

## **‘Curiouser and Curiouser!’: Organizations as Wonderland; a Metaphorical Alternative to the Rational Model**

### **Abstract**

The metaphors in Morgan’s (1986) *Images of Organization* largely imply order, rationality, stability and manageability. This reflects that the text is concerned to facilitate the design and management of organizations. This article draws on Lewis Carroll’s (1865) novel *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* to propose *Wonderland* as an alternative metaphor that places issues such as absurdity, irrationality, uncertainty and disorder, centre stage. Rather than a marginal or temporary aberration, it is argued that such conditions need to be understood as an everyday experience for many. This metaphor is important because those who are tasked to manage organizations may find it stressful and puzzling that they are so inept, when they compare their experiences and achievements with the rational model. In this sense, it offers both comfort and perhaps encouragement but it should also foster humility and caution in terms of what those at the top can achieve. Likewise, those on the receiving end of irrational decisions or who reside in absurd worlds can gain solace from knowing that they are not alone whilst those concerned to resist such conditions can find strength in the knowledge that those in positions of authority are not omniscient/omnipotent.

**Key words:** Absurdity, Change, Disorder, Literature, Metaphor, Irrationality, Rationality.

### **Introduction**

*Images of Organization* is aimed at ‘managers and professionals in all walks of life’ (Morgan, 1986: 11) and although this is said to include trade unionists, the book is imbued with a managerial perspective. This is explicit in the concern to provide a ‘general method of analysis’ that ‘can be used as a practical tool for diagnosing organizational problems, and for the management and design of organizations’ (Morgan, 1986: 12). The metaphors that are provided are often grounded in a rational, ordered view of the world, which tends to squeeze out absurdity, disorder, uncertainty and the irrational features of organizing that are equally relevant to everyday life. In short, the metaphors aim to expand our horizons through

avoiding 'partial' and 'one-sided' insights and yet collectively they are locked within a psychic prison 'of their own making' (Morgan, 1986: 228).

This article draws on Lewis Carroll's (1865) novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* to propose *Wonderland* as a new metaphor for organizations. It provides an alternative way of analysing organizations, which counters the rationality evident in the metaphors Morgan (1986) presents. This is necessary because absurdity, irrationality, uncertainty and disorder are part of the everyday experience for many. Hence, in an account of workplace bloggers, an Office Manager wrote 'I blog as a stress outlet. My workplace is unavoidably ridiculous and my writing relieves the built-up tension' (Richards, 2008: 102).

The *wonderland* metaphor seeks to draw attention to that which is ridiculous, irrational, disordered, unpredictable, uncertain, unexpected, stupid, inane, nonsensical, contradictory or just plain silly in organizations. Although there is a body of work that questions the rational model (e.g. Ashforth and Fried, 1988; Brunsson, 1982; Bryman, 1984; Cohen et al, 1972; Kets de Vries, 1980; March, 1996; March and Simon, 1958; Mumby and Putnam, 1992; Putnam and Mumby, 1993; Weick, 1976), which will be discussed below, it remains sporadic and marginal compared with the dominant rational ethos. We need a metaphor therefore that can pull together these disparate strands, which can provide an alternative to the rational model.

Morgan (1986) considered *how* we can become ensnared by particular modes of thought through his metaphor of the psychic prison. Rationality infuses this metaphor, however, because it postulates that we can escape such prisons. By contrast, the *wonderland* metaphor highlights the way in which the metaphors Morgan (1986) presents fail to fully countenance disorder, uncertainty, the absurd and the irrational due to his emphasis on managing or 'overcoming' the 'deficiency' of existing organizations (Morgan, 1986: 299). It has been argued that 'power issues' have been neglected in relation to metaphor (Gabriel et al, 2011:

370) and so as a 'radical' metaphor (Morgan, 2011: 468), *Wonderland* adds to debate and understanding because it challenges orthodox 'logico-scientific' (Gabriel et al, 2011: 367) thinking and ways of organizing that pervade business, government and academia.

The justification for the *Wonderland* metaphor is that if we think about organizations through metaphors that emphasize stability, order, rationality and manageability then much of organizational life is left out. Alternative metaphors are therefore required to 'illuminate the Shadow side' (Nord and Jermier, 1994: 398) of organizations. According to Morgan (1986) 'the use of metaphor implies *a way of thinking* and *a way of seeing* that pervades how we understand our world more generally' (1986:12) and yet metaphors such as the machine, organisms, cultures and the brain lead us to think *within* the rationality of the present system *not* to question it whilst others such as the instruments of domination and the psychic prison, imply that we can *escape* extant conditions.

The *wonderland* metaphor is different in that it urges us to question and interrogate the rational order; to examine its shortcomings, weaknesses and failures as a condition of what happens when people attempt to organize themselves in particular ways. It does not argue that rationality must be abandoned because that would be absurd, life threatening and 'patently distorting and false' (Morgan, 2011: 463). Instead, it aims to illuminate neglected features of organizational life even though this inevitably means 'hiding others' (Hatch and Yanow, 2008: 36).

The *Wonderland* metaphor is a 'sensitizing' (Weick, 1976: 2) device that draws attention to conditions that are palpably ridiculous, irrational or illogical. It seeks to make the 'familiar more familiar' (Oswick et al, 2002: 295) by adding 'analytical depth and richness' (Fleming, 2005: 48) to our understanding of organizations. The central question that the paper explores is how our understanding of organizations can be advanced through a *Wonderland* metaphor?

Before proceeding, it is necessary to clarify my understanding of Morgan's (1986) text. Rather than reflecting his perspective or a managerial perspective, it may be argued that Morgan (1986) merely presents each metaphor as representative of a particular school of organization theory. This assumption sits uneasily with the central premise of the book, however, which 'is that our theories and explanations of organizational life are based on metaphors that lead us to see and understand organizations in distinctive yet partial ways' (Morgan, 1986: 12). It follows from this argument that Morgan's (1986) reading of the texts he presents must also be informed by a metaphor or perspective but he does not acknowledge this or fully explain *his* metaphor. I will argue that his perspective or metaphor intrudes upon his reading and representation of the literature he reviews not least because there is a managerial purpose to the book evident in the concern to show how metaphors can be used 'for the management and design of organizations' (Morgan, 1986: 12). A tension arises between Morgan's (1986) attempt to make sense of the perspectives underpinning various schools of organization theory and the *simultaneous* concern to present them and his method of analysis as a 'practical tool' for managing organizations.

The closest Morgan (1986) comes to explaining his own perspective suggests considerable affiliation with a *Wonderland* metaphor for it is argued that the book aims to use 'different metaphors to understand the complex and *paradoxical* character of organizational life' (Morgan, 1986: 13; emphasis added). As none of Morgan's (1986) individual metaphors place absurdity centre-stage, it is to be expected that such conditions are passed over because each metaphor, as Morgan (1986) argues, focuses on some issues but not others. Nevertheless, absurdity is central to the book in that collectively the metaphors are understood to allude to the paradox of organizational life. This reflects 'the wholeness approach' whereby 'the meanings of concepts [individual metaphors] change when they are

combined' (Örtenblad, 2010: 446). The book is therefore about paradox and yet it is also paradoxical because it attempts to provide a way to manage paradox.

Morgan's (1986) representations of the *individual* metaphors will be discussed with a view to surfacing the paradoxes and absurdities that each alludes to but which Morgan (1986) underplays. It seeks to draw out some of the ways in which Morgan (1986) reads and represents certain literature, which *appears* to reflect *his* perspective rather than necessarily the metaphor he is representing. In this sense, it attempts a 'critical reading' of the text, which Örtenblad (2010: 445) describes as a 'fragmentary approach' but it also attempts to understand what Morgan (1986) means when 'using a specific label' (Örtenblad, 2010: 447) or metaphor to depict a body of work, which Örtenblad (2010) defines as an 'interpretive approach'.

The article has four sections; the first discusses literature that has already questioned the rational model of organization. The second examines Morgan's (1986) metaphors to illustrate how each of them approaches rationality, their limitations and the need for a different metaphor. The third section introduces the *Wonderland* metaphor and ten possible ways through which it can be used to analyse and understand organizations. Finally, the major insights of the paper are drawn out in a discussion and conclusion.

