

Managerialism and Fiction, or the Fiction of Managerialism: from Ayn Rand to novels for executives

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ABSTRACT

The aim of management books is to spread new theories in the field among company executives. Such publications are one of the pillars of managerialism. Perhaps the oddest manifestation of the phenomenon is novels focussing on senior executives heroically battling for business excellence through the application of a managerial technique. In this paper, we put this curious, rarely-explored literary genre under the spotlight. We not only analyse the salient features of such literature and its main ingredients but also highlight the major stylistic influence of Ayn Rand's works. The novels of this influential neo-Liberal writer foreshadowed the new narrative form.

Keywords: management, fiction, managerialism, Ayn Rand, literature.

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“Optimism comes more naturally to the fortunate of this world than to the homeless. Yet the overblown optimism found here bears no relation whatsoever to ordinary experience such that even the most moderate observer finds himself torn between idealism, revolutionary wrath, and the darkest sarcasm.”

Conviene tener un sitio adonde ir,
in EMMANUEL CARRÈRE (2017: 338)

“Power works through individuals rather than against them, and helps build the individual, who at the same time is power’s vehicle.”

Castigo y sociedad moderna,
in DAVID GARLAND (1999: 168)

INTRODUCTION¹

One of the most singular manifestations of managerialism is undoubtedly business literature (something called *managerial* or *management* literature). This genre targets managers in that its goal is to instruct and guide them so that they can meet the challenges posed by today’s turbulent global markets (Alonso and Fernández Rodríguez, 2006 and 2013; Fernández Rodríguez, 2007). Such works are incredibly popular and fill the shelves of the sections on business at large bookshops and at airports. They all contain recipes, behavioural guides and action models for vacillating executives seeking a direct, specific framework for application in today’s modern Capitalist world (characterised by accelerating change and market uncertainty). Business managers see these texts — which are often written by leading management gurus (Huczynski, 1993; Collins, 2000; Gantman, 2005; Fernández Rodríguez, 2007) — as possible answers to the many questions arising from their daily tasks, and as action plans. Nevertheless, these texts have other purposes too. Their pages describe the cognitive framework for the new Knowledge Economy, which Boltanski and Chiapello (2002) defined as ‘The New Spirit of Capitalism’ — a term that now enjoys wide currency.

Managerial literature aims to present a structural view of business and, above all, to implement more effective procedures in companies and other organisations (non-governmental, public, and so forth). Unlike academe (which focuses on organisational research — Managerial

Science if you will), *Managerial Literature* completely ignores many aspects of the real world in complex modern organisations (Huczynski, 1993; Fernández Rodríguez, 2007). To begin with, the ‘literary’ genre does not pay enough attention to conflicts, alternatives, ends, and the choice of means. Rather, it only takes the narrow perspective of the director or manager — a subject that takes up most of the discourse. These *managerial* texts pass off directors and managers as both the source and the guardians of reason and initiative in companies, casting all other stakeholders (staff, clients, and the social and economic context) into the shade, relegating them to mere objects of managerial action (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992).

Such texts are written to persuade and are largely the handiwork of experts (although there are many simple compilations, or books published by firms). These experts are often ‘business gurus’ (Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 1998; Jackson, 2003; Collins, 2007). In most cases, these texts have a quasi-scientific purpose, although in previous studies (Fernández Rodríguez, 2007) stress was laid on the fact that such studies formed part of specific sub-genres. In our view ‘managerial fiction’ is one of the most interesting of these sub-genres for it is one where the trials and tribulations of managerial efforts are wrapped in fiction. This brief paper will examine the special features, implications, and controversies of such fiction.

We have approached the study of managerial fiction as part of a broader movement of cultural production and consumption in the Neo-Liberal context of Late Capitalism. We have both combined and reconsidered the meanings given to major Ultra-Liberal literary works and to short Post-Modernist business tales. We see

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this fiction as an ideological production in the broad sense of practical policy, which is expressed through assessments that make groups of people aware of where they stand in the scheme of things and of social conflict (Williams, 1980). The purpose of ideologies is to attribute meaning to social acts. This exercise is one ridden by conflict. Ideologies are forms of existence and ways of pursuing social struggles, of mastering meaning processes (Ipola, 1982: 73), and as Clifford Geertz (1988: 200 et seq.) says, ideologies put forward empirical goals regarding the nature of society and the direction it should take.

Managerial ideological discourses, especially in fiction, thus become an asset and express the experience of a social group, constituting a sequence of choices that explain why some are chosen to lead and others are not (Ricoeur 1975: 94 et seq). In this case, the literature reveals that cultural production is far from a simple mechanism for imposing messages on others. Rather, it is an active process that both sets the basis for drawing up and coding the group's messages, and for the decoding and reception of those messages by other groups and social classes. Business fiction is a (sub)cultural practice for building an ideological discourse that treats the ordering of experience as a class language: "Awareness cannot be linked to experience without a given language between the two that organises understanding of the experience. Here, it is important to stress that the same set of experiences can be articulated in more than one language" (Jones, 2014: 97).

In its cultural dimension, business fiction is mainly seen as consumption and is thus an act of economic reproduction. However, it is also a social reproduction practice (Bourdieu and Darbel 1969). That is to say, all this venial literature focusing on the business world is a good and therefore has an economic value, an accumulation value, and growth. Yet it also serves well-studied social functions, such as its ability to build and express identity. Here, the purchaser opts for this cultural consumption and in so doing, both identifies with and is identified by a lifestyle and an active way of understanding the world (Lee, 1993). This gives scope to reconstruct a *habitus* to configure

a personality that is individually expressed but socially constructed (Bourdieu, 1988; Jenks, 1993). The fiction genre has become a key element in Post-Modernist cultural sensitivities (given that major analytical tracts are now considered lifeless and dull). The genre's ideological efficiency is shown in those business tales in which all the values of Late Capitalism are naturalised and idealised (business heroism, risk-taking, extreme individualism, the free market, creative freedom, and so on). Unlike boring classical management manuals or soporific, instantly forgettable Power Point presentations, these tales are personalised and made 'fun' because this (whether in the form of a hobby, leisure, or merely distracting the attention and dispersing the efforts of one's ideological foes) has become the hallmark and moral icon of the contemporary representation of the world (Postman, 2016).

