

Escaping Wonderland

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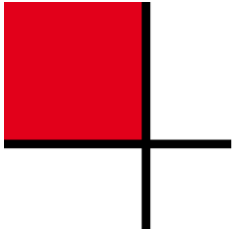
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Escaping Wonderland

Emil Husted, Karolina Mikołajewska-Zajac and Yousra Rahmouni Elidrissi

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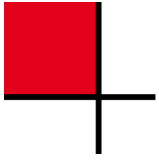


Table of Contents

Editorial

- Escaping Wonderland 1-26
*Emil Husted, Karolina Mikołajewska-Zajac and
Yousra Rahmouni Elidrissi*

Articles

- The absurd workplace: How absurdity is hypernormalized
in contemporary society and organizations 27-60
*Matthijs Bal, Andy Brookes, Dieu Hack-Polay,
Maria Kordowicz and John Mendy*
- Becoming and staying talented: A figurational analysis of
organization, power and control 61-84
Stephen Swailes and John Lever
- Digital consumer activism: Agency and commodification in
the digital economy 85-110
Kim Humphrey, Tim Jordan and Eleftheria Lekakis
- Neoliberalism in a socialist state: Political economy of
higher education in Vietnam 111-147
Khang Lê
- Extitutional theory: Modelling structured social dynamics
beyond institutions 149-190
Primavera de Filippi and Marc Santolini

Commonism and capabilities 191-209
Diego Lanzi

Notes

Refusing busyness 211-217
Stephen Dunne and Michael Pedersen

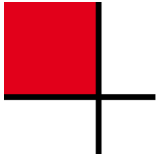
Recycled youths, or, the reproduction of the ecology
of culture 219-238
Thomas Burø

Your data is s**t 239-249
Robert Herian

Reviews

Worshipping work in Sillicon Valley 251-259
Christoffer Bagger

This means war: A review of Maurizio Lazzarato's
treatise *Capital hates everyone* 261-273
Felix Diefenhardt



Escaping Wonderland

Emil Husted, Karolina Mikołajewska-Zajac and
Yousra Rahmouni Eldrissi

Fact fiction

In Lewis Carroll's celebrated 1871 novel, *Through the looking-glass* (TLG), which is the sequel to his beloved *Alice's adventures in Wonderland* (AIW) from 1865, the protagonist Alice encounters the so-called White Queen in a dark and lonely forest. The queen is one of the governors of the 'Looking-glass world'; a world much akin to Wonderland but shaped like a giant chessboard. Both worlds are characterized by profound absurdity. Nothing seems to make sense for Alice who, relying on real-world logic, continuously struggles to comprehend the nonsensical nature of what is unfolding before her eyes. The inhabitants of Wonderland and the Looking-glass world, however, seem absolutely content with the apparent lack of reason. The following exchange between Alice and the queen is telling in this regard:

'Let's consider your age to begin with – how old are you?' [the Queen said]. 'I'm seven and a half, exactly'. 'You need not say "exactly"', the Queen remarked. 'I can believe it without that. Now I'll give *you* something to believe. I'm just one hundred and one, five months and a day'. 'I ca'n't believe *that!*' said Alice. 'Ca'n't you?' the Queen said in a pitying tone. 'Try again: draw a long breath and shut your eyes'. Alice laughed. 'There's no use in trying', she said: 'one ca'n't believe impossible things'. 'I daresay you haven't had much practice', said the Queen. 'When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as much as six impossible things before breakfast'. (TLG: 174)

Diligent students of organization and management are likely to repeat what they learn from textbooks, namely that it is simply impossible to believe impossible things. We are supposed to show *facts* and dispassionate expertise (De Cock and Land, 2006) and venture as far away from *fiction* as possible. But this distinction between fact and fiction splinters, for instance, with the recognition that we dwell in storytelling organizations (Boje, 2008) where the ongoing performance and interpretation of stories glues together individual sensemaking and collective memory, and where we fill in the missing details and re-interpret narratives to stabilize certain story lines and (actively) forget others. Or, if you happen to work at a business school and have not practiced believing impossible things eagerly enough, you may start to think that business schools manufacture a version of reality, in which they represent professionalism and prepare their alumni to lead with a high dose of certainty, while simultaneously carefully avoiding discussing morals (Anteby, 2013).

From Morgan's (1986) *Images of the organization* onward, there has been an outburst of organization and management studies that engage with fiction. De Cock and Land (2006) offer a comprehensive overview, illustrating three modes of engaging with fiction in organization and management scholarship. One mode employs literary criticism to organization theory, encouraging reflexivity about authors' use of literary devices in constructing (persuasive) research accounts. The second uses literary modes of representation to capture organizational knowledge. The third treats fiction as a resource (teaching or research material) to better understand problems of management and organization. Yet these modes, the authors observe, still conceive literature and organization studies as fundamentally separate, with the latter borrowing (or appropriating) methods from other disciplines as it sees fit. Oswick et al. (2002) suggest these approaches still represent orthodoxy and urge us to leave the 'cognitive comfort zone' they produce. Engaging with anomaly, paradox, and irony, they suggest, is a point of departure for more fruitful knowledge generation.

Sensing nonsense

Against the myth of rationality, stability, and efficiency, contemporary organizations are often rather experienced as a site of uncertainty, absurdity, and irrationality. In some instances, organizational members belonging to different ‘interest groups’, from frontline employees to managers and executives, see themselves and others acting according to different forms of rationality. In other instances, individuals experience their professional lives turning ridiculous, with so-called rational decisions leading to irrational actions. In much of the mainstream management literature however, it simply doesn’t make sense according to a rational model of organizations that values order, predictability, and manageability. When instrumental rationality shapes the way we conceptualize and practice organizational activity (Alvesson, 1984), it is easy to dismiss or disregard the ambiguous, paradoxical, stupid, chaotic, and interpret such occurrences as deficiencies, shortcomings, or temporary failures of organizations.