### **Beyond the Rational Model**

The traditional model of organization is imbued with what Weber (1964) termed 'instrumental rationality' whereby managers deploy formal rationality (planning, analysing, measuring, costing, comparing) for the substantively rational end of profit. The mainstream business and management literature assumes that such 'instrumental rationality dominates thinking and practice and constitutes the guiding star for organizational activity' (Alvesson, 1984: 70). Bryman (1984) puts it like this, the rational model 'conceptualises the organization

as an instrument or tool designed to achieve a specific goal or cluster of related goals' (Bryman, 1984: 391). In view of the limited 'ends' (see Alvesson, 1984) of instrumental rationality, we can question whether the rational model is rational but there are other critiques that question whether organization's conform to the rationality that instrumental rationality presupposes. Referring to decision making processes, Cohen et al. (1972:2) argued that rather than adopting a rational, logical, ordered approach, managers often muddle through and they represented organizations as:

a collection of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be the answer, and decision-makers looking for work (Cohen et al., 1972: 2)

These insights allude to various absurdities whereby solutions precede problems and ideas/interests are pursued/voiced, irrespective of the problems faced (see also Weick, 1976: 4). This critique does not, however, question instrumental rationality only the processes involved in getting there. It indicates that conditions are more confused than the rational model supposes but suggests that this can be resolved through more careful or thought through planning.

Meyerson and Martin (1987) adopted a similar line of argument when they presented three different views of culture that can be simplified as rational, semi-rational and irrational. The latter fits with the *wonderland* metaphor and echoes Weick (1976) as it includes change that is ambiguous and 'paradoxical', where 'means and ends are perceived as connected loosely, if at all' (Meyerson and Martin, 1987: 640). And yet, such cultures are said to work or be appropriate in certain settings, for example, 'where creativity and constant experimentations

are valued' or 'where ambiguity is unavoidably salient' (Meyerson and Martin, 1987: 641). Despite drawing attention to 'irreconcilable meanings' and changes that are by definition 'uncontrollable' (Meyerson and Martin, 1987: 642); these authors underplay irrationality and disorder and re-impose the rational model by arguing that such cultures make 'possible play, serendipitous outcomes and ambiguity in decision-making procedures' (Meyerson and Martin, 1987: 642).

The rational model assumes that managers are completely informed of all the alternatives and select the one best way to proceed so as to maximise profitability. This has been criticised by institutional theorists (see Meyer and Rowan, 1977) and the theory of 'bounded rationality', which argues that:

It is impossible for the behaviour of a single, isolated individual to reach any high degree of rationality. The number of alternatives he (sic) must explore is too great, the information he (sic) would need to evaluate them so vast that even an approximation to objective rationality is hard to conceive (Simon, 1957: 79).

According to 'bounded rationality', the environment is too complex to allow for an exhaustive analysis of all possible solutions. Moreover, people's capacity to perceive and process information is limited even with sophisticated technology. This means that individuals cannot achieve a high degree of rationality nevertheless, individuals are still assumed to pursue 'instrumental rationality' but without a crystal ball to guide them. It reflects a managerial perspective that is concerned with issues around decision making in complex situations and the potential for innovation (see March, 2006: 211).

To understand that the 'intentions and actions' of organizations are 'loosely coupled' (Weick, 1976: 4) moves us away from the rational model and Morgan (1986: 196) links this to a

political systems metaphor (see discussion below). Weick (1976) focused on the functions and dysfunctions of loose coupling and this contrasts with the non-managerialism of the *Wonderland* metaphor, which is not concerned with, for example, whether it is ‘the existence or nonexistence of loose coupling that is a crucial determinant of organizational functioning’ (Weick, 1976: 12)<sup>i</sup>. Instead, the *wonderland* metaphor seeks to provide a torch to illuminate and examine the ways in which those who work in organizations be they frontline employees or managers regard their working lives as ridiculous.

According to Pfeffer (1977) ‘What is rational given the standards and criteria of one group, such as employees, may be quite irrational given the standards or criteria of another group, such as owners’ (Pfeffer, 1977: 239). This argument offers a ‘pluralistic’ (Alvesson, 1984: 69) critique of rationality for it recognises that different ‘interest groups’ may act according to their own rationality. Nevertheless, Pfeffer (1977) assumes that organizations can be made to work in a more rational way through recognising, accommodating and balancing multiple interests/rationalities. Instrumental rationality is not questioned only the means to achieve it.

Brunsson (1982) distinguished between ‘decision-rationality’ and ‘action-rationality’, which provides another critique of the rational model. This draws our attention to different levels of rationality in terms of strategic versus operational decision making. Hence decision rationality asks whether decisions conform to rational criteria/behaviour and action rationality explores how decisions work out in action. It highlights that rational decisions can lead to irrational actions and that what is rational depends on the level of analysis or whether you are making decisions or are a recipient of the decision. This is a useful way to understand that organizations may not conform to the rational model but the underlying thrust of the argument is that we need to ensure that rational decisions are applied in a rational way. As

Reed (1991) argues of Brunsson's (1989) more recent work, he elaborates 'the complex interaction between ideas and action...[but]...rational decision-making theory...continues to set the agenda to which he responds' (Reed, 1991: 561).

Another literature that usefully moves us away from the rational model recognises the 'emotionality of rationality' (Mumby and Putnam, 1992: 480) and it highlights that managers' decisions and actions have as much to do with emotions (anger, jealousy, pride, greed, fear) as rationality. Linstead (1995), for example, argued that senior management can launch 'an emotional defence of its position in language which evokes rationality but which is not itself a rational argument' (Linstead, 1995: 204). This points towards the fusion of rationality and emotion but this literature does not make the case for the irrational or disordered aspects of organizational life but rather encourages us to focus on the ways in which 'subtle emotional agendas are employed, or woven into, decisional processes' (Fineman, 1996: 557). It draws our attention to organizations as emotional arenas but not necessarily towards absurdity.

Recent scholars have introduced the notion of 'stupidity', which relates to the *wonderland* metaphor. It questions the 'increasing veneration of smartness' (Ten Bos, 2007: 142) in organizations and posits that 'wisdom and stupidity are not necessarily at odds with each other' (Ten Bos, 2007: 147). Similarly, Alvesson and Spicer (2012) propose the notion of 'functional stupidity', which refers to issues that 'are neither semi-rational nor purely stupid' (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012: 1194-5). The implication of Alvesson and Spicer's (2012) analysis is that stupidity can be overcome through mobilizing 'reflexivity'; questioning 'dominant beliefs and expectations' and 'inter-subjective reasoning and dialogue' (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012: 1204). By contrast, the *Wonderland* metaphor encourages an analysis of stupidity as a condition of complex organizations. It does not support the view that stupidity

can be dislodged. This is because attempting to manage stupidity will generate other stupidities reflecting bureaucratic (Weber, 1964) and emotional issues (Mumby and Putnam, 1992) but also unintended consequences (Boudon, 1981) and the power relations (Foucault, 1982)<sup>ii</sup> that infuse organizations.

Alvesson and Spicer (2012) posit that ‘functional stupidity’ can hinder and serve both organizations and individuals. It can serve through providing ‘a sense of certainty’ (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012: 1209) whereby critical reflection is discouraged and conformity promoted. In such situations, employees align themselves (stupidity self-management) with corporate norms pushing ‘doubt and questioning to one side’ (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012: 1209) whilst employers evade the costs of critical reflection. The authors are concerned to avoid this situation hence they suggest that practitioners should ‘inject some form of critical thinking into organizational life’ which ‘will help to unsettle forms of functional stupidity’ (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012: 1216). Albeit critical, there is managerialism in ‘functional stupidity’ that differentiates it from the *Wonderland* metaphor in the sense that functional stupidity holds out the promise that rationality can be created or restored. This is evident in Alvesson and Spicer’s (2002) assertion that dialogue ‘can act as a space that potentially could undermine functional stupidity’ (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012: 1212). Moreover, the argument that ‘stupidity should not be rooted out of the organization completely’ (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012: 1216) contrasts with the *Wonderland* metaphor, which avers that stupidity, irrationality, disorder and uncertainty cannot be ‘rooted out’ even if management seeks to achieve this end.

To summarise this section, there have been many critiques of the rational model, which suggest ‘that it is rare in nature’ (Weick, 1976: 1) but much of this literature slips back into the rational fold by highlighting ways to mend the broken bridge between predictability and

disorder. It asks us to consider the complexity of rationality whether due to multiple interests or different levels of rationality and provides a more 'humble conception of reason' (Tsoukas et al, 2003: 1006). It therefore resonates with the *Wonderland* metaphor but, in different ways, it seeks to manage and therefore inject rationality back into the corporate patient, for example, by assuming as Ten Bos (2007) argues that 'forms of stupidity can somehow be overcome' (Ten Bos, 2007: 142) or that absurdity can be managed by turning 'our thinking about management upside down' (Farson, 1996: 44). This literature does not therefore accept such conditions as an everyday feature of organizational life that needs to be investigated as proposed by the *Wonderland* metaphor.