Our goal in this text is therefore to describe the main features of this odd genre, which despite a growth spurt in the 1980s, has a singular precedent: the literature of the controversial novelist Ayn Rand. She was a pioneering writer who is the forerunner of many of the leading figures in today's Neo-Liberalism. Her *oeuvre* is exotic and far-removed from the stylistic canons of her era yet her books laid the foundations of business tales in the 1980s and beyond. In this paper, we split our presentation into three parts. The first gives a lengthy description of Rand's contributions to building an epic, pro-market individualist plot in her novels, which (whether explicitly or not) were to inspire the managerial fiction that emerged under Reaganism. Second, we explore the features of business fiction in its contemporary forms. Third, we end the paper with a brief discussion of the implications and limitations of such works in explaining the world of management work.

AYN RAND: THE ETERNAL FORERUNNER

The pioneer of Managerial fiction — Ayn Rand — is a disconcerting, odd character whose work still influences the genre today. Whenever pretensions of exerting economic influence and literary sub-genres are mixed, we

come across characters like the Russian Alisa Zinovyevna Rosenbaum, born in Saint Petersburg in 1905 and later naturalised as an American citizen under the name of Ayn Rand. Her father was a well-established pharmacist but the family's possessions were confiscated during The Russian Revolution. It seems her ambition to become a script-writer in Russia's State Institute of Screen Arts was dashed, leading her to emigrate to The United States. Once there, she set up in Hollywood, where she did all kinds of jobs in various studios, departments, and creative teams. She married an actor and focussed on what was to become her obsession during those years, namely writing (or helping to write) film scripts. Here, her script-writing background was to shape both the books she later wrote and indeed managerial fiction as a genre (Heller, 2009). The whole thrust of her work involved conveying brutally simple ideas (the virtues of selfishness, the evil wrought by mediocrities, individualism as the supreme value) in an attractive way and with an interesting plot so that the reader could identify this with his managerial status and in so doing, could boost his ego, shed any guilt he might have about his money-grubbing behaviour, and legitimise his lack of social commitment.

Rand's rabid anti-collectivism was enshrined in a host of publications, talks, autobiographical novels, and TV and radio programmes. She spread the message further by nurturing a band of followers eager to join a personality cult and defend this anti-Communist propagandist up to the hilt (Walker, 1999). Her influence has been strongly felt from the 1940s to the present. Any number of American Senators and Congressmen, English Conservative politicians, showbiz folk, and successful US businessmen drawn from various sectors (Industry, Finance, Computing, Technology, and so on) have formed a 'network' (sect) defending her supposed 'philosophy', which she termed 'Objectivism'.

Yet the 'Objectivism' vaunted by Rand and her fans is nothing more than an amateur pseudo-philosophy mashed up from a superficial reading of Hobbes, Burke, Hume, and even Nietzsche (in its most extreme form of Austrian Liberalism). Rand's 'Objectivism' is merely a mercantilist fantasy proclaiming the supremacy of

an entrepreneur (a man) engaged in a Holy Crusade against The Forces of Darkness (which is to say, bureaucrats, the State, the envy of lesser men, and the authoritarian inefficiency of taxation and fiscal policy). Rejecting mysticism, religion, and humanitarian idealism, Rand's goal is to uphold boundless freedom, the goodness of greed, radical individualist ontology. This involves decrying the weakness and foolishness of all those who think of others, of the common good, of social and public ends — and in the final analysis, the futility of trying to civilise society.

Perhaps Ayn Rand's biggest, most profitable best-sellers are the two that catapulted her to the fame she still enjoys today. These two mammoth novels are: *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*. Neither of these books seek (or indeed achieve) any kind of literary expressiveness or creative voice. Rather, their sole purpose is to exemplify — to script-write — the behaviour of Rand's archetypal Anarchist-Liberal Man (and which always entails letting companies go on the rampage). Written in the 1940s and 1950s, just when Keynesianism and Organised Capitalism were the dominant discourses in Economic practices, Rand's novels seemed doomed to oblivion or ostracism. Yet between them, business and generalist magazines, film producers, Ultra-Conservative circles close to right-wing of The Republican Party, and the *National Review* praised Rand and her novels to the skies, thereby creating a myth. Rand's virulent Anti-Communism and anti-trade unionism served the interests and American corporate policy as The United States entered The Cold War (after a brief and tense alliance with The Soviet Union during The Second World War). Rand's message was that 'The American Way of Life' was threatened and that only heroic businessmen stood in the way of collectivism and Communism. For Big Business and its political allies, it was just what the doctor ordered (Weiss, 2012).

Yet Rand's success was not confined to The United States. The English-speaking world had (and continues to have) armies of followers eager to keep her work alive. Thanks to the pressure exerted by business schools and their acolytes, the classic publishing house Penguin (which had earlier refused publish Rand's books) was forced

to relent as the so-called ‘Conservative Revolution’ gathered steam. Penguin was reduced to publishing Rand’s two mammoth novels as part of its ‘Modern Classics’ collection. This was expanded to include other titles as Conservative and Neo-Liberal governments came to dominate Britain’s political landscape. Indeed, things have reached such a pass that works by this strange author now form part of the literary and philosophical themes covered in British secondary education syllabuses (Freedland, 2017). In Latin America, her *oeuvre* has been published and republished ever since the 1950s (the editions currently in Spanish bookshops were published in Argentina (Rand, 2003 and 2004)). There, several powerful groups have openly followed Rand. Her books are associated with currents in Chilean and Argentine ‘Neo-Liberalism’ — the same ones that defended military coups to re-establish economic order in accordance with Hayek’s dictates (in which the market comes before democracy) and those of The Chicago School afterwards. Even under Franco’s dictatorship in a politically anesthetised and gagged Spain, the Nazi-loving publisher and Catalan Falangist Luis de Caralt brought out several of Rand’s novels in the 1960s (no doubt after changing some of the Argentine translations, liberally sprinkled as they were with Americanisms). His ambition was to publish her complete works together with other big names in the world literature of the period. Caralt’s closeness to business circles at the time gave his editions a clear lobbying edge in a Spanish economy that had been shaken up by the 1958 Stability Plan [*Plan de Estabilización*] and had yet to fully modernise.