Yet, critiques of the rational model (e.g. Ashforth and Fried, 1988; Kets de Vries, 1980; March, 1996) have long attempted to question and redefine how we (make) sense (of) the nonsensical. Shedding light on this so called ‘shadow side’ (Nord and Jermier, 1994: 398), scholars have advanced a more complex understanding of organizations: one where systems are designed by ‘bounded rationality’ (Simon, 1957), decisions are also informed by the ‘emotionality of rationality’ (Mumby and Putnam, 1992), and where ‘intentions and actions’ are ‘loosely coupled’ (Weick, 1976) in the everyday life of organizations. Challenging the orthodox scientific logic of thinking organizations in our field, McCabe (2016) invites us to draw on Carroll’s (1865) novel *Alice’s adventures in Wonderland* in order to make sense of the other phenomena reflecting the complexity of organizations.

The story of the young Alice starts when she falls down a rabbit hole into a fantasy world full of illogical events. It is in this underground world that she encounters and experiences the apparently nonsensical dimensions of life after she decides to chase the rabbit. Undergoing changes in size and shape, finding herself surrounded by irrational and sometimes threatening characters, her own sense of identity becomes threatened, as exemplified in her meeting with the Caterpillar who asks ‘Who are you?’:

'I – I hardly know, sir, just at present – at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.' 'What do you mean by that?' said the Caterpillar sternly. 'Explain yourself!' 'I can't explain myself, I'm afraid, sir' said Alice, 'because I'm not myself, you see.' (AIW: 41)

Driven by confusion, surprise, and a sense of curiosity, her journey is one of losing certainties and opening herself up to the unfolding of increasingly absurd events. Ultimately, Wonderland turns out dystopian (Roelofs, 2015) and while Alice's desire to live in a world that make sense grows, readers are confronted with 'the terrifying vision of the void that underlies the comfortable structures of the rational world' (Kelly, 2011: 26).

In his sequel, *Through the looking-glass*, Carroll (1871) situates Alice in another fantastical world, which she enters by climbing on the other side of a mirror's reflection. There she finds everything is reversed and logic is turned upside down: one needs to run in order to remain stationary, and it is only by walking away from something that one moves towards it; flowers can speak, and chess pieces have come to life. When she meets the Red Queen, Alice is told that the entire countryside is laid out in squares, like a gigantic chessboard:

'When you say hill', the Queen interrupted, 'I could show you hills, in comparison with which you'd call that a valley'. 'No, I shouldn't', said Alice, surprised into contradicting her at last: 'a hill *ca'n't* be a valley, you know. That would be nonsense'. The Red Queen shook her head. 'You may call it "nonsense" if you like, she said, 'but *I've* heard nonsense, compared with which that would be as sensible as a dictionary'. (TLG: 140)

The change in perception of the world around her calls into question 'the essence' of time and space (Kelly, 2011: 37) – as much as longitude and latitude, size, and growth – considered as structural features crucial for 'rational' sensemaking. It also brings to the forefront the contradictory dimensions resulting from this change: how can a hill ever be (called) a valley? Nonsense.

In McCabe's (2016) essay, the Wonderland metaphor opens avenues for making sense of the nonsensical. It does so by first acknowledging the contradictory – but also ridiculous, irrational, disordered, unpredictable, uncertain, unexpected, stupid, silly – as constitutive dimensions of organizational life. In other words, it serves to surface those phenomena,

which speak to the ‘strangeness’ of organizations while simultaneously questioning our rational understanding of it. Rather than trying to manage or escape those, we are invited to appreciate the limits of our knowledge of the ‘worlds’ we aim to investigate, to explore the uncertainties, ambiguities, and misunderstandings that shape these, as well the non-linear temporality and complex and deep structures that affect their becoming. In recent years, both novels have become popular among organizational scholars and practitioners concerned with strategic and cultural change (e.g., Forbes, 2013), having been used as a lens to better understand failures in processes of change (e.g., Heracleous and Bartunek, 2021).

With this editorial, we wish to reconnect with the debate on fiction and organization studies, recognizing that the call for leaving the ‘cognitive comfort zone’ now extends beyond the suggested distinction between paradox or irony. We wish to draw the attention to the entire *Wonderland* of absurdity, unpredictability, irrationality, contradictions, confusion, and ambiguity that we are all inextricably caught-up in but nonetheless trying hard to escape in contemporary society and organizations. The contributions to this issue all speak to various facets of Wonderland. Here, we group them into two sections. The first is called ‘Knowing Wonderland’ and contains contributions that engage with the ‘hypernormalization’ of absurdity in and around organizations. The second section is called ‘Escaping Wonderland’ and contains contributions that theorize the various strategies of resisting absurdity in contemporary society. Before we introduce the contributions, however, we wish to delve into Wonderland as a gateway into sensing nonsense.

The contributions, part 1: Knowing Wonderland

Although only one contribution in this open issue deals explicitly with absurdity, they all somehow concern aspects of contemporary (work)life that could be considered absurd in one way or another. In each case, we relate the contributions to central episodes in Lewis Carroll’s novels *Alice’s adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the looking-glass*. We begin by outlining and discussing those contributions that concern the foundations of work in ‘Wonderland’ and then move on to those contributions that address the

question of how to resist the absurdity of contemporary society in all its shapes and colors.