### **Images of Organization: The Need for an Alternative Metaphor**

This section explores the eight metaphors Morgan (1986) represents to illustrate how many of them reinforce the rational model and in doing so it makes the case for a new metaphor. *Images of Organization* provides multiple metaphors for understanding organizations 'in the belief' that they 'are generally complex, ambiguous, and paradoxical' (Morgan, 1986: 17). This questions the rational model but a tension is evident in Morgan's (1986) concern 'to learn to deal with this complexity' (Morgan, 1986: 17) for the purposes of managing it. The representation of the individual metaphors proceeds with this rational view in mind and so, in effect, the metaphors tend to rule out a sustained analysis of the irrational, absurdity, uncertainty and disorder. At times, this reflects the rationality of the literature reviewed but also, at times, the rationality that imbues the book or, in other words, Morgan's (1986) unstated metaphor. A significant difficulty in analysing *Images of Organization* is trying to disentangle when it is Morgan's (1986) personal perspective that is being voiced versus his representation of literature to illustrate a particular metaphor. Of course, this Gordian knot does not exist if it is believed that the two can be separated but this only stands if it is

believed that we can analyse and represent the world in a way that is free of our own metaphors. Moreover, the task is complicated by the managerial inclination of the book that intrudes upon how the metaphors are represented.

### *Organizations as Machines*

The metaphor of organizations as machines exemplifies the rational model but Morgan's (1986) discussion of its 'limitations' shares considerable overlaps with the concerns of the *wonderland* metaphor. Hence Morgan refers to the 'great human cost' (Morgan, 1986: 31) that can arise through this mode of organizing, for example, he discusses what seems to me to be the absurd situation of Frederick the Great of Prussia reforming his army in ways that reduced 'soldiers to automata' (Morgan, 1986: 25). Rather than a condition of organizational life these 'pernicious' outcomes are represented as unintended consequences or bi-products of overly mechanistic thinking. Organizations, even if they are managed in a mechanistic way, are not seen as absurd per se but rather their consequences are understood to be damaging if mechanistic principles are taken too far or are applied in an inappropriate context. It appears that Morgan (1986) veers towards a more negative reading of the machine metaphor given his extended discussion of its disadvantages compared with its advantages. A machine metaphor does not draw us towards the ridiculous, irrationality, disorder or absurdity although these are evident in Morgan's (1986) account of its limitations in terms of means becoming ends; dehumanization; mindless bureaucracy and inflexibility.

The representation of this metaphor implies that its limitations can be avoided if managers adopt different metaphors that are more 'appropriate for managing in these new times' (Morgan, 1986: 38). And yet, machine thinking often creeps back into organizational life or is reproduced through seemingly "new" interventions such as the 'team' (e.g. Barker, 1993), which Morgan (1986) links with the cultures and brain metaphors. The irrationalities that

flow from the machine metaphor (discussed as its 'limitations') may therefore re-surface even if other metaphors are employed to manage organizations. Moreover, even if this reproduction can be avoided other absurdities are apt to arise in relation to the other metaphors as will be discussed below.

### *Organizations as Organisms*

Rationality informs the organizations as organisms metaphor hence it urges us to think about organizational forms as species that are 'better "adapted" to specific environmental conditions than others' (Morgan, 1986: 39). The image that this conveys is one of leaders/strategists logically scanning the marketplace and adopting organizational forms that are best suited to it (e.g. contingency theory). The organism metaphor is said to have 'changed' (Morgan, 1986: 40) the earlier mechanistic one and yet both are 'locked into a form of engineering preoccupied with relations between goals, structures, and efficiency' (Morgan, 1986: 40). An emphasis on rationality endures therefore but they differ in that the organism metaphor recognises multiple organizational forms that fit better with different environments.

An opposing but equally rational theory is the "natural-selection" approach, which assumes that 'environments select organizations for survival' (Morgan, 1986: 68), which Morgan (1986) argues 'many theorists believe' to be 'far too deterministic' (Morgan, 1986: 68). A third ecological perspective advances the view that environments and organizations are cocreative. The rationality here is that organizational 'collaboration' (Morgan, 1986: 70) is needed to render environmental 'turbulence more manageable' (Morgan, 1986: 71). The comforting language of 'common values' and 'shared problems' (Morgan, 1986: 71) that pervades this metaphor sits uneasily, however, with the competition, exploitation, profiteering and growing inequality within society. As Morgan (1986) notes, the organism

metaphor all too readily depoliticises organizations. It imputes a neutral naturalism to phenomena that are loaded with vested interests.

The organism metaphor is also linked to 'people' having 'complex needs' (Morgan, 1986: 71) but the socio-technical, human relations or human resource managers who must satisfy these needs are no less rational than before they just have a more complicated human machine upon which to work and a more varied tool kit with which to motivate it. It is posited that these needs 'must be satisfied in a mutually acceptable way...otherwise the health of the overall system suffers' (Morgan, 1986: 72) but the organism metaphor, as Morgan (1986) states, 'runs the danger of producing an organizational society' where 'people become resources to be developed, rather than human beings who are valued in themselves' (Morgan, 1986: 76).

According to Morgan (1986), the 'sociotechnical approach suggests that by accommodating and balancing basic needs, strategic management can create a much more harmonious and productive work environment' (Morgan, 1986: 72-73). This is problematic because it neglects the inequalities and struggles that such processes conceal and contribute to. Hence Morgan (1986) asserts: 'Imagine a sociotechnical system where human needs characteristic of the higher reaches of Maslow's need hierarchy meet assembly-line technology' (Morgan, 1986: 72). It is asserted that the abrasion will result in 'human boredom and alienation where game playing and sabotage emerge as a means of gaining self-respect' (Morgan, 1986: 72). This argument suggests that if higher human needs are met (i.e. self-esteem, self-actualization) then politics and sabotage, which are irrational from a managerial perspective, can be resolved. And yet, these higher human needs are increasingly part of workplace struggles. This is evident in management programmes that target subjectivity through espousing autonomy, freedom, responsibility, teamwork and identification with corporate

norms (see Fleming and Sturdy, 2009; du Gay and Salaman 1992; McCabe, 2009; Willmott, 1993).

The 'systems theory', which the organism metaphor draws on, assumes that it is possible to 'find ways of managing the relations between critical subsystems and the environment' (Morgan, 1986: 48). As Morgan (1986) explains in his discussion of its limitations, a functional rationality is evident and this is apparent in its medical analogies ('organizational ailments', 'organization doctors') that equate organizations with the body that can be subject to 'diagnosis and prescription' (Morgan, 1986: 62) whereby it is possible to 'identify and eliminate potential dysfunctions' (Morgan, 1986: 48). Rather than allowing 'us to break free of bureaucratic thinking' (Morgan, 1986: 48) or instrumental rationality then, the organism metaphor reproduces them in a variety of ways and new uncertainties and struggles arise.

### *Organizations as Brains*

In his discussion of organizations as brains, Morgan (1986) muses upon its potential to create organizations that can adapt to 'changing circumstances' (Morgan, 1986: 78). This refers to dispersed 'brainlike capacities throughout an enterprise' (Morgan, 1986: 79) whereby the whole is replicated in each of its parts. A functional rationality continues to underpin this metaphor because it assumes that information systems can overcome the limitations of bounded rationality. Sophisticated information systems have accelerated electronic cash flows and the potential irrationality of such systems was painfully exposed during the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC). In the case of the GFC, information systems contributed to less brainlike activities, which is apparent in the lack of joined up thinking in the run up to the crisis. Moreover, the rationality of cybernetics did not appear to apply for 'significant deviations' were not identified nor was 'corrective action' (Morgan, 1986: 87) initiated by the governments or financial institutions that contributed to the GFC. The knowledge of the

whole was not ‘enfolded in the parts, allowing the system to learn and self-organize’ (Morgan, 1986: 95). This can also be said of the individual banks that failed for their retail arm rarely knew what their investment arm was doing and it appears that few had any understanding of the whole.

A fundamental problem with ‘intelligent, self-regulating’ systems is that ‘the system can maintain only the course of action determined by the operating norms or standards guiding it’ (Morgan, 1986: 95). This takes us back to the limitations of bounded rationality because rationality depends, at least in part, on system designers creating rational systems and yet human knowledge remains imperfect. Moreover, one has to ask whose interests are served by the wider system of which the systems are a part. This raises moral questions for as Morgan (1986) argues simple cybernetic systems ‘are unable to question the appropriateness of what they are doing’ (Morgan, 1986: 87).

Morgan (1986) provides an excellent analysis of the problems of single-loop learning (i.e. non-questioning bureaucratic systems) and the obstacles facing double-loop learning or systems that allow for ‘challenge’ to ‘operating assumptions’ (Morgan, 1986: 91), which illuminates that organizations do not always behave in rational ways. A learning-oriented approach seemingly offers a solution to this, which encompasses a pluralistic rationality whereby conflict is aired and debated thereby surfacing ‘different viewpoints’ through a ‘participative approach’ (Morgan, 1986: 92). Guidelines are presented for developing a learning-oriented approach that include accepting ‘legitimate errors’ and viewing ‘negative events and discoveries’ as a ‘source of knowledge and wisdom’ (Morgan, 1986: 91) and yet this neglects vested interests, unintended consequences and economic insecurities.