The Fountainhead was written in 1943 and its success led to a film version directed by King Vidor in 1947, in which the protagonists were Gary Cooper and Patricia Neal. The pedestrian story recounts the life of Howard Roark, an architect who wants to create a new, radiant architecture. In this quest, he has to defend his ideas against mediocrities, bureaucrats, and failed construction companies. After graduating, he becomes a mere building worker who is then rescued by (among others) a rich woman whom he admires and falls in love with. She helps him and puts up with his fiery personality to the point of accepting what many have interpreted as

rape. Thanks to her financial help, he designs wonderful houses but the contractors and other ‘usual suspects’ on Rand’s list (State politicians, interested parties, and cowards) ruin Roark’s beautiful idea. The irate architect decides to blow up the buildings, which causes ‘collateral damage’. The climax comes where Roark defends himself in the trial, in which he argues that the value of creativity, individualism — the fountainhead of *ego* — is what drives progress. He defends man’s right to rebel against routine social conventions. The novel features innumerable stereotyped characters: hide-bound architects, cowardly politicians, and confused magnates (who always end up backing creative individuals). Those trying to frustrate the entrepreneurs’ efforts include critical journalists and envious intellectuals, mediocrities and Socialists whose egalitarian discourse and espousal of collective is used to brow-beat talented businessmen. The women in these fairy-tales are breathless admirers of the gifted men and virile entrepreneurs who waft through the pages. The detail of these stereotypes is particularly relevant if we compare *The Fountainhead* with books with similar themes but of greater literary merit, such as the controversial *Sometimes a Great Notion* by the acid author Ken Kesey, who depicts a family of lumberjacks resisting the blandishments of a striking trade union (Kesey, 1964).

In 1943, Rand’s book was still an oddity (even though the anti-collectivist discourse emerged towards the end of The Second World War, as one can see from Friedrich A. Hayek’s famous *The Road to Serfdom* [*Der Weg zur Knechtschaft*], which was published in 1949). When the film version of *The Fountainhead* appeared in 1949, the context was more favourable to this doctrinaire message (Hayek, 2005). The beginning of The Cold War, McCarthyism, the policies pursued by the big film studios against the trade unions of technicians, workers, actors, and script-writers, and the reaction of American Conservatives against British social policies all nurtured such ideas. Indeed, Rand’s animosity against Britain was explicit in one of her novels (and in the film script, which she wrote herself), in which she pilloried Harold Laski — a political theorist who had been a Labour Party icon. All these factors created a best-seller and a runaway success for Rand, who was

swift to brand anything that rejected or nuanced her strange moral philosophy as ‘Socialist’, ‘cosy intellectual’, ‘retrograde’, ‘collectivist’, ‘bureaucratic’. Yet her philosophy boiled down to nothing more than an ode to the thrusting male entrepreneur and the impossibility of deflecting him from his course through communal ideas or programmes. Hers was a world in which the only path to prosperity and progress was paved by giving individuals free rein to seek profit and trample anyone who stood in their way.

In 1957, Rand published her second mammoth novel, which we have taken as an example of business fiction. In *Atlas Shrugged* (a book running to over a thousand pages, with the same underlying structure as *The Fountainhead* but even more over-egged with moralising sub-plots lauding individualist, anti-social ‘rationalism’. This time round, it is engineer and businessman Hank Rearden who develops a wonder-metal (the eponymous ‘Rearden Metal’) but which the government, mediocrities, and intellectuals are all bent on wresting from him and declaring as a social good. The female protagonist is Dagny Taggart, who against all the odds (corrupt State interventionism and family advice) and with the help of a few talented individuals creates a railroad using Rearden Metal. Yet the most original (and openly pro-Capitalist) part of the book is the sub-plot in which: (1) the great American industrial and business geniuses vanish; (2) The United States goes into irreversible decline, stifled by egalitarian legislation supposedly fostering the common good and public needs but actually only benefiting the bushwhackers bent on doing down heroes such as Hank Rearden. This is where John Galt steps out of the shadows — a mythical figure who is still popular. Galt is a secretive, silent, unsung hero who is holed up in some remote spot, organising a strike by talented businessmen in order to bring society to a grinding halt and fan the flames of revolt. The battle flag Rand chooses for these revolting Capitalists is (believe it or not) the dollar sign. This uplifting struggle against the mediocrities, corrupt, and collectivists in Government has a ‘happy ending’ in which Galt and Rearden bring the country to its knees. This forces the government to scrap the

taxes and other duties that would otherwise hold back Rand’s band of brave, visionary wealth-creators.

This monstrous dystopian work triumphed in a period in which the *genre* was on the upswing — other dystopian novels published about the same time or slightly earlier were George Orwell’s *1984* (1949) and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932). The fear of nuclear war with The Soviet Union was at fever pitch, and the terror of losing ‘The American Way of Life’ and the country’s military and political hegemony in the Eisenhower era was palpable at the time. The book’s triumph was fostered by the most conservative (right-wing) circles of American Republicanism, business magazines, the ‘Ultra-Liberal’ Mont Pèlerin Society (MPS), and a wolf-pack of fans — that is to say, young business school students and aspiring market heroes. This audience found Rand’s ‘literature’ irresistible, with its mix of *Boys Own Paper* derring-do, the Frontier Spirit, and facile justifications for ruthless selfishness and lack of social commitment, topped off with exaltation of the individual. It was the Capitalist equivalent of a wet dream.