Working through absurdity

One of the most beloved characters in Wonderland is the Hatter (often referred to as the 'Mad' Hatter). Alice first encounters him when she decides to visit the so-called March Hare in his fur-covered house with ear-shaped chimneys. In front of the house, beneath a tree, the March Hare is having tea at a large table with a dormouse and the Hatter. While the dormouse is fast asleep at the table, the Hatter is very much awake but initially not particularly welcoming toward Alice. The Hatter and the March Hare spontaneously cry 'no room!' as Alice approaches the table, although plenty of seats are empty. The reader later learns that the reason for this somewhat hostile outburst is that the tea party must constantly move around the table, as they never have time to clean the dishes, since it is always teatime in Wonderland. Time is apparently stuck at 6 pm, which leaves the Hatter and the March Hare with little choice but to always have tea. Eventually, Alice finds a seat in an armchair at the end of the table. This leads the March Hare to offer Alice some wine, but since there is no wine on the table, she must do without. At this point, the Hatter enters the conversation:

'Your hair wants cutting', said the Hatter. He had been looking at Alice for some time with great curiosity, and this was his first speech. 'You should learn not to make personal remarks', Alice said with some severity: 'it's very rude'. The Hatter opened his eyes very wide on hearing this; but all he said was 'Why is a raven like a writing-desk?' 'Come, we shall have some fun now!' thought Alice. 'I'm glad they've begun asking riddles – I believe I can guess that', she added aloud. (...) 'Have you guessed the riddle yet?' the Hatter said, turning to Alice again. 'No, I give up', Alice replied. 'What's the answer?' 'I haven't the slightest idea', said the Hatter. 'Nor I', said the March Hare. Alice sighed wearily. 'I think you might do something better with the time', she said, 'than wasting it in asking riddles that have no answers'. 'If you knew Time as well as I do', said the Hatter, 'you wouldn't talk about wasting it. It's *him*'. 'I don't know what you mean', said Alice. 'Of course you don't!' the Hatter said, tossing his head contemptuously. 'I dare say you never even spoke to Time!' (AIW: 60-63)

Since the publication of *Alice's adventures in Wonderland*, much has been made of this nonsensical riddle. It has even appeared in *ephemera* once, with Mark de Rond (2018) using the riddle to illustrate his own confused reading of

Damien O'Doherty's (2017) *Reconstructing organization*. While many observers have suggested possible solutions to the riddle – 'the higher the fewer, of course!' – it was apparently never intended to have an answer (Haughton, 1998). As such, the Hatter has in many ways become the symbol of Wonderland's absurdity, so much so that he appears as the only character (portrayed by Johnny Depp) on the cover of Tim Burton's 2010 cinematic remake of the story. In everyday language, absurdity is usually understood as 'the quality of being ridiculous or wildly unreasonable' (Oxford Languages, 2023), but it is usually given a more complex meaning in academic writing. For instance, for Camus (1942: 6), absurdity represents the fact that life has no higher purpose and that we therefore constantly must deal with the 'absence of any profound reason for living'. As opposed to this existentialist conception, Dogherty (1994) defines absurdity as something that contradicts formal logic, challenges common sense as well as commonly held values, and is linked to foolishness. Similarly, Loacker and Peters (2015: 625) understand the absurd as 'not solely about lack of meaning and order, but about *other* orders and logics of ordering'.

Framing absurdity as concerned with 'otherness' allows us to appreciate the value of Carroll's novels, for they are precisely not meaningless, although they clearly are both foolish and deprived of common sense. They allow us to enter a foreign world where things gradually become 'curiouser and curiouser', as Alice puts it, in order to gain enough critical distance to view our own world in a new light. For instance, when joining the supposedly 'mad' tea party, Alice is forced to challenge her own reasoning about temporality. In Wonderland, *Time* is a living being; that is, someone to be recognized and respected. So, when the Hatter asks Alice if she knows time, and she replies that she knows how to 'beat time' at her music lessons, the Hatter responds: 'Ah, that accounts for it (...) he won't stand beating. Now, if you only kept on good terms with him, he'd do almost anything you liked with the clock' (AIW: 63). Unlike our world of almost rhythmic optimization, Time in Wonderland is not something to be beaten, nor something that obediently follows a predetermined beat. Time is something – or, rather, someone – who requires attention and has his own idiosyncratic rhythm. Thinking about temporality in this way forces us to contemplate our own attitude toward time and

critically assess our constant attempt to ‘beat it’ at work as well as in life in general¹.

The short research note by Dunne and Pedersen called ‘Refusing busyness’ concerns this exact issue. Taking their cue from recent statements by self-proclaimed ‘lean’ entrepreneurs such as Elon Musk and Micha Kaufman, who publicly celebrate overwork and optimization, the authors discuss the notion of ‘busyness’ as a central aspect of contemporary worklives, which is clearly systemic but frequently framed as individual. Although many skilled workers today are caught in a career ‘hamster wheel’ that forces them to always improve their resumés in order to stay competitive at the global job market, and while most members of the precariat have little choice but to toil for a penny at two or even three jobs at a time, most people nonetheless seem to believe that the choice to remain in a constant state of busyness is actually theirs to make. This leads the authors to conclude that collective resistance against busyness (as seen in experiments with four-day work weeks) represents an unlikely scenario, since it ‘is both a possibility which the professional worker will not pursue and a luxury which the precarious worker cannot afford’ (Dunne and Pedersen, 2023: 221).

Similar concerns about the surreal (and high-paced) nature of contemporary worklives figure prominently in the article by Bal, Brookes, Hack-Polay, Kordowicz, and Mendy, entitled ‘The absurd workplace: How absurdity is hypernormalized in contemporary society and organizations’. Drawing on Nagel (1971) in particular, the authors characterize organizational practices as absurd when they appear illogical and inappropriate, and when there is a clear discrepancy between official values and real-life practices. Contemporary organizations are replete with such discrepancies. One example, highlighted by the authors, is university teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Here, many teachers were forced to continue on-campus teaching, despite warnings from health authorities, thereby exposing themselves and the students to the risk of contamination. Ironically, many

¹ There are, obviously, two meanings to the notion of ‘beating time’. While one represents the act of finishing something quickly, the other signifies the ability to keep a rhythm. In the novel, Carroll uses this equivocation intentionally by making a reference to Alice’s music lessons.

lessons, supervision sessions, and exams were later spontaneously converted to online formats because either teachers or students contracted the virus during classroom teaching, which effectively prevented teachers from preparing educational content that was fit for online interactions. In this example, absurdity resides in the fact that the solution to the problems posed by the pandemic ended up contradicting both the ambition of protecting the health of students as well as teachers *and* the goal of providing the best possible learning experiences.