In short, the power relations and politics that Morgan (1986) explains undermines learning do not feature in relation to the solutions offered nor do they appear to pose a fundamental

problem for those who view organizations as brains. For example, teams or autonomous work groups are a key feature of organizations as brains and yet such forms of work have been widely criticised as a means to foster work intensification and subjugation (e.g. Barker, 1993; Parker and Slaughter, 1988). Power and inequality then all too readily disappear such that the language of ‘common values’ and ‘shared purpose’ (Morgan, 1986: 104) surfaces. In concluding the Chapter, Morgan (1986) acknowledges the ‘danger of overlooking’ (Morgan, 1986: 109) conflict, power and control, which highlights the limitations of this metaphor for such conditions, are apt to give rise to uncertainty and irrationality.

### *Organizations as Cultures*

Absurdity is not the focus of any of Morgan’s metaphors and so it is entirely understandable that conditions which are absurd are passed over. This is inevitable because each metaphor as Morgan (1986) points out leads us to focus on some issues but not others. This is evident in his discussion of organizations as cultures, where Japan is used to illustrate how cultures emerge through historical contexts. Morgan (1986) quite rightly points out the opposing views of Japanese organizations whereby they are equated with collectivism and harmony (Morgan, 1986: 116) versus ‘personal deprivation’ and ‘gruelling’ working conditions (Morgan, 1986: 117). This contradiction is passed over and yet such representations point towards an absurd situation whereby we cannot distinguish between polarised accounts of organization.

‘Dazzling success stories’ which ‘tell of the way the Japanese arrive at work early or stay late to find ways of improving efficiency’ (Morgan, 1986: 117) point towards other absurdities. That is to say, how can work intensification be labelled a success? Where is the success or rationality in people being so consumed by work that it saturates their lives? These absurdities indicate the need for a different metaphor that focuses on such issues.

The North American culture is illustrated through Peters and Waterman's (1982) example of Tupperware. Morgan (1986: 119) discusses how the positive reinforcement of sales is ritualized through a "Rally" for all saleswomen. It is argued that 'The ceremony combines head-on competition with a positive tone that suggests that everyone wins' thereby 'reinforcing desirable behaviour evident in so many American parent-child relations' (Morgan, 1986: 120). If we were to re-read this example drawing on the *Wonderland* metaphor it would result in a different analysis. One would point towards the humiliation and infantilization of imposing parent-child relations on adults or the silliness of cheering the sale of plastic boxes. It would involve reflecting on whether the sale of plastic boxes indicates that someone is a "winner" along with the stupidity of a culture of winning. The latter necessitates that there are losers and obfuscates that the vast majority do not win. This points towards the irrationality of a society that is legitimated on the grounds of winning where winning is largely the preserve of elites and their descendents.

In another example, Morgan (1986) contrasts an American insurance company's *public* 'ethos of harmony and cooperation' (Morgan, 1986: 122) with a *private* view, where 'people often expressed considerable anger and dissatisfaction with various staff members and with the organization in general' (Morgan, 1986: 123). This situation is not described as absurd and Morgan (1986) displays instrumental rationality, when he argues that:

the problems lay in the way it [the team metaphor] was coupled with norms favouring passivity. Had the metaphor been linked with an ethos favouring openness and innovation, and team players encouraged to make active contributions, the company's fortunes could have turned out very differently indeed (Morgan, 1986: 124).

At such times, Morgan (1986) appears to present *his* perspective rather than necessarily the literature he is reviewing. In contrast to this rationality, a *Wonderland* metaphor suggests that

even if a different approach had been pursued new absurdities or problems would have arisen. To illustrate this, Morgan (1986) offers Hewlett-Packard as an example of a company that did not make the above mistakes, for example, one of its founders broke the padlock off a laboratory door, when it was found to be locked on a Saturday leaving the instruction – “Don’t ever lock this door again. Thanks Bill”. This is presented as a story or legend about the organization that conveyed the message: ‘we trust and value you. You *are free* to be enthusiastic about your job even if it’s Saturday’ (Morgan, 1986: 124; emphasis added).

A *Wonderland* metaphor would draw out different insights hence it is evident that employees are *not free* because management has the authority to issue commands to others. Moreover, it implicitly says that you are *not free* even at the weekend for senior managers will patrol offices and laboratories to see who is really enthusiastic about their work. Instead of people enjoying a life beyond work it conveys the absurd expectation that individuals should be inhabited by work. To avoid this absurdity, the CEO could have left the lock in place and promoted the individual who put it there thereby signifying a very different story, message or legend. Yet no doubt had he done so another absurdity would have arisen whereby the truly “enthusiastic” employee would have found another way to continue working.

Overall, there is a tension in the culture metaphor. Though sophisticated in its rendition of the living quality of culture and the necessity of its ongoing enactment or accomplishment, the chapter suggests that culture can be manipulated. Hence it is stated that ‘the culture metaphor points towards another means of creating organized activity: by influencing the language, norms, folklore, ceremonies, and other social practices that communicate the key ideologies, values, and beliefs guiding action’ (Morgan, 1986: 135). This rubs up against the subsequent statement that managers ‘can never control culture’ (Morgan, 1986: 139) and this tension

demands further explanation because it is not clear whether the culture metaphor assumes that organizations can or cannot be managed.

A key distinction between the culture and *wonderland* metaphor can be traced to Morgan's (1986) contrast between the 'myth of rationality' that is argued to inhabit modern society and the culture metaphor, which directs us towards 'the symbolic or even "magical" significance of even the most rational aspects of organizational life' (Morgan, 1986: 135). The distinction is that the culture metaphor is presented as an alternative form of rationality. Instead of statistics one has rituals or myths or ceremonies that govern behaviour. The metaphor, as it is presented, is bound up with a humanistic rationality. Hence it is argued that 'The results of research on organizational culture show how this form of symbolic management can be used to shape the reality of organizational life in a way that enhances the possibility of coordinated action' (Morgan, 1986: 135-136). This allows the humanistic leader to 'play a background role, shaping the all-important stage of action and the general direction that events will take but leaving choice about details to those responsible for their implementation' (Morgan, 1986: 136). Irrationality, uncertainty and disorder slip into the shadows. The culture metaphor largely erases what is said to be 'the basic uncertainty and ambiguity underlying many of our values and actions' (Morgan, 1986: 135) because it reinforces key aspects of the rational model albeit through rituals, stories and legends.

To conclude this section, culture can be seen as something an organization *is* versus what an organization *has* (Smircich, 1983). The former follows in the anthropological tradition of 'a process embedded in context' whereas the latter presents culture as 'an objectified tool of management control' (Wright, 1994: 4). The latter approach haunts the way in which the culture metaphor is presented, which sits more easily with using metaphor as a 'practical tool' (Morgan, 1986: 12). It illuminates how the aims of the book colour the representation of

the metaphors and points toward the need for another metaphor because clearly if culture cannot be managed then this gives rise to all kinds of uncertainty and potentially absurd situations.

### *Organizations as Political Systems*

The metaphor of organizations as political systems begins with an absurdity although it is not named as such, which is that employees in work settings are often denied the rights he/she enjoys as a citizen – ‘to hold his own opinions, make his own decisions, and be treated as an equal’ (Morgan, 1986: 141). This is attributed to ‘highly authoritarian’ or ‘dictatorial modes of rule’ and it is argued that ‘Not all organizations are characterized by such entrenched relations’ (Morgan, 1986: 142). Rather than articulating the metaphor of organizations as political systems, this appears to be Morgan’s (1986) perspective on the matter. Yet from a more radical position, it could be argued that this absurdity is not only the domain of autocratic systems because to different degrees, it is evident in all of the forms of governance Morgan (1986) discusses (bureaucratic, technocratic or democratic) for even cooperatives or mutual organizations rarely allow employees a substantial voice or freedom in their day to day lives (see Knights and McCabe, 2003).

The ‘Wheeling and dealing’ (Morgan, 1986: 148) of diverse interests is presented as an Aristotelian view of politics, which renders outcomes uncertain and so this metaphor resonates with the *wonderland* metaphor. This is especially evident in Morgan’s (1986) assertion that ‘politics’ is ‘an inevitable feature of organizational life’ and that ‘Rationality is always political’ (Morgan, 1986: 195), which ‘helps to explode the myth of organizational rationality’ (Morgan, 1986: 195). Nevertheless, politics is also presented as something ‘that must be resolved through political means’ (Morgan, 1986: 148) and it is argued that there are ‘many ways in which this can be done’ (Morgan, 1986: 148). The managerial belief that

politics can be ‘resolved’ albeit through political means tends to contradict the assertion ‘that organization is intrinsically political’ (Morgan, 1986: 142). This could be interpreted as the aims of the book intruding upon the representation of the political systems metaphor. Alternatively, one could take it to infer that the political systems metaphor contains divergent views and Morgan’s (1986) analysis certainly alludes to such tensions. The political systems metaphor points towards similar organizational dynamics as bounded rationality for both mean that ‘The organization often has to be content with satisfactory rather than optimal solutions to problems’ (Morgan, 1986: 155) and yet this still confers considerable rationality upon organizations albeit an imperfect one.