Rand’s relations with the world economic right-wing have been long, close, and not without conflict. Ludwig von Mises praised *Atlas Shrugged* for its vitriolic criticism of left-wing intellectuals. Both Rand and Mises considered intellectuals to blame for fostering the ‘bureaucratic spirit’ and ‘moral bankruptcy’ driving government’s Socialist policies, and of unravelling the Industrial Revolution. Alan Greenspan, President of The Federal Reserve between 1987 and 2006, was a die-hard ‘Objectivist’ right from the early 1950s and one of Rand’s followers. His blind belief in the rational behaviour of financial markets (an almost direct transcription of Rand’s rational individualism but applied to the nation’s finances) led to the bursting of one of the biggest stock market bubbles ever. The devastating financial crisis followed in its wake in 2008. The father of Anarchist Capitalism, Murray Rothbard, praised the film adaptations of the books. Yet Rand’s relationship with other Neo-Liberal economists of The Chicago School (such as Milton Friedman and George Stigler) became tenser and more distant to the point where our audacious authoress denounced their ‘subjectivism’. Yet

the Utilitarian Theory of Value is subjective by definition and thus sits ill with the supposed ‘objectivism’ of Rand’s folksy, home-spun moral philosophy. If this were not enough, she denounced their ideas as immoral and — though it is hard to credit — as conducive to creeping Socialism (Burns, 2010).

Nevertheless, Rand’s influence on American business and economic discourse had become scandalously obvious over the years and through succeeding governments. During the Keynesian era, conditions were not propitious to the kind of wholly unregulated Libertarian Capitalism vaunted by Rand. Yet it was precisely the literary support and the strategy of fictionalising hard-core ‘slash-and-burn’ Capitalism that made room for her in the American imaginary. This fame (some might say notoriety) was to prove of key importance in re-launching such theories during the long Neo-Liberal cycle beginning in the 1980s. Over all these years, there has been a wave of statements by Conservative politicians, management gurus, businessmen, technologists, and artists of all kinds (ranging from music to comedians) who have been inspired by Rand’s ‘business’ novels.

‘The New Spirit of Capitalism’ analysed by Boltanski and Chiapello (2002) at the dawning of the new century gave Rand’s discourses on Anarchic Capitalism a shot in the arm. The sight of multi-millionaire entrepreneurs who began their technological empires in Californian garages, Web prophets, the informal pioneers of Silicon Valley, the new mystique of libertarian talent and limitless creativity has triumphed as a stereotype. For Rand groupies, these ‘makers and shakers’ are opposed by the ‘resident evil’ of bureaucrats, Civil Servants, politicians, dull academics and failed old-hat left-wing intellectuals with an axe to grind. It seems that Rand’s message is now re-emerging not in the offices of MPS and American Republican Senators but among the blithe, deregulated, glittering, hyper-individualist world of technology networks and companies. The packed public presentations of Apple’s new products touted by Steve Jobs seem like scenes lifted from *Atlas Shrugged*, a book that Steve Wozniak, Apple’s co-founder vaunted as the one that had guided

his life. Peter Thiel, co-founder of PayPal (the world’s most used Internet payment system and the main financial backer of Facebook) is also an enthusiastic follower and admirer of Rand, whom he considers to be the most influential business writer. Even the so-called ‘Collaborative Economy’ wraps itself in the flag of ‘Objectivism’ — Travis Kalanick, CEO of Uber, uses the original book cover of *The Fountainhead* as his personal logo on social networks (Keen, 2015). It would be impossible to list every American senior executive (from whatever sector) who has warmly recommend reading one of Rand’s two novels, or who say it was their favourite book. We shall see that the image of the entrepreneur who has become a millionaire by bravely taking on mediocrity and political bureaucracy has become the hallmark of The Trump Era.

In large measure, the historical success and long life of Rand’s output can be put down to her great skill in weaving alluring novels that various generations of young American have seen as expressing their ideal of independence and self-affirmation. George Stiglitz puts the post-adolescent appeal of Rand’s books almost on a par with Tolkien’s *Lord of The Rings* but also points to its appalling consequences when it comes to American executives’ macro-economic reasoning (Freedlan, 2017). The symbolic effectiveness of these novels lies in their clever mix of literary *genres* running from melodrama to adventure stories, sagas, and mystery tales, and whose verisimilitude makes the reader identify with all of the values in the sub-text. These values are very simple (not to say simplistic) and echo folk culture. However, they gain special symbolic meaning when they are linked with the reader’s ideal self in the most Freudian concept of the father figure of personality (Freud, 1973). This is because they reaffirm the reader’s own imaginary trajectory. Rand’s career as a script-writer helped her organise her stories well, make them pleasant and even interesting to read, and opened broad horizons for a reader with a leaning to an individualist, will-driven vision of the world, reinforcing his ideal self (Freud, 1970). Those readers with a guilty conscience stemming from criticisms of Capitalism as both selfish and inhuman felt liberated by Rand’s ‘anything goes’ credo.

This is where the contradictions and paradoxes surrounding Rand arise. The author's 'Objectivist' philosophy was supposedly rational and anti-idealist, yet she used it to pursue the most arbitrary, unrealistic, and historically unsustainable ideal of a mythological 'Super Man'. She is rabidly anti-religious because of the irrational basis of such beliefs yet her works build a boundless mysticism based on idolatrous worship of a god-like entrepreneur who greatly overshadows the skilful, astute figure identified by Schumpeter. In the end, Rand — the goddess of market forces and individualism — gained much of her fame because of the weaving of networks, circles and even 'collectives' (as Rand's most fervent henchmen call themselves), all with strong sect-like connotations (the business project and publishing house spreading Rand's 'thought' in Argentina is called *Grito Sagrado* [The Holy Battle-Cry]). They recall those utopian communities inspired by Saint Simon or Auguste Comte that, in their relentless pursuit of their 'vision', began singing the praises of reason, Science, and positive thinking, only to end up creating new rites, weird masses, and worshipping their founders as the new deities of an anti-religious faith. Here, it is worth considering the four definitions of a literature proposed by Terry Eagleton (1993 and 2016). It was Rand's two mammoth novels that brought her the greatest success and made the biggest public impact. These two books combine: (1) a representation of the real world that is expanded out of all proportion in the literary sphere; (2) a specific, self-referencing language; (3) non-pragmatic presentation (for the books are novels, not academic tracts or textbooks); (4) making readers believe that they are exceptional works reflecting a higher plane of truth and human sensibilities than that represented by purely instrumental thinking. All of these features give Rand a mantle of timeless greatness spun from a threadbare mental scheme. Her tales were taken by many in the society of her time as a key to understanding and interpreting the world, and as a guide to behaviour.

