of ancient *agon*. As in ancient times, one must fight against oneself and win over

⁶ Following the invitation made above to my colleagues from the social sciences and the humanities, I cannot overemphasize the relevance of questioning modern *agon* in terms of gender, and even investigating the sexual connotations of the term “performance” for some English-speaking audiences (or so I have been told).

⁷ Ancient *agon* is understood here in the sense of “[a contest for a prize at the public games](#)” ([Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary](#) 1913), “as in athletics or music” (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language 2000), rather than as the slightly different albeit not unrelated “debate or contest between two characters in attic comedy” (Encyclopædia Britannica, On-line) that has prompted the current use of the term to depict “the dramatic conflict between the chief characters in a literary work” (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, On-line).

others in order to become an *ariston*. But the how and why of the competition as well as the symbolic meaning attached to excellence are different, and thus ancient and modern *agons* are not completely comparable. The differences rest on ancient *agon* being part of the worldview of ancient Greece, and centred in a religious mythology and a metaphysics of the body. Modern *agon*, on the other hand, is thoroughly imbedded in the secularised, rationalised, and controlled *Weltanschauung* of modernity, at least as defined in the thinking traditions of Europe and North America⁸.

Modern *agon* requires of contestants that by themselves and without divine intervention they show their ability to achieve pre-defined goals. Contestants entering the modern *agon* of performance do not actually enter competition to honor a god, but to show that they are agents who are able to make the best possible use of the resources to which their principals have entrusted them (a tenet of agency theory)⁹. Modern candidates to the status of *ariston* – conceivably any manager or organisation – must be able to plan adequately, to monitor, and to control their destiny. Yet it is not enough for them to be efficient and effective. They must also be able to demonstrate it, sometimes on several distinct arenas. Modern *agon* achievements are not supposed to remain private matters, but should be displayed publicly. The *agon* of performance accounts mobilises all the resources of accountability and publicity, and is dedicated to the visibility of its champions. Besides visibility, it is an *agon* dedicated to progress. The idea of achievements vaguely implies that of improvement, just as every sports record signals the striving of human race toward *citius*, *altius*, and *fortius* – faster, higher, and stronger. And thanks to systematic measurements can one track with precision in performance accounts the progresses made possible by modern *agon*. Top

⁸ As Brian Morean, Copenhagen Business School, pointed out, considering how distinctively a country like Japan approaches both modernity and what I characterize as performance (e.g., competition and hierarchies), it might be more appropriate to reduce my claims to modernity as experienced and theorized in Western Europe, North-America, and culturally corresponding countries (Personal communication, October 23, 2002).

⁹ I am indebted to my colleague Torbjörn Tagesson, Kristianstad University College, for this idea (Personal communication, September 9, 2002).

performers are the symbols of this quest for progress; they embody excellence and further efforts to improve even upon excellence. As *aristons* of modern *agon*, top performers are the characters of a modern moral tales about the politics of human success, a parable of how competition creates progress.

The *agon* of performance accounts are contingent upon that which Jürgen Habermas (1981/85) calls the ‘project of modernity’ of developing an objective science, a universal morality and law, and an autonomous art, according to a logic of its own. Thus everyday social life will be rationally organised; natural forces controlled; the world and the self understood; and moral progress, the justice of institutions, and even the happiness of human beings promoted (1981/1985:8). The *agon* of performance accounts evokes, as well, the separation of time and space (through time measurement techniques that were no longer bound to geographical determinants), the disembedding of social systems (lifting social relations out of local contexts of interaction and restructuring them across indefinite spans of time-space) and the reflexive ordering and reordering of social relations in the light of continual inputs of knowledge that affected the actions of individuals and of groups (altering practice through knowledge and altering knowledge through practice) that according to Anthony Giddens (1990:16) characterise modernity. Performance is part of Western modernity like *fortuna* is part of ancient Rome’s worldview or karma part of Hinduism.

Performance accounts that are narratives of achievements at an individual level, become, at a global level, the grand narrative of modern *agon*. Taken together, performance accounts tell how rationally planned, organised, and controlled competition leads to the selection of the modern *ariston*, let it be a physical person, an organisation, a management tool or anything else that one wishes to single out. The connections between the grand narrative of modern *agon* and the meta-narratives of emancipation, accumulation, history, or science – all identified by Jean-François

Lyotard (1979) as typical for modernity – are numerous, several of them having been touched upon above. And just as it possible to follow, as Lyotard claims, the constitution of the meta-narratives of modernity into many projects sustained by instrumental knowledge and by a corresponding technoscience, one can follow the constitution of the grand narrative of modern *agon* into numerous projects sustained by a specific knowledge and a corresponding technoscience – that which I would call, coining a new term, the ‘performance industry’. Describing in detail the projects, knowledge, and technoscience of performance *agon* would require many more pages than I have been allotted. In brief, however, the performance industry consists, first, of the numerous projects aimed at measuring corporate, public, or non-profit performances, or at establishing national and international standards; second, of the specific body of knowledge about performance measurement and reporting that management research, rating agencies, or various accounting, auditing and consulting firms have developed; and finally, of a technoscience that includes everything from legal obligations made to corporations to disclose their environmental or social performance to large data-based information systems dedicated to the measuring, computing, and reporting organisational performance. It is, by all means, an influential and rapidly growing industry.