It is argued that the ‘use’ of this metaphor ‘may generate cynicism and mistrust’ when ‘we begin to see politics everywhere’ (Morgan, 1986: 197) and this appears to concern Morgan (1986). He posits that it is ‘for this reason, the metaphor must be used with caution’ (Morgan, 1986: 197) but, from a radical perspective, one could argue that perhaps this is necessary in a world of immense inequalities. Morgan (1986) also seems concerned that the metaphor will be used by corporate Machiavelli’s to advance their ‘personal interests’ (Morgan, 1986: 197). This is contrasted with an approach which would ‘*use* the political metaphor to generate new insights and understandings that can help us to deal with divergent interests’ (Morgan, 1986: 197; emphasis added), which necessitates ‘genuine openness and collaboration’ (Morgan, 1986: 198). This appears to be Morgan’s (1986) perspective rather than necessarily a political systems metaphor but perhaps he is merely taking on a pluralist/Aristotelian perspective? Either way, it is suggested that the metaphor can be used so that organizations can be made to work in a rational, pluralist and consensual way.

Morgan (1986) posits that the ‘Aristotelian vision of politics’ is one of politics as a ‘constructive force’, which can be used to ‘restructure the relationship between organizations

and society' (Morgan, 1986: 198), which appears more radical than pluralist. The rationality underpinning the concern to use politics as a 'constructive force' seems doomed, however, because it is argued that 'Ultimately, some people have much more power than others' and 'ultimate power rests with those who are able to define the stage of action' (Morgan, 1986: 198). It is not clear whose view this reflects but it rubs up against a pluralistic solution because if only certain individuals/groups possess 'ultimate' power to effect change then they may resist change that threatens such power.

To sum up, the tension at the heart of this metaphor is that the Aristotelian or pluralistic view suggests that people should act in the interests of all and yet the more radical arguments that Morgan (1986) also refers to imply that this is improbable. This tension is significant because it is not clear whether the metaphor means that politics can or cannot be resolved or managed. The former fits with the aims of the book whereas the latter rail against it.

### *Organizations as Psychic Prisons*

The central belief underpinning the psychic prisons metaphor is that 'human beings have a knack of getting trapped in webs of their own creation' (Morgan, 1986: 199). Rather than accepting or exploring disorder, uncertainty or absurdity, it is argued that the metaphor 'helps identify ways out of these self-created traps' (Morgan, 1986: 228). This is bound up with the assumption that 'people have an ability to free themselves from imperfect ways of seeing' (Morgan, 1986: 200), which fits with the rational model of organization. Hence it implies that there are perfect 'ways of seeing' or grasping 'the world' (Morgan, 1986: 200).

Rationality is evident in the assertion that the 'institutionalized inefficiency' (Morgan, 1986: 201) of the Fordist psychic prison can be superseded by the Just-in-time (JIT) system because 'progressive firms are now challenging the wisdom of such organized inefficiencies'

(Morgan, 1986: 201). The absurdity of the JIT system for those who work in such regimes described elsewhere as 'management-by-stress' (Parker and Slaughter, 1988) is absent from the account. To have discussed this would have meant acknowledging that we may move from one absurdity to another but this does not fit with the psychic prison metaphor for it promises escape through our 'ability to think critically and to engage in the required reality testing' (Morgan, 1986: :202).

Drawing on Freud, *repressed* sexuality of which we are 'unconscious' is offered as another illustration of a psychic prison, which is said to underlie 'many of the most difficult and entrenched corporate problems' (Morgan, 1986: 210). Although not discussed in this way, Morgan's (1986) analysis suggests that *repressed* 'unconscious' desires, anxiety, competition, fears and anger are apt to generate absurdities in organizational life. Nevertheless, even that of which we are unconscious is seemingly governable for 'much' can 'often be done to resolve problems at the personal and interpersonal level' (Morgan, 1986: 210). It is argued that these 'destructive impulses are often unleashed' by cultures with an 'ethos of cut-throat competition' (Morgan, 1986: 220). The implication being that other cultures or methods for 'the design of change' (Morgan, 1986: 223) can resolve or ameliorate them. In short, that of which we are unconscious 'may be built into work and organization' (Morgan, 1986: 227) and therefore resolved through rational thinking.

Likewise, recognition of the 'conceptual prison' of 'patriarchy' (Morgan, 1986: 211) also becomes a means to transform the 'corporate world' and its 'values' so as to align them with 'matriarchal values, which emphasize unconditional love, optimism, trust, compassion, and a capacity for intuition, creativity, and happiness' (Morgan, 1986: 212). Although the latter is to be wholeheartedly welcomed, it implies that the bars of the gendered psychic prison can be exploded through a masculine blast of rationality so as to impart matriarchal values.

Morgan (1986) also discusses the ‘myth of immortality’ as another psychic prison, whereby we deny our death, impermanence, vulnerability and lack of control, which resonates with the *wonderland* metaphor. It is argued that ‘in attempting to manage and organize our world we are really attempting to manage and organize ourselves’ (Morgan, 1986: 213). This is manifest in myths, rituals, humour, goal setting and planning. Although true, *Images of Organization* can also be understood as an attempt to manage ‘our world’ and ‘ourselves’. Rather than embracing and seeking to understand our ‘vulnerability and lack of control’, as proposed by the *Wonderland* metaphor, the metaphors are, at times, presented as a means to manage it. Hence even whilst stating that ‘Rationality and irrationality....appears to be central to the human condition’ (Morgan, 1986: 229) and that ‘the unconscious is by nature uncontrollable’ (Morgan, 1986: 231), the psychic prison metaphor is argued to identify ‘many of the barriers standing in the path of innovation and change’ (Morgan, 1986: 229). This is said to be ‘in perfect harmony with the metaphor of the psychic prison for a vision of confinement is invariably accompanied by a vision of freedom’ (Morgan, 1986: 228). To sum up, a ‘repressive’ (Foucault, 1982) view of power underpins the psychic prison metaphor for it is premised on the belief that we can escape power and yet the absurdity is that as we seek to escape one psychic prison we are apt to forge the bars of another.

### *Organizations as Flux and Transformation*

The metaphor of flux and transformation and its concern with the ‘pathological consequences’ of ‘the underlying logics of change’ (Morgan, 1986: 271), also resonates with the *Wonderland* metaphor. Hence the transience and temporality of organizations is acknowledged, which militates against the control and order embedded in the rational model. Nevertheless, this metaphor seeks to identify the ‘hidden processes’ or ‘logics of change – that help to explain the concrete form of the world at any given point in time’ (Morgan, 1986:

234). To identify these 'logics of change', Morgan (1986) partly draws inspiration from the natural sciences, systems theory and autopoiesis, which understand systems as wholes rather than separate parts. Here, the source of change is linked to 'random variations' and 'chance interactions' (Morgan, 1986: 239), which takes us beyond the rational model of causation but only temporarily because once change is set in motion by random acts, order is seemingly restored in ways that allow for transformational effects.

The metaphor points towards absurdities such as organizations failing to see that they are part of their own environment, which leads to environmental destruction. The rational model is evident, however, in the suggestion that such irrationalities can be avoided through thinking/acting 'systemically' rather than in self-interested ways (Morgan, 1986: 246). This systemic rationality appears evasive because 'Egocentric corporate cultures' continue to dominate whereby organization's 'achieve their success at the expense of their wider context' (Morgan, 1986: 246). Morgan (1986:247) refers to the 'ability' of 'individuals and organizations' to 'influence' and 'shape the future' and yet this causality (even if complex) rubs up against the randomness and unpredictability of this metaphor. Indeed, it points towards uncertainty and disorder rather than ecological harmony.

The flux and transformation metaphor is further explained through referring to dialectics or 'a way of thinking in terms of opposites' (Morgan, 1986: 257). Through discussing Marxist dialectics, Morgan (1986) explains the logic of capital accumulation *and* the contradictions that this gives rise to (e.g. 'man's mastery of nature turns back on man' (Morgan, 1986: 265)). The latter resonates with the *wonderland* metaphor because it is indicative of uncertainty for as Morgan's (1986) representation of this metaphor suggests, 'contradictions' are as much a part of the capitalist system as its injustices. It is posited that 'there is a self-generating aspect to many contemporary problems' that can only be tackled 'by addressing

the logic that produces them' (Morgan, 1986: 271) and this points towards the need for systemic change but it also suggests that contradictions can be resolved through changing society.