In a field apparently distant from Rand's astral plane, we find the literature of the working-class. Jacques Rancière (1997) has taught us to realise that the revolutionary proletarian ideal owed much to groups of

French artisans mobilising identity through readings of romantic works and the tales of Victor Hugo (who glorified poetry and the higher values of Art). These workers spent much more of their meagre earnings and free time buying books or newspapers than they did mugging up on the scientific study and comprehension of history's laws of materialism (Fundamental Marxist ideas that, curiously enough, were also passed off as 'objective'). For Rancière, instead of the unfolding of the results of an analytical history, what we find in reconstructing the itineraries of specific, contextualised social agents is a sentimental, intellectual, and political education built upon overlapping images based on tales of heroism, stories of heart-rending suffering, and albums of stirring emotions. It is difficult here to separate the interplay of the real world and fiction for any narration (in whatever genre) is simply a way of telling a story through a set of signs in order to create meaning from the author's social standpoint.

Rancière's insights are especially enlightening when we see how managerial fiction has been so successfully presented and fostered over the last few years. The genre has sought to appropriate meaning in the social world (and indeed of human activity as a whole) in terms of managerial function (Salmon, 2008). 'Story-telling' has become the buzz-word in corporate presentations, and management has given it a twist in all its formats, levels, and spheres. Stories, emotions, and new works of fiction intermingle in a torrent of homilies churned out by the great story-makers in which the bounds between the real and imaginary blur. 'Business gurus' (a mixture of technology visionaries, prophets of competitiveness, and moralists preaching the supremacy of the market) are the high priests of this new cult. They invent futures that they peddle as likely, while rejecting or demonising other futures they consider impossible. Thus story-telling has invaded every nook and cranny of the business world and of the economy in general, conquering the commanding heights of post-truth politics. The social-legal rationale of action spanning from Kant to Weber that was the linchpin of enlightened modernity has been unhinged — hence the managerial opprobrium heaped on bureaucracy. It has been displaced by affective, neo-charismatic

forms of legitimisation in which the business world has rebuilt its hegemony on the notion of the exceptional person. The narration of this idealisation is used to boost business productivity and to de-institutionalise labour relations.

MANAGERIAL FICTION AFTER RAND

With the consolidation of Neo-Liberalism in the 1980s, Rand's influence can be seen in the managerial recipes dished up by fiction writers for their target audience. It is as if the runaway success of the authoress of *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged* gave those mouthing the management discourse the key to influencing their readers. This key basically boils down to a hotchpotch of Freudian identification and projection in the avatars the authors use to play out the gripping epic of management activity. Only thus can we grasp that fiction is seen as a valid strategy for spreading the management message. Yet there is a difference between past and present: while Rand built a philosophical framework that gave meaning to entrepreneurial individualism, modern managerial fiction applies the same behaviour patterns to managers and workers alike. In today's corporations, these not only identify with the rebel who fights 'against the odds' (apathy, conformism, red tape, and so on) but also with his feelings. The new man, though a bit 'square' and prudish, differs from Rand's rigid, ruthless and repulsive 'hero'. In fact, the new managerial fiction is a little less 'black and white' when it comes to the dynamics of management decision-making, and tosses in sentimental sub-plots for the protagonists. Nonetheless, today's fiction is written in a highly amateurish literary style (proof of which lies in the awkward choice of names for the characters). Yet these sub-plots are mere embellishments of the *leitmotiv*. Their only purpose is to obtain a 'gift' (in the sense meant by Propp, 1981) that will help the protagonist(s) beat his/their competitors in the ruthless battle for survival in which today's companies are engaged.

In any case, contemporary managerial literature has developed two overlapping literary genres: the fable

and the novel. In the fables, there is a fictionalisation of the behaviour that one should follow and the text ends up taking the structure of the classical fable such as those by Aesop or La Fontaine. A good example of this model is *Who Moved my Cheese?* by Spencer Johnson (2000), in which the protagonists are mice and 'the little people' who wonder who or what has taken their cheese. They later discover that the only way to stop others carrying off the cheese is to keep moving it around. The tale alludes to the need to adapt to permanent change. Some other key texts on the same lines are *Aesop's Management Fables* (McCann and Stewart, 1997), in which they re-write Aesop's fables to give advice on management; *Fish!* (Lundin *et al.*, 2001), in which a group of fishermen work in a team, and *A Paperboy's Fable* (Patel, 2016), in which a poor but enterprising boy becomes a successful businessman. All these allegorical texts are miserable apologies for literature but nevertheless proved to be runaway best-sellers. The case of *Who Moved my Cheese?* is paradigmatic: it is one of the best-selling books this century in any genre. In Spain, one of the most successful books has been *La buena suerte*, by Rovira Celma and Trías de Bes (2004) [Translated into English as *Good Luck. Creating The Conditions for Success in Life and Business*]. It follows the same successful formula as Johnson's tale. In the American's case, two friends meet and one recounts the fable to the other. In the case of *Good Luck*, the story is of two knights who seek a magic clover in a fable where good luck is not a result of blind chance but rather of creating the circumstances in which Fortune will smile.