The authors couple their interest in absurdity with the concept of ‘hypernormalization’, in order to understand how illogical and inconsistent practices have become a part of everyday life in many contemporary organizations (and in society as a whole), and how ‘the absurd is taken for granted, perpetuated, and projected upon people as the norm’ (Bal et al., 2023: 37). According to the authors, hypernormalization works because it fulfills a number of crucial functions for people in a particular social space. For instance, it creates stability and predictability in the face of otherwise stultifying complexity, and it helps maintain the fantasy of rational organization regardless of the apparent lack of consistent and meaningful rationales. Hence, the concept of hypernormalization allows the authors to explain why members of contemporary organizations provide so relatively little resistance toward genuinely absurd practices. Recalling the note by Dunne and Pedersen, one might argue that busyness has been hypernormalized in contemporary society despite its absurd and inconsistent logic of overwork and superficiality.

As seen in the example above, one type of workplace that is frequently charged with absurdity, and where absurd practices have become thoroughly normalized, is the university. In fact, several scholars have written about the ‘McUniversity’ and its instrumental (il)logic of standardization (e.g., Parker and Jay, 1995), and others have compared management education to the ‘theater of the absurd’ (Starkey et al., 2019). While most of these studies have focused exclusively on the Western world, the article ‘Neoliberalism in a socialist state: Political economy of higher education in Vietnam’ by Lê moves that debate to post-socialist Asia. Building on first-hand experience as well as numerous reports on university teaching in Vietnam, Lê discusses the neoliberalization and Englishization of the Vietnamese university system and

its impact on the quality of education and student well-being. One of the paper's main claims is that the neoliberal paradigm in higher education, with its constant focus on transforming students into human capital for corporations, matches and even accentuates the Confucian undercurrents of Vietnamese society in a way that effectively undermines the egalitarian principles of the official socialist ideology. This, Lê argues, creates a profound discrepancy between the official values and the real-life practices of the university system that can easily be interpreted as absurd in Bal and colleagues' sense of the term. Nonetheless, 'resistance is rare', as Lê (2023: 139) discouragingly concludes. Since people have become socialized into the current system and lack knowledge of its fundamental dynamics, and because the problematic aspects of neoliberalism are masked by the state's official commitment to socialist ideology, reforms are highly unlikely. This, once again, testifies to the hypernormalized character of absurdity in different corners of contemporary society.

Another explanation for how potentially absurd social structures are created and upheld is offered by De Filippi and Santolini in their article 'Extitutional theory: Modeling structured social dynamics beyond institutions'. The main purpose of the article is to direct scholarly attention to those ephemeral and interpersonal relationships that somehow contradict established institutions. While the authors understand *institutions* as declarative and explicit codes of conduct, *extitutions* are conceived as implicit and emergent rules for how to behave in a particular context. Whereas the former is based on rules and roles (e.g., legal statutes and professional contracts), the latter is based on identities and relationships. An example of an extitution, highlighted by the authors, might be the behavioral patterns that emerge from a CEO's secret and perhaps inappropriate relationship with a subordinate. Such patterns, the authors claim, govern life in and around organizations as much as proper institutional arrangements. On the one hand, extitutions are responsible for the gradual emergence of problematic or even absurd institutions, but they could also be seen as pockets of freedom where resistance toward absurdity can be enacted in the absence of codified rules and norms.

In Wonderland, everything seems conditioned exclusively by extitutions. It is virtually impossible for Alice to familiarize herself with the rules and norms that govern life at the end of the rabbit hole: 'How queer everything is to-day',

as she notes (AIW: 17). Moreover, the events that unfold appear to be almost exclusively determined by the whims of the curious characters that inhabit Wonderland. The following section departs from one such instance, in which the whims of an otherwise benign monarch challenges Alice's (and the readers) commonsensical understanding of employment and remuneration.

The promise of jam

In *Through the looking-glass*, Alice unexpectedly encounters the White Queen on her way through a dark forest. Not to be confused with the Red Queen (or the ill-tempered Queen of Hearts who rules Wonderland), the White Queen appears confused and looks somewhat untidy (this may have something to do with the fact that she is living backwards). Her shawl keeps falling off, despite being pinned both 'here' and 'there', and her hair is so tremendously tousled that a hairbrush has become entangled in it. Alice picks up the shawl, pins it down, and helps the Queen release the brush from her uncombed hair. In an attempt to provide a long-term solution for the disoriented majesty, Alice suggests that the White Queen gets her own personal 'lady's-maid'. Much to her surprise, the White Queen finds Alice a promising candidate:

'I'm sure I'll take *you* with pleasure! The Queen said. 'Twopence a week, and jam every other day'. Alice couldn't help laughing, as she said 'I don't want you to hire *me* – and I don't care for jam'. 'It's very good jam', the Queen said. 'Well, I don't want any *to-day*, at any rate'. 'You couldn't have it if you *did* want it', the Queen said. 'The rule is, jam to-morrow and jam yesterday – but never jam *to-day*'. 'It *must* come sometimes to "jam to-day"', Alice objected. 'No, it ca'n't', said the Queen. 'It's jam every *other* day: to-day isn't any *other* day, you know'. (TLG: 171)

This is one of the more well-known passages from Carroll's books, and the phrases 'never jam today' or simply 'jam tomorrow' have even become sayings of their own, often referring to promises that are never fulfilled. Mark White (2010) interprets the passage as a metaphor for situations where the whole appears to be more valuable than the sum of its parts. For instance, the individual members of a rock band may seem fairly ordinary on their own, but when they join forces on stage, they transform into something extraordinary. Similarly, people may describe their worklives as meaningful and stimulating on the whole but find each individual workday both dull and pointless. In other words, one might look back on previous experiences or forward on

future opportunities and find ‘jam’ in both situations, but still live through each individual workday in a state of perpetual jamlessness.