As perverse as it may seem, inequality is a taken-for-granted feature of our society but irrationality is not. Surfacing irrationality then, as an everyday condition of working life, may help to 'reframe' (Morgan, 1986: 266) our understanding of organizations in ways that foster change. In contrast to the flux and transformation metaphor, *Wonderland* does not offer a way of 'managing change' (Morgan, 1986: 268) but given the unpredictability that this metaphor illuminates it may help to stimulate change. In the event, the diagnosis that 'new problems of a similar kind will reappear' (Morgan, 1986: 271) is surely correct. This is certainly the case if conditions such as irrationality, disorder, contradiction and uncertainty are understood to be a condition of complex organizations.

#### *Organizations as Instruments of Domination*

The question of rationality is discussed in relation to the instruments of domination metaphor, where it is argued that 'organizations as rational enterprises pursuing goals that aspire to satisfy the interests of all...is more an ideology than a reality' (Morgan, 1986: 275). This appears to be due to 'asymmetrical power relations that result in the majority working in the interests of the few' (Morgan, 1986: 275). It is stated that 'Organizations are *often* used as instruments of domination that further the selfish interests of elites at the expense of others. And there is *often* an *element* of domination in all organizations' (Morgan, 1986: 275; emphasis added). Rather than the instruments of domination metaphor, this appears to reflect Morgan's (1986) perspective because critical scholars who subscribe to this metaphor would not see domination as a temporary or partial condition.

Influenced by Marx and Weber, this metaphor draws our attention to how top down power is exercised through domination, in ways which present the extant order as unshakable. The metaphor provides ammunition through which to criticise the rationality of the established order for it is grounded in the subjugation, misery and exploitation of others. Indeed, it is argued that rationality can be 'profoundly irrational for many' (Morgan, 1986: 316). The rationality of the established order is also questioned in relation to instrumental rationality. Hence Michels 'iron law of oligarchy' asserts that 'modern organizations typically end up under the control of narrow groups, even when this runs up against the desires of the leaders as well as the led' (Morgan, 1986: 277). This irrational situation is based on the assumption that leaders are able to gain 'near monopoly power' (Morgan, 1986: 278) and so the metaphor proffers a dystopian view of *some* organizations.

The *Wonderland* metaphor does not question whether organizations are arenas of inequality but does question whether power is the preserve of elites. In short, the *Wonderland* metaphor asks us to consider organizations not in terms of the unitary rational model or a bleak house of domination because power is understood to operate in a far more fluid, messy and uncertain way than either of these positions suggests. The merit of which is that it holds out the possibility of change.

Rather than representing the literature that adheres to this metaphor, the argument that 'nondominating forms of organization are possible' such that we must 'distinguish between exploitative and nonexploitative forms' (Morgan, 1986: 318) appears to reflect Morgan's (1986) own perspective. Hence, from a Marxist perspective, which fits with the instruments of domination metaphor, all forms of profit-making organizations are exploitative. It appears that for Morgan (1986) the instruments of domination metaphor only applies in certain

situations such as when multinationals switch to cheaper sources of labour or to “the radicalized organization” where there are ‘warring factions’ (Morgan, 1986: 297).

The discussion of both the domination and political systems metaphors, equate ‘radical’ with what I understand to be particular management styles be they autocratic unitary or an adversarial form of pluralism. Hence it is posited that unitary and pluralist positions can become radical if managers shape their ‘relations with their workforce as a battle’ (Morgan, 1986: 299) and that ‘many organizations become radicalized in ways that stress “them and us” attitudes’ (Morgan, 1986: 316). In this way, the wider implications and analytical relevance of the domination metaphor are diminished. Hence it does not just apply to antagonistic settings given its focus on inequality and privilege. These conditions exist whether a unitary or pluralist perspective prevails for both can be analysed from a radical perspective as different expressions of domination.

A ‘radicalized organization’ is not only equated with certain management styles but also ‘where at least one major section of the workforce experiences a sense of exploitation and responds in a solidaristic way’ (Morgan, 1986: 298) or a situation where ‘a unionist or other radical employee’ may seek to unite ‘the workforce against management’ (Morgan, 1986: 298). This mistakenly equates ‘radical’ with antagonism and collective resistance. It is mistaken because resistance is far more widespread and takes many different forms (see Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Jermier et al., 1994). Second, a ‘radical’ frame of reference not only relates to conflict/antagonism/resistance but also to how domination works to secure consent, which Morgan (1986) only briefly alludes to in his discussion of Weber. Finally, the representation of this metaphor tends to equate certain ‘radical’ forms of organization, where exploitation, conflict and resistance prevail, with irrationality. It implies that more rational

situations exist in other organizations but many of those who view the world through an instrument of domination metaphor would not agree with this partitioning.

Overall, this section has highlighted that whilst the metaphors Morgan (1986) represents offer a rich pallet through which to analyse organizations that includes many irrationalities, many reflect a managerial rationality and, at times, this informs the way they are presented. To some extent this is inevitable because disorder, the irrational, the absurd and uncertainty have to be rubbed out in order to lay claim to be able to manage organizations. It has been argued, however, that this tends to eclipse other aspects of life that coexist with the rational.

### **Organizations as Wonderland?**

The genesis of the Wonderland metaphor can be partly traced to my experience of a dispute at a university. A strategy was developed in secrecy that advocated compulsory redundancies due to a temporary fall in student numbers. A number of colleagues involved in the dispute commented on what they saw as the irrationality of management and the absurdity of the situation they found themselves in – ‘Curiouser and curiouser’ one individual wrote in an email that conveyed the dreamlike quality of the experience. This phrase appears in Lewis Carroll’s (1865/2008) *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and it conveys Alice’s surprise at the unfolding events in Wonderland. It resonated with many of my earlier empirical observations, for example, managers in a manufacturing company rejecting a more efficient way of working because frontline employees rather than engineers suggested it (McCabe, 1996). In another instance, a bank that I researched designed a new system of work as if its employees were robots, which led to various forms of resistance (McCabe, 2007). It was indeed curious that the bank’s management introduced these changes through emphasizing the importance of teamwork, initiative and the need for employees to take responsibility (McCabe, 2009).

It was a combination of these strange experiences and empirical observations that drew me to Lewis Carroll's (1865/2008) *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as a means to develop a different way of seeing organizations. It depicts a strange world where nothing is quite as it seems which Alice often regards as 'very absurd' (Carroll, 2008: 26). The book begins with an encounter with something completely unexpected: the White Rabbit, which is absurd for it is both clothed and talks and yet it echoes the 'rational' world, for the White Rabbit is worried that it will be late. First of all then, the wonderland metaphor draws our attention to the unexpected; it says that we should expect the unexpected and not assume that things will follow a rational, ordered pattern.

The Wonderland metaphor embraces and expects 'out-of-the-way things' which led Alice to begin to think 'that very few things were impossible' (Carroll, 2008: 6). Rather than reading this through a managerial lens of assuming that all things are possible providing that we put our minds and muscles to the plough, I take it to mean that things which we do not expect to happen may well happen. If this is applied to organizations it could lead to greater tolerance for things going wrong and might mean that managers are less 'shocked' when people resist their interventions (see McCabe, 2011). It could also lead to more caution when introducing change. Such thinking might also prepare the ground for people to resist when it is expected that previous organizational actions, promises or discourses may be contradicted. And yet, from this perspective, the outcomes of resistance must also be understood to be uncertain. This is a stronger assumption than the more cautious one proposed by the political systems metaphor, which acknowledges that 'some uncertainty almost always remains' (Morgan, 1986: 171).

Second, the Wonderland metaphor asks us to question the rational model, which is imbued with the assumption that people but also 'things' will behave in compliant ways. As Alice

pursues the White Rabbit down the rabbit hole and begins to fall, she discovers that gravity does not follow its normal rules. This resonates with Pickering's (1993) point in relation to understanding scientific practice that 'The contours of material agency are never decisively known in advance' (Pickering, 1993: 564). Similarly, Leonardi (2011) asserts that 'technologies exercise agency through their "performativity"...in other words, through the things they do that users cannot completely or directly control' (Leonardi, 2011: 148). This is not to suggest that we must abandon the laws of physics but it is to acknowledge that we do not always know how objects let alone humans will act in relation to a given intervention. In an insurance company, for example, management invested in a new information technology (IT) system to reduce costs, which would partly be achieved through reduced staffing. The object or IT did not, however, behave as was expected and management were forced to recruit more staff (McCabe, 2002). The metaphor therefore asks us to question our beliefs and to be open to new possibilities rather than taking the rational model for granted.