Conclusion

I believe, along with Pierre Bourdieu (1998), that the time has come to question the current domination of our imaginary by a much narrower view of economy, including management, and ‘fire back’. Drawing upon the critical potential of a narrative approach to the social sciences, I present in this paper both a critical assessment of how management currently approaches organisational performance, and a narratively informed re-conceptualisation of one of management’s favourite

concept . My purpose is to open for criticism a notion that has thus far been relatively untouched by it, and to invite a critical reconsideration of management in terms of story-telling activity.

I first present the ways in which management theory and practice deal with the notion of performance, emphasising how they simultaneously objectify and abstractly idealise what they call organisational performance. Questioning such an attitude, I suggest that one take into account the fundamental difference that exists between life in itself and the various accounts that one can make of it. I also suggest that the consideration of such a difference opens radically new theoretical and practical approaches to what one calls organisational performance. Looking at the poetic traits of performance accounts, I claim that these are narratives of competitive challenges geared to the presentation of achievement hierarchies, and made possible as narratives by the use of adequate measurement procedures and the respect of decent conditions of fairness. Again adopting a socially informed standpoint, I describe how the never-ending flow of performance accounts inflicts managers with stress, angst, and escapism. Finally considering performance accounts as a whole, I end my overview of the consequences of defining organisational performance in terms of accounts of organisational achievements rather than achievements *per se*, by suggesting that performance accounts not only constitute a literary genre but the grand narrative of an *agon* that is contingent upon modernity and that, for this reason, I label modern *agon*.

It is on this particular point that I would like to conclude. The grand narrative of modern *agon* is of societal significance. Performance narratives are mythologies¹⁰ that recount in a glorifying manner how individual, organisational, national, or even transnational actors rationally achieve their goals and progress in late modernity. At the organisational level, stories of achievements (to re-use an expression I coined in Corvellec [1997]) confirm the organisation's well-ordered instances of

production, contribute to providing a sense of purposefulness to managerial actions, and participate in the making and holding together of organisations. They abide by the heritage of positivist scientific knowledge and the dream of objectivity, classification, and discipline. At a societal level, performance accounts elevate efficacy to a moral imperative and competition to a universal yardstick of value, posit measurement as an unsurpassable mode of knowledge production, and invest the idea of hierarchies with a renewed legitimacy. The success of performance accounts is an expression of modern societies' inclination to seek efficacy as a means, end, and justificatory mode, which Jean-François Lyotard (1979) considers to be specific to our times. By depicting a modern *agon* performance accounts both present the portrait of a corresponding modern *ariston* (an individual, an organisation, an artefact, or whatever), and affirm their own ability to identify the modern champions. Performance accounts are given the pretence of describing how modernity takes us to the ultimate front line of human and organisational capacity.

This may all sound comforting until one remembers that modernity has failed to fulfil its promises. All performance accounts celebrating our endless technical successes notwithstanding, are we living in a world in which access to health care, education, or even drinking water, are daily challenges for far more than half the world's population and are likely to remain so in the foreseeable future. Even as companies boast of their environmental performances, our approach to natural resources places our ecosystem under ever more encompassing long-term lethal threats. Not to mention the political (read "human-made") troubles such as war or genocide that seem to know no end and represent triumph to no one. Performance optimists argue that it is merely a question of time and knowledge, and that the day will come when performance management will be good enough to

¹⁰ In the sense given to the term by Roland Barthes (1957) of a system of signification or a form of expression for a set of beliefs considered meaningful by a given population during a given period

solve these problems. The contrast remains between the self-satisfied enthusiasm underpinning the genre of performance accounts and the alarming state and perspectives of the world we inhabit.

It is no mere coincidence that performance is such an immensely popular a notion at a time when problems deemed difficult to surmount keep piling up. Performance accounts are here to remind the wealthy, healthy, and well informed of their capacity to achieve. The grand narrative of modern *agon* is here to maintain the satisfying belief of modern western society in its own superiority. Each performance account is an attempt to signal that some advances have been made somewhere and that modernity's promise of progress will be fulfilled. Organised in endless patterns of repetitions and redundancies, performance narratives attempt to answer our need to reassure ourselves of our operative capacity to face the problems we identify as being important but to which we have no effective solutions. Do we consume performance accounts to relieve angst? Success stories are good at drawing our attention away from hard-to-solve problems. That which recounts our ability to achieve thrives on our confirmed incapacity for dealing with the social or environmental consequences of, for example, our political and theoretical choices.

Performance narratives endeavour to prove the capacity of contemporary societies to rationally operationalise progress and to indicate that, despite daily signs to the contrary, we are indeed moving in the direction of progress. Performance narratives are, in this regard, far from being politically neutral. They are not simply modernist narratives; they are narratives that keep afloat the modernist dream and the social order that is attached to it.

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