These two meanings of ‘never jam today’ are both reflected in the article by Swailes and Lever, entitled ‘Becoming and staying talented: A figurational analysis of organization, power and control’, although the authors focus predominantly on the former. The article develops a framework for understanding the type of power and (self)management that exists within so-called ‘talent pools’ (i.e., groups of employees that management views as particularly promising). Many contemporary businesses work actively to identify and isolate talents that may, in time, become the stars of the enterprise: they scout for potential, supervise, monitor, promote, evaluate, and socialize promising candidates into a mode of being that is deemed consistent with the interests of the corporation. Talent management programs are, however, not restricted to the private sector. Public sector organizations such as universities are equally preoccupied with identifying employees that appear capable of outperforming their colleagues according to a number of vaguely defined KPIs. This prevalent practice clearly has a disciplining effect on those aspiring to become part of the talent pool as well as the selected few on the inside. As the authors note: ‘For the talented, this comes at a price – and the price is the constant need to perform and be observed’ (Swailes and Lever, 2023: 74).

While some employees arguably benefit from being part of talent programs, the practice of separating the ‘wheat from the chaff’ is just as much a strategy that allows management to control their workers by ‘playing them off against each other’ (ibid: 76), thereby ensuring that everyone maintains a high level of performance by means of fierce self-discipline. There may not be any ‘jam today’ for those aspiring to become part of the talent programs, but the promise of ‘jam tomorrow’ is clearly present. Similarly, although there were ‘jam yesterday’ for those already included in the programs – and despite the fact that the whole talent management idea is predicated on ‘jam tomorrow’ – the prospect of ‘jam today’ remains equally bleak for those in the pool. Nonetheless, if one were to ask employees who have been part of organizations that engage with talent management programs (the editors of this issue included), a considerable part would probably say that there was plenty of jam on the whole.

In some ways, the note by Burø called ‘Recycled youths, or, the reproduction of ecology of culture’ likewise tackles issues pertaining to the cultivation of talent. In the note, Burø follows a young person called MJ who has been doing cultural work in Denmark for more than 10 years. Burø’s main claim is that, during those 10 years, MJ has been ‘groomed’ into becoming a cultural laborer through numerous short-term stints in various cultural organizations (festivals, theaters, community centers, publishing houses, etc.). Although the notion of ‘grooming’ is usually associated with (sexual) abuse, Burø uses it to conceptualize the ways in which MJ has been ‘spotted, motivated, recruited, engaged, and integrated into the strategic efforts of culture organizations’ (Burø, 2023: 226), through a process that is surprisingly similar to the type of talent management schemes that Swailes and Lever analyze in their article. Having been ‘recycled’ and ‘circulated’ by cultural organizations, MJ now knows how to ‘do culture’, despite having left the cultural industry to study political science. In some ways, being groomed has taught MJ a valuable craft, and she has thus become a valuable (human) resource, but she has also been exploited and exposed to unacceptably precarious working conditions. As such, MJ’s story can also be interpreted as a ‘never jam today’ experience, and Burø therefore calls for more critical reflexivity on the part of both culture professionals and people like MJ who are part of the culture precariat. While the former should acknowledge the power they wield and teach young culture laborers the rules of the game (both institutions and extitutions), the latter should organize collectively and demand more humane – and perhaps less absurd – working conditions.

Being socialized into a particular mode of being – whether a ‘talented’ or ‘cultured’ or any other mode of being – requires knowledge; that is, knowledge of who you are and who you are *not*. Having arrived in Wonderland, Alice is forced to confront this very issue after eating a magic cake (with the words ‘EAT ME!’ written on it), which makes some parts of her body grow disproportionately. This makes Alice feel that she no longer knows herself, and she begins to wonder if she has changed overnight:

‘Let me think: *was* I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I’m not the same, the next question is “Who in the world am I?” Ah, *that’s* the great puzzle’. (AIW: 17)

Alice later finds out that she is, in fact, herself (and not her friend Mable), but it requires much deliberation on her part to reach that conclusion in the absence of meaningful information (e.g., recognizing her own body). In a sense, this part of Alice's adventures underground speaks to the research note by Herian called 'Your data is s**t'.

What data to use and to discard, what data to buy and sell?, Herian asks. In digital capitalism, data has become a 'raw material', an asset class, and this vision excludes messiness (or simply: 'shit') – rather, the dominant narratives tend to reinforce an incontestable value of well-organized data to organizations. Meanwhile, he engages with 'shit data': the petabytes of digital excrement that our actions generate on a daily basis, which is kept for its *potential* value. But that potential seems to largely escape human cognitive abilities and limited work hours; escape the corporate C-suites, which have failed to mine them to see the avenues of novel profits for the shareholders; escape the medical scientists who are not using the massive streams of data from wearables to develop new drugs or public health advice, and so on. His data gloom is a form of knowing the digital capitalism's Wonderland: not so different from the traditional capitalism, in which run-away consumption generates immeasurable piles of garbage, digital excrement exacerbates the consumption of labor, energy, and rare-earth minerals, and brings us ever closer to climate catastrophe.

The contributions described above all articulate how the absurdity of our organized lives is reproduced, albeit in ever shifting forms, which may make us believe that we are in control, or that we are moving (forward or upward and onward) while actually drowning. Alice's adventures are marked by several (narrow) escapes, and it is some of these escape tactics that we turn to now.

The contributions, part 2: Escaping Wonderland

Several of the contributions to this open issue address questions of resistance. They do so by probing how actors in various organizations and industries challenge the powers that be and escape their often-absurd modes of operation. Alice also engages in different forms of resistance when the

absurdity of Wonderland becomes too overwhelming or when its rulers become too unreasonable. In fact, the story of Alice's adventures in Wonderland may help us identify a number of archetypical 'lines of flight' or 'escape tactics' that can be used in contemporary organizations to resist nonsensical dynamics and unreasonable conditions². We will label these tactics: *Refusal*, *protest*, and *commoning*. Coincidentally (or not!), all three tactics can likewise be found in contributions to the present issue. Juxtaposing the fictional narrative of Alice with real-life cases may help us observe things that we might not otherwise see and throw new light on key aspects of our own world as well as Wonderland.