Despite the recent success of these fables, the novel enjoys greater acceptance among both the propagandists of managerial theories and the general public. Management novels follow the fictionalisation patterns already mentioned in fables but their contents are more highly developed given that they have a narrative structure offering greater scope. Here, Rand is clearly the benchmark even though little mention is made of her among the best-selling authors. Some writers opt for novels because they already have a strong track record in organisational thought. Here, one can highlight Peter Drucker, the great manage-

ment guru, who published two novels both of which were lambasted by critics: *The last of all possible worlds* (1982) and *The temptation to do good* (1983). Drucker — possibly the key thinker in the management field (Fernández Rodríguez, 2008) — sought to frame his defence of good management practices in the first of these two novels. Yet the results of his efforts were less than thrilling, not least because he put a stone in his shoe by contextualising the story in inter-war Europe. The second book, which was less ambitious in its aims, is set in a conflict-riven university (what university is not?). Once again, this work makes it plain that Drucker would do better to stick to other kinds of literary fare for managers. Later on, a new generation of authors began to re-interpret the rules of the new genre through a growing number of publications. Authors that have stood out are Tom DeMarco, with *The Deadline* (1997): a novel about project management; Patrick Lencioni and his *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* (2002); and Stefane Swanepoel with *Surviving Your Serengeti* (2011). In Spain, various writers in this genre have enjoyed great success — as is the case of Fernando Trías de Bes, with books such as *La buena suerte* [*Good Luck*] (2004), and Juan Carlos Cubeiro, with his trilogy *La sensación de fluidez* (2001), although there are also short stories, such as Pozo's collections of tales (2016).

Nevertheless, the most classical works in this sub-genre are: *The One Minute Manager* (1983), by Ken Blanchard and Spencer Johnson, which spawned a host of *One Minute Manager* novels that Blanchard continued with other authors; *The Goal: A Process of Ongoing Improvement* (1993), by Eliahu Goldratt and Jeff Cox, into which we shall now delve to discover most of the keys to this sub-literature. We shall begin with the protagonist, who faces various problems in managing an industrial plant. Beset by the demands made on him by the company's senior managers, Rogo has to turn the management of the business round in short order (he is given just three months to pull it off). Rogo personifies the American middle-manager in terms of his character, cultural references and lifestyle (with allusions to his marital problems, replete with flaming rows that lead to him breaking up

with his wife and — surprise, surprise — with whom he makes up later on). The purpose of this managerial fiction is to enshrine some of the problems arising in conventional management literature (and supposedly based on real cases) in a work of fiction, giving glimpses of the protagonist's virtues and vices. Nevertheless, the questions posed by the main character faithfully reflect the obsessions of corporate consultants and gurus:

[— It's the damn competition. That's what's killing us. Ever since the Japanese entered our markets, the competition has been incredible. Three years ago, they were beating us on quality and product design. We've just about matched them on those. But now they're beating us on price and deliveries. I wish I knew their secret.

— What can I possibly do to be more competitive? (Goldratt and Cox, 2004 (Third Revised Edition): 25).

This is the challenge Rogo faces. In the novel, the main character has an odd ally — a ghostly character called Jonah, Rogo's erstwhile teacher in the past, and an expert in various subjects. The book proceeds through a kind of Socratic dialogue between the two in which the wraith-like mentor keeps pointing Alex Rogo in the right direction, helping him re-examine his goals and act accordingly:

[If the goal is to make money, then (putting it in terms Jonah might have used), an action that moves us toward making money is productive. And an action that takes away from making money is non-productive. For the past year or more, the plant has been moving away from the goal more than toward it. So to save the plant, I have to make it productive; I have to make the plant make money for UniCo. That's a simplified statement of what's happening, but it's accurate. At least it's a logical starting point] (Goldratt and Cox, Goldratt and Cox, 2004 (Third Revised Edition): 47)

Jonah leads a confused Alex Rogo back to the paths of 'common sense', orienting his actions so that they dovetail with corporate reasoning. Rogo soon follows the advice of his mentor, who never tires of telling

Alex that he needs to reflect if he is to find the answers for himself. A typical and oft-repeated passage in the novel runs as follows:

[— "You're leaving?" I ask.

— "I have to," he says.

— "Jonah, you can't just run off like this."

— "There are clients waiting for me," he says.

— "Jonah, I don't have time for riddles. I need answers," I tell him.

He puts his hand on my arm.

— "Alex, if I simply told you what to do, ultimately you would fail. You have to gain the understanding for yourself in order to make the rules work," he says] (Goldratt and Cox, 2004 (Third Revised Edition): 95).

Jonah acts as a coach and spiritual (spirit?) advisor, helping Alex find his own path. Following his guru's advice, Alex Rogo begins to apply various measures on the production side that gradually change the way the plant works, making it profitable:

[Throughput is going up as marketing spreads the word about us to other customers. Inventories are a fraction of what they were and still falling. With more business and more parts over which to spread the costs, operating expense is down. We're making money] (Goldratt and Cox, 2004 (Third Revised Edition): 254).

In the end, business success (reaching this goal is not just about making money but also about formulating and creating change) leads the protagonist to make the following change at the end of the book:

[— "At the same time," I continue, "can you imagine what the meaning is to being able to hone in on the core problem even in a very complex environment? To be able to construct and check solutions that really solve all negative effects without creating new ones? And above all to cause such a major change smoothly, without creating resistance but the opposite, enthusiasm? Can you

imagine having such abilities?"

— "Alex, that is what you have done. That's exactly what you have done in our plant."]

(Goldratt and Cox, 2004 (Third Revised Edition): 343).

In the end, what it boils down to is acquiring certain skills to change the mind set within an organisation — something that involves self-examination in which the manager not only has to reflect on his goals but also to ask himself questions and get his underlings to think about their daily work and goals, and even their personalities and their attitude to life. This process is reproduced in all management novels. If we look at some other works — for example Spanish ones in the same genre — we shall see that Goldratt's scheme is followed almost to the letter. We can see this in texts such as the novel *La sensación de fluidez* by Juan Carlos Cubeiro:

[He thought of Leopoldo Zoe: This manager has an edge! He has time to swim, exercise, breathe deeply, he has a hearty laugh, and he practices archery. He creates an atmosphere with a buzz, full of Baroque music and photos of beaches. He knows what his leadership priorities are; he leads with humanity and humility and is so energetic. I thought he was a 60-something has-been just a week ago but what drive and purpose he has! I could learn a great deal from him!