As Alice falls down the rabbit hole during her pursuit of the White Rabbit she ponders various questions to which she concedes she does not know the answers and thinks of words, the meaning of which she does not know. This lack of knowledge about the world is the third element of the Wonderland metaphor, which can be contrasted with the organizations as brains metaphor. Hence it recognises that we do not always know or fully understand the world we inhabit and it urges us to investigate how this applies to practice and to those in organizations. This is not to say that better Knowledge Management is needed as Nonaka and Takeuchi (1993) embracing the rational model would contend but rather to acknowledge that 'Knowledge is a concept far too loose, ambiguous, and rich, and pointing in far too many directions simultaneously to be neatly organized, co-ordinated, and controlled' (Alvesson and Karreman, 2001: 1012; see also McDermott, 1999). In this sense, knowledge can be

compared to the elusiveness of the White Rabbit, for as we attempt to explain or control it (see Knights and McCabe, 2003a), it scurries away and ‘is no longer to be seen’ (Carroll, 2008: 5). This elusiveness is elegantly expressed in Polanyi’s (1966) popular phrase: ‘We can know more than we can tell’ (Polanyi, 1966: 4).

The rational model is grounded in the belief that ‘a’ leads to ‘b’ or, in other words, that the future follows on from actions we take in the present. The future is predicable and all of our actions are predicated on this assumption. In Wonderland the future is not known. Alice does not know what it will bring and to recognise this given the recent uncertainties in relation to the GFC should foster caution, modesty and humility on the part of those who seek to exercise power over others. After becoming lost in the rabbit hole, Alice finds a way out but she is too big to pass through a tiny door that offers escape. Having drunk from a bottle marked ‘drink me’, without knowing the consequences of doing so and shrinking to ten inches, Alice ponders the outcome of further shrinkage. She compares herself to a candle going out and asks ‘I wonder what I should be like then?’ (Carroll, 2008: 8). This contemplation of oblivion is absurd from the rational model because it is grounded in the assumption that the world tomorrow will be much the same as it is today. This predictability is what gives meaning to our actions, stability to society and it provides a sense of economic and existential security. A fourth feature of a wonderland metaphor then would be to acknowledge that the future is to some extent unknown.

At ten inches, Alice is now too small to reach the key to unlock the tiny door as it is on a table that is beyond her reach. Her solution is to eat a small cake marked ‘EAT ME’ in a little glass box. She speculates ‘if it makes me grow larger, I can reach the key; and if it makes me grow smaller, I can creep under the door’ (Carroll, 2008: 9). In either scenario Alice assumes positive outcomes will follow from her actions and this raises a fifth insight that the

Wonderland metaphor draws our attention to for she now grows to more than nine feet. This relates to the unintended consequences emanating from any course of action (see Boudon, 1981), which can have positive as well as damaging outcomes. Hence Morgan's (1986) instruments of domination metaphor highlighted that 'industrial accidents' may 'occur because of problems unintentionally built into the structure of plant and buildings' (Morgan, 1986: 290). The point is that we do not know what the outcome of our actions will be. Indeed even if we act so as to remedy the problems created through previous actions new problems may emerge "and things are worse than ever" (Carroll, 2008: 16). Foucault puts it like this 'People know what they do; frequently they know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what they do does.' (Personal Communication in Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982: 187). The melting of the polar ice caps is a relevant point hence industrialists did not set out to destroy the environment but global warming has emerged as an unintended consequence of the pursuit of profit.

Nonsense, is a sixth insight that the Wonderland metaphor highlights for once Alice escapes the rabbit hole she meets an array of creatures that speak nonsense to her including a Lory who states 'I am older than you, and must know better' (Carroll, 2008: 22). In addition to this being illogical, the Lory refused to say how old it was. This is redolent of those in positions of authority making illogical statements which those lower down the pecking order are seemingly expected to accept (Linstead, 1995). It echoes the political systems metaphor where it was argued that managers 'often use the idea of rationality as a resource for pursuing political agendas' (Morgan, 1986: 195). Hence in the case of a manufacturing company, unions were expected to accept pay differentials because one plant was argued to be more productive than another and yet management could not convincingly substantiate this claim. It also ran counter to previous promises that there would be pay parity across the two sites

(Lockyer and McCabe, 2011). This point elucidates the need to interrogate claims that ostensibly appear rational because rationality and claims to rationality are not free from power. The Holocaust provides an extreme example of this, when ‘Reason itself’ came ‘to be used for insane purposes’ (Burrell, 1999: 140; see also Bauman, 1988). Of course, those seeking to exercise power will not regard their claim to rationality as nonsense and so to some extent this analysis requires one to take on the position of those who are on the receiving end of such claims.

During Alice’s conversations with the Blue Caterpillar, she is continually contradicted and contradiction is the seventh feature of this metaphor. To illustrate this point, a major building society advanced a one team vision for the organization, which included a concern to promote openness and honesty. In a call centre of the Society, management proceeded to introduce ‘individual’ pay awards, which staff were asked to keep secret (Knights and McCabe, 2003). In Morgan’s (1986) account of the instruments of domination metaphor he discussed an automobile factory where ‘the explicit policy is “safety first,” the reality is “safety when convenient”’ (Morgan, 1986: 290). Elsewhere, a bank extolled the importance of staff delivering service quality but instigated a system for promoting quality that prioritised cost reduction, which effectively squeezed out intangible issues such as customer service (Knights and McCabe, 1997). All of which created the type of uncertainties for employees that Alice experienced as she grew or shrank in size for ‘how puzzling all these changes are! I’m never sure what I’m going to be, from one minute to another!’ (Carroll, 2008: 55).

The eighth element of the Wonderland metaphor is that it turns traditional hierarchical, top down power relations, characteristic of the instruments of domination metaphor, upside down. Hence the Frog-Footman did not restrict Alice’s access to the Duchess and Alice

simply walked past him. Alice then observed a cook throwing everything from ‘saucepans, plates and dishes’ at the Duchess without rebuke even ‘when they hit her’ (Carroll, 2008: 62). Similarly, when the Queen of Hearts screams ‘Off with her head!’ Alice replies ‘Nonsense!’ (Carroll, 2008: 86) and later, the Cheshire Cat tells Alice that the Duchess has ‘boxed the Queen’s ears’ (Carroll, 2008: 89). These hierarchical markers of privilege (Duchess, Footman, Cook, Queen) indicate that inequality endures in Wonderland and antagonism is an everyday feature of life but still it is evident that power is not a possession of the elite alone.

In contrast to the metaphors Morgan (1986) represents, which tend to present those in positions of authority as powerful, in Wonderland, the seemingly powerless are able to exercise power. This resonates with Foucault’s (1982) argument that the ‘exercise of power consists in guiding the possibilities of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome’ (Foucault, 1982: 221). All kinds of unknowns flow from this ‘relational’ (Foucault, 1982) understanding of power because it means that one is always acting upon targets that are capable of exercising power themselves or, in other words, acting contrary to your desires. It provides a different insight than the organism metaphor, which drawing on the Hawthorne studies, recognised ‘unplanned interactions’ (Morgan, 1986: 41). The difference is that this does not just apply to certain working conditions (i.e. ‘routine, boring, low-discretion jobs’ (Morgan, 1986: 72)) or when there is a failure to consider higher order ‘needs’ (Morgan, 1986: 72) but applies more broadly.

The ability of others to exercise power is not something that can be managed as the political systems metaphor tended to suggest when it was posited that ‘resistance’ to an idea might emerge before ‘most’ come to ‘accept’ (Morgan, 1986: 153) it. This is because according to a ‘relational’ (Foucault, 1982) view of power, power is not something that can be ‘possessed by leaders’ or other ‘social groups’ (Morgan, 1986: 174) and so it points to a more fluid and

unpredictable situation. This is not to suggest that Morgan (1986) is unaware of or neglects the manifold ways in which power is exercised only that the Wonderland metaphor is concerned with *how* power is exercised rather than working from the assumption that some possess power whilst others do not.

Alice joins a mad tea-party with the March Hare, the Dormouse and the Hatter. As she approaches, although the table is large, all three cry ‘No Room! No Room!’ (Carroll, 2008: 71). Similarly, when the Queen of Hearts instructs her soldiers to execute other soldiers they ignore her but then claim that ‘Their heads are gone’ (Carroll, 2008: 88). These lies point towards a ninth feature of the wonderland metaphor – dishonesty, deviance or misconduct. This includes acts of misbehaviour defined as ‘anything you do at work you are not supposed to do’ (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999: 2). Embedded in the rational model is the assumption that individuals act in accordance with corporate regulations and/or in honest ways. This tends to obscure acts of deviance by both employees (Mars, 1982) and managers (Bensman and Gerver, 1963; Lawrence and Robinson, 2007) as Volkswagen’s recent ‘efforts to cheat on clean air rules’ (Rusche, 2015: 26) illustrates. It is important to recognise therefore that individuals may act in their own interests rather than those of the organization (see Watson, 1994). Nor do they necessarily follow the rules or always tell the truth because career ambitions, inequalities and power relations infuse everyday life in ways that can lead people, perhaps through fear, to construct or falsify accounts in support of their endeavours (see Anand et al., 2005; Lockyer and McCabe, 2011; Vaughan, 2009). The organizations as political systems metaphor discussed similar irrationalities (Morgan, 1986: 158) and yet, by contrast, it posited that such ‘conflicts can be managed’ (Morgan, 1986: 158).