Refusal: I'm quite content to stay here

In *Through the looking-glass*, Alice encounters the Red Queen in a garden of anthropomorphic flowers. Unlike her counterpart (the confused but benign White Queen) the Red Queen is cool, calm, and collected. She even takes the time to carefully explain to Alice the rules of the chess game that they are all playing, especially in relation to the concept of 'promotion'; that is, the move where a player is allowed to replace a pawn (such as Alice) with a queen. Regardless of the fact that Alice is actually on the *White Queen's* team, the *Red Queen* has enough confidence to walk her through the moves that are required to rise from pawn to queen. The task for Alice is to arrive at the 'Eighth Square', but to get there, she has to move inconceivably fast. Seeing that Alice is merely a child and therefore not capable of running fast enough, the Red Queen decides to escort her some of the way, and they therefore start to run hand in hand:

Alice never could quite make out, in thinking it over afterwards, how it was that they began: all she remembers is that they were running hand in hand, and that the Queen went so fast that it was all she could do to keep up with her: and still the Queen kept crying 'Faster! Faster!', but Alice felt she *could not* go fast, though she had no breath left to say so. (...). 'Now! Now!' cried the Queen. 'Faster! Faster!' And they went so fast that at last they seemed to skim through the air, hardly touching the ground with their feet, till suddenly, just as Alice was getting quite exhausted, they stopped, and she found herself sitting on the

² Gilles Deleuze (1990), the coiner of the term 'lines of flight', actually offered his own interpretation of Carroll's work, in which he argues that the 'sense' of the real world always haunts the 'nonsense' of Wonderland.

ground breathless and giddy. The Queen propped her up against a tree, and said kindly: 'You may rest a little now'. Alice looked around her in great surprise. 'Why, I do believe we've been under this tree the whole time! Everything's just as it was!' 'Of course it is', said the Queen. 'What would you have it?' 'Well, in *our* country', said Alice, still panting a little, 'you'd generally get to somewhere else – if you ran very fast for a long time as we've been doing'. 'A slow sort of country!' said the Queen. 'Now, *here*, you see, it takes all the running *you* can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!' 'I'd rather not try, please!' said Alice. 'I'm quite content to stay here – only I *am* so hot and thirsty'. (TLG: 141-143)

There are several instances in Carroll's two books where Alice works up the courage to simply refuse. It usually happens when she is either too exhausted to tag along or confronted with circumstances that are too unreasonable to handle. In the example above, she refuses to keep running (in order to get nowhere!), but during the Hatter's tea party, she likewise refuses to take part in the apparent nonsense and rudeness of that particular event. As an escape tactic, Alice typically employs 'refusal' in the first part of both *Alice's adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the looking-glass*. If the novels are interpreted as coming-of-age narratives, as they frequently are (e.g., Empson, 1935), refusal seems to be understood by Carroll as a slightly immature way of resisting the ways of the world, compared to some of the other tactics that we will consider here. Refusal, for Carroll, is about resignation and frustration. It is an active choice, but one that really does not change anything: The Red Queen preserves her authority, the Hatter maintains his madness, and Alice remains a pawn in the grand chess game that is Life itself.

Perhaps this is why Dunne and Pedersen have little faith in the ability of ordinary people to 'refuse busyness'. As they say, professional workers have little interest in challenging the dominant view of busyness as a virtue, and members of the precariat simply cannot afford to do so. In fact, the incident where Alice and the Red Queen run hand in hand without getting anywhere has an uncanny resemblance with contemporary worklife. Many people today feel precisely like Alice: They chase the Promised Land by constantly trying to be 'doers' who get things done at a surreal pace, but they never seem to reach their final destination. This may lead some to refuse (e.g., through quiet quitting), but it seems unlikely that such acts of refusal will seriously improve the current state of affairs for members of the working class. Dunne and

Pedersen, as well as Burø, argue that changing things for the better will require more active modes of resistance.

Protest: I'll shake you into a kitten

As Alice grows, mentally as well as physically (recall that the magic cake makes her body grow disproportionately), she starts to get a hold of things in Wonderland. Not only does she familiarize herself with the institutions – and extitutions – of life underground, she also learns how to object to things that in her view are unreasonable or unfair. For instance, toward the end of *Alice's adventures in Wonderland*, she openly challenges the Queen of Hearts' authority during a game of croquet. The game is played with an ever-changing set of rules and, instead of mallets and balls, participants use live flamingos and hedgehogs. Moreover, the queen's soldiers assume the role of arches that conveniently move in directions that are favorable to the feisty monarch, who spontaneously shouts 'off with his head' or 'off with her head' whenever the other participants behave in ways that displeases her (which is approximately once in a minute). Alice finds the game 'provoking' and 'very difficult', and she begins to feel uneasy about the whole situation (AIW: 74). In the end, the Queen decides to execute the so-called Cheshire-Cat, even though only the cat's head (and occasionally only his smile) is visible. Alice objects to this type of unfair treatment by claiming that the cat belongs to the so-called Duchess of Wonderland, and that it would be reasonable to consult her before beheading the poor cat.

