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Stranger Things in Academia

Unplugged - Voices

Eeva Houtbeckers

Research in management and organization can only gain by being inspired from arts, culture and humanities in order to rethink practices but also to nourish its own perspectives. Life in organizations is artificially separate from ordinary life: all mundane objects are thus conducive to astonishment, inspiration, and even problematization. The unplugged subsection “voices” gives the opportunity to academics and non-academics to deliver an interpretation of an object from the cultural or artistic world. Interpreted objects may or may not be directly related to organizational life, and may or may not resonate with the moment, but share some intriguing features. These interpretations suggest a patchwork of variations on the same object.

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As an avid speculative fiction fan, I value the feeling of strangeness. This might explain why I work in Academia, from which many strange things still arise after a decade. *Stranger Things* is a speculative fiction television series that presents parallel worlds: our world and an upside-down alternative dimension. In this piece I elaborate the analogies between *Stranger Things* (season 1) and Academia.

In *Stranger Things*, the upside-down dimension is a dark nightmare version of our world. Secret experiments conducted in a government institution bring to light a connection between these worlds and release a monster that visits our world in which it instills terror. However, the classical division of good and evil becomes distorted as the first season progresses: the problem drinker is a small-town sheriff, who believes that things are strange when others refuse to believe; the troubled father of a missing child is predominantly after a damages claim; a new kid on the block causes jealousy among a tight-knit group of children; a head of scientific experiments pushes his protégée in the name of fighting external threats to his nation. Even the scary monster needs to eat in order to survive and provide care for the implied next generation. At the same time, one of the main characters is stuck in the upside-down dimension, hiding from the monster while, due to toxic air, life slowly departs him.

I see analogies between Academia and the worlds in *Stranger Things*. In Academia, there seems to be a nonverbal agreement among some that other fields (i.e. the other dimension) are upside-down. This is because they do not value aspects that are considered important in

Academia: freedom of thought; flexibility; goals beyond personal benefit; generating knowledge and challenging understandings; raising the next generation of independent thinkers and so on. The other side is scary, distorted, and strange.

However, when observing the realities of contemporary academic work, I'm starting to think that it is actually Academia itself that is placed on the wrong side. A discourse exists of demanding ever increasing efficiency in the name of the knowledge economy, echoed by policy-makers and higher -education management. In the name of survival, we have scientists and researchers obeying and producing more and more of what Isabelle Stengers calls "fast science" (2017), resulting in countless publications for the sake of publications that no one has time to read. We have both less and less small-student groups and time for debate. We place more emphasis on individuals' CVs than on solving the critical issues for humanity and ecosystems.

I have started to wonder, what if I am stuck in the upside-down dimension? What if I'm living in a dimension of toxic air and a constant fear of disappearing? When will the monster get me? Like the key characters in *Stranger Things*, what if I'm stuck on the dark and gloomy side, which slowly sucks all life out of me and uses me to augment evil? However, don't get me wrong: it would be lovely to execute tasks with clear targets, such as nailing that journal article submission for an A-list journal or "playing the game" of getting that competitive research funding. Both tasks completed, I would feel like the queen or king of my department. Yet, would that be enough?

At the same time, scientists and researchers have warned for decades about the disastrous ecological chain reaction that has already wiped out too many non-human species and is fast approaching large mammals, like humans. Instead of listening to the warnings, short-term economic gain rules the world, which results in favouring development and growth (Latouche, 2009).

Paradoxically, (but, aptly, in the very spirit of *Stranger Things*) worldwide socio-ecological problems, as a context of my research, seem less bleak than the situation in Academia. While policy-makers are reluctant to adopt new measures to modify (Western) lifestyles to the limits of our planet, I see an unpredictable strength in local and global movements that I have been studying. In short, for me, pernicious socio-ecological issues generate hope and, conversely, Academia as a potential place in which to address such socio-ecological issues generates anxiety. As a result, I am truly puzzled as to the role of a sole researcher in this entire mess and to what can be done.

Yet, analysing the situation further makes things even less black-and-white. Rather, academic work is experiencing major changes that result in similar labour market changes, as already experienced in the field of culture for decades (Lingo & Tepper, 2013). People are increasingly required to manage and sanction their own work, academic work communities are crumbling, and the neoliberal expectations set by various parties put a burden on higher- education institutions. Interestingly, these trends in work, labour, and the economy penetrate all fields, not only Academia. Thus, my personal anxiety about work conditions in Academia

is not just personal anymore but is a symptom of a phenomenon that is larger than myself.

In *Stranger Things*, the connection between worlds requires a massive energy burst. After all, in speculative fiction things have to be explained plausibly (in some sub-genres, preferably with scientific facts derived from physics). In Academia, however, I wonder if anyone can find such an energy tide that could link Academia with the other world(s) and release whatever is trapped in the upside-down dimension in order to restore balance. I have a feeling that a sole effort is insufficient but many people in collaboration can make a difference. Yet, as Macy and Johnstone (2012) suggest, change comes from within when respecting our fears, insecurities, and anxieties before trying to solve them. Monsters are only scary when they pick one prey at a time. Fighting them together makes all the difference, as *Stranger Things* has shown us.

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