Jesús did not know that in the room next to him, Leopoldo Zoe was thinking of the marvellous opportunity that Reptelco had given him to show Jesús the ropes. He had shown that 'human nature' can be developed and that someone who was distant and cock-sure could still become more effective as a leader. He had at least asked himself a few searching questions] (Cubeiro, 2003: 168).

Once again, we see the same ingredients: in Cubeiro's book, Jesús Bauluz is the guru and Leopoldo Zoe in the one seeking the Holy Grail (that is, becoming a leader). Yet again, we find parallel stories linked with emotions (which are so important in contemporary Capitalism: Illouz, 2007). Then there are the contrived

names given to the characters (Sid y Nott, Leopoldo Zoe, etc.), reflecting an amateurish writing style, and the resort to ‘unliterary’ devices such as summarising the main ideas in a chapter, trouble-shooting guides so as to give the idea that the novel has an educational purpose. The author constantly speaks directly to the reader, as one can see in the book’s prologue:

[That is why I hope, Dear Reader, that you will use this story on leadership to reflect on what you do in your job so that you can advance in your team management] (Cubeiro, 2003: IX).

Almost all management novels follow a similar scheme. They are based on presenting management efforts as the need to take the right decisions; they melodramatically present good and bad practices and pass both practical and moral judgements on them. Indications on which practices are ‘good’ and which are ‘bad’ is based on management criteria serving the company’s interests. In these novels, the manager is faced by choices shaped by inevitability: there are no rational alternatives to the prescribed option, in which adopting a new viewpoint, action plan, or discovering a new management technique is presented as the ‘gift’ that will lead to business success (Fernández Rodríguez, 2007). In this respect, all the novels show a similar structure to the tales described by Propp (1981), with a framework based on the need to make inevitable ‘either/or’ choices between staying in a rut (marked by stagnation, failure, and helplessness) or embarking on change (involving co-operation, common goals, a new management culture,). In the latter case, the idea of change is imbued with almost revolutionary mystique, selling it as the fix that will deliver management and business success given a little effort. In general, the narrative is one that stresses individualist values without a psychologising framework, suggesting that given stimuli may boost a manager’s motivation and that of his workers. It rests on the notion that human nature is easily shaped. Such literature also rejects any contextual or sociological context. Thus issues such as economic exploitation, social conflict, ideological manipulation, or inequality (Fernández Rodríguez, 2007; Alonso and Fernández Rodríguez, 2013) are simply overlooked. There is sometimes the

odd reference to labour disputes but these are always settled in short order by managers who are capable of turning losses into profits.

As one might expect, the discourse in these novels coincides with those of management. A certain prescriptive style is used, peppered with expressions such as “one must”, “one should”, and in many cases acronyms and easily-memorisable lists are used (Huczynski, 1993; Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002). The description of situations is wedded with a prescription, which not only works like a dose of salts but which is also intended to stimulate and enthuse the reader. Furthermore, these novels are plagued with ‘mythological elements’ in the Barthesian meaning of the term (Barthes, 2000), where the messages imparted by the characters in the tale have a strong ideological tinge. Among these mythologies, there are abundant references to some of the examples described earlier (Fernández Rodríguez, 2007), among which one can highlight the following:

- a. The Mythology of Management Styles: The novels differentiate among management styles. On the one hand, the chosen style explains the novel to readers and is the one enshrining the behaviour needed to ensure business success. The remaining management styles have shortcomings or are just plain wrong and following them inevitably leads to organisational failure.
- b. The Mythology of Co-operation: This is based on the assumption that at the end of the day — no matter what the potential conflicts (broached at the beginning of the novels) — both managers and workers share the same interests. Social conflict either does not exist in the company or if it does, it is the result of bad management or the workers’ apathy and irresponsible behaviour. In general, the problem lies in failure to adapt to change and lack of flexibility by some members of the company.
- c. The Mythology of the Committed, Free Worker: Workers are presented as highly motivated, willing to accept any change that management

comes up with. Workers are pro-active; exemplary in their commitment to the company, and their interests are those of the firm. They hate bureaucracy because they want to be free and closer to clients. The novels paint an alluring picture of the new organisation. Here, the ‘new’ company is held up as one that is fun to work for, full of exciting challenge as it bravely battles against a conservatism linked to old, inflexible work practices and red tape.

- d. The Mythology of the Committed Manager: If workers are highly-motivated, it is because their bosses are. Managers do not skulk in their offices or in glass skyscrapers but rather take a personal interest in the work of their employees. Tasks are portrayed as exciting because they are ‘engaging’. When others are passive, our super-heroes give their all (especially their time: in most of the novels, there is a sub-plot portraying the tensions caused by the little time spent by the manager on his wife and children, the stresses of family life, and so on).

These mythologies justify certain ways of organising work, describe a given behaviour pattern intended to inspire readers, and that are a call to action. The narratives are articulated around what Bormann (1983) terms as ‘fantasy themes’ (dramatised messages), in which various persons (usually members of the company, although they may also be external agents such as consultants, friends, and family members) share a group fantasy through a sequence of acts (the situation supposedly being based on real events) (Jackson, 2001; Fernández Rodríguez, 2007). The reader, as onlooker, ends up projecting himself in one way or another through the actors in the tale and the stories told. Here, the stories are similar both in their subject matter and in how they unfold. Indeed, they all follow the same narrative nexus: the manager-cum-hero has joined a company that is in dire straits but has a gift, a magic wand, or some other management technique that will miraculously transform the firm’s fortunes and lead to a happy ending.