However, the most remarkable display of protest occurs at the very end of *Through the looking-glass*. At this point, Alice has finally been promoted from pawn to queen, and she finds herself at a fancy dinner table with a large gathering of characters. The Red Queen and the White Queen are present, and they both start out by correcting her dining manners, which causes some frustration in Alice. The Queens then decide to toast Alice, who is sitting at the head of the table, and Alice stands up to thank the guests. Suddenly, everything erupts into chaos: Candles rise to the ceiling, bottles begin to fly (using plates as wings and forks as legs), and the White Queen falls into the soup-tureen. The sudden chaos triggers Alice to finally take matters into own hands:

‘I ca’n’t stand this any longer!’ she cried, as she jumped up and seized the tablecloth with both hands: one good pull, and plates, dishes, guests, and candles came crashing down together in a heap on the floor. ‘And as for *you*’, she went on, turning fiercely upon the Red Queen, whom she considered as the cause of all the mischief – but the Queen was no longer at her side – she had suddenly dwindled down to the size of a little doll, and was now on the table, merrily running round and round after her own shawl, which was trailing behind her. At any other time, Alice would have felt surprised at this, but she was far too much excited to be surprised at anything *now*. ‘As for *you*’, she repeated, catching hold of the little creature in the very act of jumping over a bottle which had just lighted upon the table, ‘I’ll shake you into a kitten, that I will’ (TLG: 233-234).

This is the moment where Alice wakes up from her dream and discovers that the Red Queen is actually her own kitten Kitty, and that the White Queen is her other kitten Snowdrop. Some observers have interpreted this final scene as representing Alice’s sexual awakening (think of the erecting candles). This may be an over-interpretation, but the episode is at least easily understood as a moment of maturation; that is, a point where Alice stops reacting to the absurdity of her surroundings and starts molding it in her own vision. Instead of being corrected all the time (most notable by the two Queens), she now assumes a position of authority herself and corrects the incumbents of Wonderland for being absolutely absurd.

The contribution by Humphery, Jordan, and Lekakis is likewise concerned with protest as an escape tactic. More specifically, they trace what happens when consumer activism moves to the digital realm. The authors investigate digitally-mediated consumer agency through the lens of three types of activist campaigns. They unveil how different forms of online consumer activism rely on the mainstream digital economy. For instance, this includes the marketing know-how in managing them, the publicly available tools and technological expertise, which allows consumers to identify the brands that should be avoided (in that case: Trump-related companies), and the mobilization of consumers by the biggest platforms themselves. In contrast, so-called ‘#delete storms’ such as *#deleteuber* are reactive to highly-publicized events and decentralized. Both types rely on and further fuel the use of social media, the authors note. From a political economy perspective, the latter seem to work like connected vessels: whatever Uber loses, Twitter (now X) gains over the course of these ‘storm’ events. A third scenario is based on ‘buycotts’, or

endorsing the purchase of particular products or services, which has resulted in advocating for alternative spaces of provisioning such as farmers' markets. Like the two other scenarios, boycotts rely on the notion of the individual consumer's power. And they are also inescapably entangled in the digital economy at large – for instance, through the use of ethical consumption apps, which fuel novel, commodifiable consumer data. Among the different facets of consumer agency that these cases illustrate, it becomes apparent that consumers cannot escape the realms of mainstream digital economy, driven primarily by profit concerns, rather than other ethical norms and social goals, which they are striving to support.

Present day consumers easily compare to Alice. Both inhabit a world far too complex to fully comprehend and both are, consequently, forced to respond passively to the often-absurd dictates of the powers that be (e.g., unrestrained monarchs or corporate interests). But wisdom is power, as the saying goes. Once Alice starts to understand the (il)logic of Wonderland, she works up the confidence to challenge and eventually rebel against the establishment, shaking the story's main antagonist 'into a kitten'. Similarly, consumers are incapable of resisting unethical corporate conduct, unless they are provided with the tools and knowledge to engage in meaningful political activism. However, with serious political engagement comes the risk of cooptation (Dahlman et al., 2022). While Alice ends up as a monarch herself, the consumers in Humphrey and colleagues' article are forced to rely on privately-owned technological platforms to raise awareness, coordinate events, and mobilize support. As Humphrey et al. (2023: 94) note: 'What might digitally aid a consumer to take effective choices in supporting, for example, living wages for laborers, will at the same time generate information valuable to data brokers and digital platforms dedicated to private profit'. This observation points to a serious problem for contemporary activists, and it leads us straight to the final escape tactic.

Commoning: You're nothing but a pack of cards

As mentioned, Carroll's two novels have been interpreted in multiple ways: as a coming-of-age story, as a tale of sexual maturation, as a feminist critique of patriarchy, and as an expression of pure nonsense. One of the rarer interpretations focuses on Alice as an anti-capitalist; or, rather, as someone

who learns how to be an anti-capitalist in the nineteenth century (to paraphrase a well-known book by Erik Olin Wright). This particular interpretation is typically associated with Nancy Armstrong's (1990) essay 'The occidental Alice', in which she argues that a central aspect of Alice's journey from childhood to adolescence concerns her ability to discipline her own desire, including her desire for commodities. The very first scene of *Alice's adventures in Wonderland* features our protagonist sitting on a riverbank next to her older sister (who is reading a book 'without pictures or conversations') while observing a white rabbit with pink eyes running past her (AIW: 9). The rabbit is apparently late for an appointment and therefore pulls 'a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket' and looks at it (this part is italicized by Carroll to emphasize the weird but nonetheless compelling nature of the observation). This brings Alice to her feet – 'burning with curiosity' – and she begins to chase the rabbit down the rabbit hole, which famously leads her to Wonderland. Armstrong interprets Alice's reaction as an expression of the child-like fascination with all things new and unattainable, which essentially is what drives the process of commodification in late capitalism (see also Zizek, 1989). As Tarr (2018: 26) notes: 'The commodity, the fuel of capitalism's runaway train, is as much a fantasy as the Bandersnatch and the Jabberwocky'³.