A tenth insight that can be gleaned from the Wonderland metaphor relates to the indeterminacy of meaning and to the propensity for confusion or a lack of understanding to

prevail in organizations. These types of confusions are evident when the March Hare tells Alice you ‘should say what you mean’:

‘I do.’ Alice hastily replied; ‘at least – at least I mean what I say – that’s the same thing you know.’

‘Not the same thing a bit!’ said the Hatter (Carroll, 2008: 73).

Alice subsequently informs the Hatter ‘I don’t quite understand you’ and this ambiguity is evident throughout the book as people and creatures tend to talk past each other. This insight can also be found in the work of Franz Kafka, where ‘misunderstanding’ predominates and it has been argued that this presents ‘a weapon against the mythologies of the new bureaucratic order’ (Munro and Huber, 2012: 533). It resonates with the ‘dark side’ of organizations or ‘how things go wrong in socially organized settings’ (Vaughan, 1999: 273), which surfaces issues such as mistakes and disasters. The wonderland metaphor departs, however, from the organizational behaviour literature that restricts the dark side to deviance, dysfunction or abnormality that is seen as intentionally harmful to others (Griffin and O’Leary-Kelly, 2004). This is because harm is not always due to accidents, errors or things not working as they were intended but may reflect the profit motif, greed or particular working conditions, which the instruments of domination metaphor alludes to. In short, harm (e.g. stress) may stem from functionality or things working as they were intended to work.

This section has offered a new metaphor that counteracts whilst not entirely rejecting the rational model. Through its ten-interconnected points, it surfaces issues that are often neglected or marginalised and overall it offers a non-prescriptive, non-managerial and distinctive way of analysing and understanding organizations:

1. Expect the Unexpected

2. Anticipate the Unpredictability of Objects/People
3. Recognise the Limits of Knowledge
4. Appreciate that the Future is Uncertain
5. Examine Unintended Consequences
6. Interrogate Claims to Rationality
7. Explore Contradictions
8. Question a Top-down Understanding of Power
9. Investigate Dishonesty, Deviance and Misconduct
10. Identify Confusion/Misunderstanding/Ambiguity

These interrelated points are not exhaustive of the metaphor, which more generally directs us towards the ‘strangeness’ of organizations. They need to be considered in conjunction with the points raised in the critique of the rational model and the discussion of the metaphors Morgan (1986) represents. It is not claimed that these issues are entirely neglected by Morgan (1986) but in combination and spirit they provide a different focus for analysis than his metaphors.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

According to Morgan (1980), metaphor ‘is a creative form which produces its effects through a crossing of images’ whereby ‘the processes of comparison, substitution, and interaction’ act ‘as generators of new meaning’ (Morgan, 1980: 610). He subsequently posited that ‘Metaphor turns imagination in ways that forge an equivalence or identity between separate elements of experience’ (Morgan, 1983: 602), which allows us ‘to see the world anew’ (Barrett and Cooperrider, 1990: 222). Reflecting the uncertainty, strangeness and absurdities in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Wonderland can be used as a metaphor to surface issues in organizations that question the rational model. The Wonderland metaphor invites

‘further “filling in”’ (Cornelissen, 2005: 757) of ‘features that previously were considered not salient’ (Cornelissen, 2005: 755) given the dominance of the rational model.

Morgan’s (1986) approach towards metaphor indicates that he is sensitive to the issues raised by the Wonderland metaphor. Hence he argues that ‘managers and organization theorists’ often attempt to override ‘complexity by assuming that organizations are ultimately rational phenomena that must be understood with reference to their goals or objectives’ (Morgan, 1986: 322). He suggests that this ‘gets in the way of realistic analysis’ and advocates that we ‘start from the premise that organizations are complex, ambiguous, and paradoxical’ (Morgan, 1986: 322). This suggests that we should begin with the Wonderland metaphor. On the other hand, however, as he acknowledges, he adopts ‘a managerial point of view’ (Morgan, 1986: 334) and avers that ‘the important point is that the insights of all the metaphors can be used prescriptively’ (Morgan, 1986: 334). In this way, he rules out the Wonderland metaphor because the essence of this metaphor is that it is non-managerial and so it militates against prescription (other than as a research agenda), which from a managerial perspective points to its ‘limits and downsides’ (Morgan, 2011: 466-7). Like all of Morgan’s (1986) metaphors, Wonderland provides only partial insights into organizations and it is not meant to suggest that we should abandon rationality for obviously that would threaten the fundamentals of life (water, food, shelter, healthcare, education) that in large complex societies necessitate organization. Nevertheless, this does not mean reverting to instrumental rationality but rather debating and being open to alternative possibilities that reflect upon both the ‘means’ and ‘ends’ of rationality (see Alvesson, 1984; Reed, 1991).

Although Morgan (2011) emphasises the ‘practical impacts’ (Morgan, 2011: 470) of metaphor, there is a compatibility between his approach and the Wonderland metaphor. Hence he sought to show how metaphors ‘can frame and reframe our understanding of the

same situation, in the belief that new kinds of understanding can emerge from the process' (Morgan, 1986: 340). This is consistent with the Wonderland metaphor because it provides 'a novel or surprising likeness' (Davidson, 1978: 31) between seemingly incompatible things. Metaphorically, the Wonderland metaphor is offered as a firework to light up the organizational night sky allowing us to see things crouching beneath the rocks, lurking in the shadows that are often hidden from view. It could lead to a change in practice through reverse engineering as absurdities are identified; however, new absurdities are apt to arise as extant absurdities are addressed.

The notion that 'organizations are many things at once' (Morgan, 1986: 339) is central to Morgan's (1986) thesis and so his metaphors are seen as 'intertwined' (Morgan, 1986: 341). Each is understood to fit certain situations better than others 'but we must always remember that aspects of every metaphor may be found in every situation' (Morgan, 1986: 342). The Wonderland metaphor can therefore be added into the mix and it relates to the other metaphors that Morgan (1986) identifies. Hence, taken to its extreme, the machine metaphor reduces people to mechanical parts, which is absurd whilst the culture metaphor, whereby organizations are managed through values and beliefs, taken to an extreme, can be likened to George Orwell's 1984 (Willmott, 1993) or to an 'iron cage' of teamwork (Barker, 1993).

In these situations, Wonderland can be glimpsed and yet it is sufficiently distinctive and relevant for understanding organizations to be considered as a metaphor in its own right. It draws our attention to dynamics that have been 'imprisoned' (Morgan, 1980: 605) by metaphors that far more readily lend themselves to the rational model and managerialism. The Wonderland metaphor points towards irrationality, disorder, unreason and uncertainty, which does not easily fit with the metaphors in Morgan's (1986) text. It challenges the

rational model and therefore avoids being 'intuitively conservative and, thus, cognitively prescriptive rather than liberating' (Oswick et al., 2002: 298).

The Wonderland metaphor allows for 'a willingness to abandon feelings of confident mastery' and rejects 'the conventional aesthetic hunger to transform a messy, unsettled world into a place of fixed, rational continuities' (DeMott, 1989: 132). In the wake of the 2008 GFC, such caution, reflexivity and modest thinking is perhaps more relevant now than ever as it allows for 'a recognition of fallibility and limits to our rationality' (Gabriel, 2010: 757). This article has focused on the movement from metaphor as the source domain by challenging our understanding of the organizational target domain. It has not considered the interactive theory of metaphor whereby our understanding of the Wonderland metaphor could be changed (Black, 1962). To do so would involve using the rational model of organization to analyse and resolve the various elements of the Wonderland metaphor and yet this would contradict its very purpose. Rather than leaving 'the church of decision-making theory' (Reed, 1991: 566), it would amount to rebuilding it and introducing new hymns.

To conclude, *Images of Organization*, though an original, erudite and powerful way of understanding organizations overemphasises rationality and this reflects its managerial leanings. Rather than a prescriptive tool, the Wonderland metaphor points in a different direction. It directs us to explore what are daily experiences for many in the belief that this will surface buried or neglected issues in a way that questions the status quo; it seeks to understand the world of the underdog or tenant rather than the landlord; it encourages reflexivity on the extant order rather than offering a means to manage or escape it. Finally, it rails against managerialism, for it is understood that each new means to manage is apt to generate new absurdities and this is valuable because it points towards the limits of managerial power and urges caution, humility, scepticism and reflection.

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<sup>i</sup> Weick's (1976) emphasis on the functional aspects of loosely coupled systems and Morgan's (1986), at times, managerial discussion of politics suggests a tension in terms of whether irrationality or politics are an everyday feature of organizations or something that can be managed.

<sup>ii</sup> According to Foucault (1982) power is not a possession that some have and others do not. Instead, power reflects 'modes of action upon possible action, the actions of others' (Foucault,1982:224) and so because others can act contrary to our intentions, this means that outcomes are always uncertain.