Another element that should be highlighted is the use of characters inspired in the manager-hero model, albeit with some nuances. As Fernández Rodríguez (2007) states, one of the features of managerial books is the way they employ the so-called executive-cum-hero, closely linked with the classical hero. Here, one should note that the classical hero — who has fallen by the wayside in modern literature — was a literary figure whose life only had meaning if it was linked to some great task that was fully-defined and that required unswerving resolution, flawless execution, and utter conviction (as Bajtin, 2003 notes). The hero’s behaviour and acts predestine him for success and to serve as a paragon for lesser mortals — a model that forces the authors of management texts to frame their discourses as dogmatic monologues (Fernández Rodríguez, 2007). If this were not so, the goal could not be obtained: “In the contrary case, failure would bring a moment of ‘guilt and responsibility’ and the aesthetic unity of the hero’s destiny would be shattered. In such event, the hero would be freed from the shackles of Destiny but not from readers’ moral judgement and opprobrium. When the hero is founded on blame and responsibility (...) he ceases to be himself, and the author’s projection of the key elements (...) is lost. In such case, the whole literary edifice comes crashing to the ground” (Bajtin, 2003: 155-156).

Nevertheless, there are some nuances to the hero in these management novels, given that their personalities are leavened with few humanising traits. For example, in *The Goal* we see that the protagonist — Alex Rogo — has family problems and is sometimes tired and confused. Nevertheless, his actions in his personal quest seem to follow a narrow path wending its way through the tale’s ‘message’. In other works, such as *RRelatos HHumanos* [‘Human Tales’, the forced Spanish spelling making reference to ‘HR’ or Human Resources] compiled by Pozo (2016), various authors present diverse pen-pictures of the trials and tribulations facing management in times of crisis. The narrative is liberally sprinkled with rows, funerals, cafés, and tensions designed to stop the reader’s interest flagging. Yet in the end, success wins

the day and the moral of the tale is trotted out on what it takes to be an executive-hero. The variation in the protagonist's behaviour and relation to the established norm is remarkably narrow if we compare it with the unpredictability found in modern literature (Lotman, 1978). Thus the characters in these novels are far removed from modernity and are much closer to the classical form of *exemplum*, or a narrative whose sole purpose is to hold up an example for emulation which, according to Barthes (1990), is a form of gentle persuasion. Boltanski and Chiappello noted that: "Their orientation is not constative, but prescriptive. In the manner of edifying books or manuals of moral instruction, they practise the *exemplum*, select the cases employed according to their demonstrative power - what is to be done as opposed to what is not to be done. - and take from reality only such of its aspects as confirm the orientation to which they wish to give some impetus" (Boltanski and Chiappello, 2007: 58).

CONCLUSIONS

Managerial ideas are highly influential in the business world, which is due in great measure to the extraordinary reach enjoyed by its propagandists — especially business management experts and gurus. Some of them have chosen certain channels to spread their message over the last few decades, one of which is fiction — 'managerial literature' — in the form of novels and fables. In them the reader — a harassed professional more often than not — puts himself in the shoes of a successful (fictional) executive in a quest for The Philosopher's Stone of managerial technique that will transmute his career into gold (or more prosaically, professional and financial success). The construction of these works has a notable precedent in Ayn Rand's novels, the leading author among highly influential business and political leaders defending the struggle of the individual entrepreneur against the State, bureaucracy, and collectivism, generously larded with a mystification of selfish tax avoidance/evasion as a philosophy of life, as set out in *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*.

The works of contemporary management novelists do not have the same aetherial epic quality given that they try to empathise with their readers by throwing in pen-pictures of the characters' emotions (frustrations, losses, family problems). Nevertheless, they share with Rand a manipulative view of the world in which business success is the only goal in sight. In pursuing this Holy Grail, they follow a rigid narration whose closest forerunner is the Mediaeval *exemplum*. Managerial fictions, like other works of 'business literature', are built upon structural contrasts between behaviours. In these novels, a main character sets out the sequence of actions and their alternatives, identifies the 'right' choice (that is, one serving the company's interests and its management style). Great stress is placed on mobilising the manager in order to make his job sound more thrilling. To achieve this identification, a character — typically a company manager (an executive-hero) achieves business success by adopting a given management technique, and whose actions are used for moralising exemplification.

Despite the appearance of a few elements in the narrative that lend a certain realism to the characters (such as their daily concerns, personal relations and the like), the iron rhetoric of personal growth (of a straitjacketed kind) and the human condition ends up bowing to the stereotype. These management novels thus foster a narrow, biased view of the business world in which the characters are mere marionettes despite the authors' attempts to humanise them. In the end, they give way to the same archetypes Rand built of 'rebels with a cause' (which is no other than the pursuit of wealth no matter who gets hurt).

Both distance women from the feminist struggle for gender equality. Thus whichever theme or issue is tackled by the books (equal pay, sexual harassment, learning to be more assertive, and so on); the approach is always individualist and Neo-Liberal in nature. In this respect, it seems there is a translation of the women's corporate business spirit to their role as women. The sub-genre does not stint on the

language of mock-heroism and self-sacrifice common in corporate leadership literature but in this case applies it to the field of ‘family management’.

Examining the results of our analysis, we can conclude that our initial hypothesis is confirmed (restated below for the sake of convenience):

The values and behaviours prescribed for career women and mothers (especially those in senior management posts) reproduce traditional sexist, gender stereotypes, placing such women at a disadvantage compared with their male peers, thus fostering immoral companies in which there is no scope for gender equality.

While the advice tendered to women (who are both senior managers and mothers) is open-ended and leaves it to readers to decide whether they want to perform both roles, the books’ prescriptions are contradic-

tory. This muddled advice leaves women defenceless, thrusting the burden of choice on them in a way that is typical of Neo-Liberal societies. This burden is made all the harder to bear through its intersection with gender.

We can conclude by saying that the feminist struggle is wholly secondary in this literary sub-genre, which turns each woman into a kind of ‘Lone Ranger’ fighting single-handed in big business’ badlands. This kind of struggle is always framed in individual terms, thus depoliticising women, distancing them from demands for equality, and making them even more vulnerable to exploitation. In a nutshell, books in this genre do women a great disservice by frivolously reducing grave social issues to an internal struggle that leads to small conquests for a few lucky (well-placed) individuals but that renounces a collective war waged on gender inequality that would benefit the many.

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