However, as Alice matures, she learns how to temper her own fantasmatic attraction to the curious creatures of Wonderland. Not only does she learn how to protest their unreasonable and unjust rationales, as we saw above, she also understands how to question their sublime character. The perhaps best example of this occurs in the final chapter of *Alice's adventures in Wonderland*. The chapter centers on a grotesque legal trial, at which the Knave of Hearts is accused of stealing the Queen of Hearts' tarts. As the trial proceeds, Alice is constantly provoked by the meaninglessness of the event: the judge (the King of Hearts) is wildly unreasonable, the Queen of Hearts constantly interferes with the proceedings, the jurors seem unable to remember anything at all, and witnesses (e.g., the Mad Hatter) continuously prove utterly incapable of providing any kind of clarity as to what happened to the tarts. Eventually, the White Rabbit (who acts as a courtroom clerk) calls the final witness, which

³ The Bandersnatch and the Jabberwocky are both creatures in the 'Looking-glass world'.

happens to be Alice. In a matter of minutes, Alice grows to enormous size and rises to the occasion.

At this moment the King, who had been for some time busily writing in his note-book, cackled out ‘Silence!’ and read out from his book, ‘Rule Forty-two. *All persons more than a mile high to leave the court.*’ Everybody looked at Alice. ‘I’m not a mile high’, said Alice. ‘You are’, said the King. ‘Nearly two miles high’, added the Queen. ‘Well, I sha’n’t go, at any rate’, said Alice: ‘besides, that’s not a regular rule: you invented it just now’. ‘It’s the oldest rule in the book’, said the King. ‘Then it ought to be Number One’, said Alice. The King turned pale, and shut his note-book hastily. (AIW: 106)

‘Let the jury consider their verdict’, the King said, for about the twentieth time that day. ‘No, no!’ said the Queen. ‘Sentence first – verdict afterwards.’ ‘Stuff and nonsense!’ said Alice loudly. ‘The idea of having the sentence first!’ ‘Hold your tongue!’ said the Queen, turning purple. ‘I won’t!’ said Alice. ‘Off with her head!’ the Queen shouted at the top of her voice. Nobody moved. ‘Who cares for you?’ said Alice (she had grown to her full size by this time). ‘You’re nothing but a pack of cards!’ At this the whole pack rose up into the air, and came flying down upon her: she gave a little scream, half of fright and half of anger, and tried to beat them off, and found herself lying on the bank, with her head in the lap of her sister, who was gently brushing away some dead leaves that had fluttered down from the trees upon her face. ‘Wake up, Alice dear!’ said her sister; ‘Why, what a long sleep you’ve had!’ (AIW: 107-108)

This final scene is easily interpreted as a representation of Alice waking up to the new reality of adolescence, in which things that once seemed magical now appear as they truly are: nothing but a pack of cards. As mentioned, *Through the looking-glass* ends in a similar fashion, with Alice shaking the Red Queen into its true shape (a kitten). Hence, it seems that, for Carroll, adolescence (or, at least adulthood) is associated with a loss of innocence and an elimination of the enchantment of the world. However, the episode can also be interpreted as containing an anti-capitalist kernel. At the trial, Alice learns how to question the ‘reification’ of things; that is, she learns to appreciate things for what they truly are and how they are made (as products of human labor), instead of seeing them as commodities that in and of themselves contain a magical ability to satisfy our deepest desires. As Tarr (2018: 36) observes: ‘Wonderland features several fascinating performances of reification, in which social relationships are defined by the interaction between things, with the result that subjects are objectified and objects acquire human properties’.

Eventually, however, Alice reclaims her agency vis-à-vis the anthropomorphic objects of Wonderland. She does so by penetrating the world's fantasmatic superstructure and calling things by their right name. According to Carroll, this is – for better and for worse – a central part of what it means to be an adult; according to Armstrong (1990) and Tarr (2018), this is a central part of what it means to be an anti-capitalist. Perhaps this is why the progressive British fashion designer Vivienne Westwood entitled her introduction to the 150th anniversary edition of *Alice's adventures in Wonderland* 'End capitalism' and included a 'climate map' that shows 'the area of land that will become uninhabitable if the earth's temperature rises by 5 degrees Celsius' (Constable-Maxwell, 2015: np).

Finding ways of curbing the process of commodification is clearly central to the anti-capitalist agenda, but Carroll's novels leaves us with little ammunition in terms of envisioning the social structures that could replace, or at least supplement, market-based society. Fortunately, the article by Lanzi in this issue addresses that particular issue. Diego Lanzi invites us to revisit the commons as a strategy to escape absurdity. His emphasis is on management and preservation of the commons without relying on market institutions. He engages with Sen's notion of capabilities, or the freedoms that individuals can choose to develop to realize their wellbeing. Building on Marx, he emphasizes that commodities cannot be the pillars of socioeconomic development. Rather, echoing Sen, Lanzi highlights the deprivation in capabilities as *caused* by capitalism. Drawing on Ostrom, he creates practical design principles for enduring self-governing, post-capitalist institutions, which replenish and extend capabilities through inclusion rather than by creating artificial scarcities.

Conclusion

So, what might we learn from reading Carroll's two nonsensical novels alongside the present issue of *ephemera*? Some might argue that there's little to be gained from relating nine essentially unrelated pieces of scholarly writing to a story that was never intended to hold any kind of higher meaning. This is a fair assertion. Others, however, might contend that fiction helps us escape the straitjacket of what is commonly perceived as reasonable and

provides us with an other-worldly and non-reasonable point of view, from which to view matters of concern in a new light. By turning real-world logic on its head, we are able to see more clearly the arbitrary and sometimes absurd nature of our current condition. Who says we have to speed through life at a surreal pace in order to get nowhere? Who says that we always have to turn our 'talents' and 'capabilities' into human capital and trade them at the 'free' market? Who says that we should engage in a constant quest to quantify ourselves and each other, thereby producing endless amounts of fundamentally useless data? And who says that we should not take matters into our own hands, call things by their right name, and shake the powers that be into cute little kittens?

But enough has been said about sense and nonsense, about pawns and queens, and about the process of escaping Wonderland. It is time to follow the Gryphon's suggestion when Alice starts to explain the meaning of what she has so far experienced: 'No, no! Adventures first (...) explanations take such a dreadful time' (AIW: 91). So, let's indeed get on with it.

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