Transforming Sustainabilities: Grassroots Narratives in an Age of Transition.

An Ethnography of the Dark Mountain Project

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Abstract

The framing of sustainability as a goal of aligning human needs with protection of the environment has been pursued through various definitions and frameworks in policies and programmes across a wide range of contexts. And yet, unsustainable modes of production and consumption are accelerating the global destruction of natural habitats, depletion of resources, release of greenhouse gasses and other forms of pollution. Thus, the nature and scale of the changes that the earth is undergoing is bringing conventional approaches to, and understandings of, the sustainability challenge into question.

This thesis re-examines the framing of the sustainability challenge instead as one of understanding the relations between humans and nature implied by dominant cultural narratives. Through building a theoretical understanding of how human-nature relationships can be understood and studied, and devising a methodology for examining individual and collective ontologies and epistemologies, it investigates how alternative worldviews are imagined and embodied in grassroots innovations. Specifically, it provides an in-depth ethnographic study of the Dark Mountain Project – a network of writers, artists and thinkers who explore cultural narratives that move beyond the meta-narrative of progress. It shows how engaging with the beliefs and assumptions entailed by the dominant Western meta-narrative can open up for new knowledges and actions to address the sustainability challenge.

The thesis suggests that creating sustainable ways of living involves active participation in the way 'sustainability' is imagined, storied and enacted. Findings indicate that creating spaces for active experimentation with alternate ways of seeing, co-creation of new vocabularies and development of creative practices, is a direct way to enable re-narration and re-experiencing of human-nature relations. It concludes that engaging with transitions in worldviews as a transformation in the experience of social life provides a promising starting point for future work on the sustainability challenge.

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And to those who have gone before: I aspire to honour your wisdom and ways of life, thank you for all you have given.

To Atsa Louise, my grandmother and niece,
to my mother, Helle, and to my sister, Naja.

The Qallunaat (European-Canadians) have a strange concept of their environment. For instance, the term "wildlife" is used to separate themselves from their home and separate their community from the natural environment. They do not realize that they're part of the wildlife; they were wild once and will be part of the wild forever, but they like to exclude themselves from anything the natural world provides. Inuit do not have such a word in their language, we are part of nature and cannot to be excluded from it.

Tommy Akulukjuk in Rasmussen, 2013

I would like to beg you, dear Sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

Rainer Maria Rilke in Letters to a Young Poet

Prologue

This morning a Chaffinch made its way into my dissertation. I have arrived in the summerhouse on Draget in Thy, Denmark, where I will write the three empirical chapters about my research with the Dark Mountain Project. I got up four hours after the sun, sleeping out chaotic events in a dreamless night. I took up my morning ritual of greeting the sun and sitting still breathing before I went out onto the porch to lie in the sun for a few minutes. The Chaffinch landed in a tree a few meters away and sat there observing me, calling "tchuii... tchuii...", its language an unknown mystery to me. Because I know it is a *language*, I can learn it if I listen well and maybe one day I will (apparently the Chaffinch has thirteen kinds of song) but for now, I just lie there with closed eyes letting its song reverberate through my body and mind. I recall a dream I once had about being a whale. It ended with waking myself up in laughter and bursting into tears when I realised I was human. The son of a species which has nearly forgotten its ability to hear the languages of other life forms and so render them voiceless and powerless. The weight of generations who spoiled the habitats of whales and peoples, the end product of a lineage whose roots in the wilds beyond civilisation have been hacked up and buried. Waking up I realised first I existed in a place, my friends still sleeping quietly in the other end of the room. Only moments later did I remember I was not just any human being, I was me. The brother of a sister. A person with a social security number, an accumulating debt and a privileged education. I was *also* me.

Do you know the language of the Chaffinch? I only just learned its name today, I had to look it up in an old copy of *Lademann's Nature Guide*. This book tells me it is a common bird in Denmark and most of Europe. I search my memory for encounters with a Chaffinch or its song but I'm blank. I remember its name but not its blue-green and red-brown hues. I'm baffled by my own ignorance, this is one of the most common birds in Denmark. How many kinds of birds do I really know? How many plants and how many of their uses? Bernie Krause is a musician who has spent 40 years recording and archiving the soundscape of wild places for his Wild Sanctuary project[1], and his experience of the changes he has heard over four decades of listening to the wild is described in these terms:

> "A great silence is spreading over the natural world even as the sound of man is becoming deafening. Little by little the vast orchestra of life, the chorus of the natural world, is in the process of being quietened. There has been a massive decrease in the

[1]See: http://www.wildsanctuary.com/.

> density and diversity of key vocal creatures, both large and small" (Vidal, 2012, na.).

The diversity of life is diminishing on a scale that is almost too vast to fathom[2] but because we cannot *hear* it and *see* it we tend to talk about it mostly by citing statistics and scientific reports. We may claim to apprehend the numbers as *loss* but do we really know that in a way that we *sense* it too? If we did, I imagine we would break into tears spontaneously as I did awakening from my dream of being a whale.

Whistling a badly imitated "schuii schuii", I went back inside and made breakfast. "Tchuii... tchuii..." the song is resounding in my mind as I go through the day's online tasks and check what 'bogfinke' is in English. Chaffinch. It is a common bird in Britain too. How can we 'represent' other species in our democratic systems if we do not learn their languages and really listen to what they are saying? We neatly lump millions of unique living creatures into the category of 'environment' and then we treat that category as a resource, a form of 'capital' which provides us with 'services'. Within that logic if the Chaffinch should go extinct tomorrow it would register only as a number: -1 (maybe with some kind of multiplier if other species were dependent on it). It is this logic that has led to the increasing silence Krause is hearing. If I had not learned its song today, the Chaffinch would be just that to me, a number. Its loss would have been as intangible to me as the disappearance of the Great Auk, the Eurasian Aurochs, the Caucasian Wisent or the Tarpan. It is said that ignorance is bliss but I feel my ignorance as a knot in my stomach pushing up against my windpipe.

By the time I have turned this morning's encounter into writing it is already afternoon. I walk down to the fjord and stand there for a moment watching a sunbeam breaking through the clouds, its fire lighting up the waves which the wind has whisked white. The beam travels towards me and embraces me. That word comes to mind again. *Teeming*. It is strange how one word can capture so many lived moments, this one briefly transporting me back to Illulisat in Greenland[3]. As I pass a groyne I see a collection of stones lying on one of the rocks. I wonder whether someone put them there or if the sea had arranged them so. I can't make it out. As I get closer I recognise a heart-shape, there's my answer. I remember something I read in *The Old Ways* by Robert Macfarlane: "We think in metaphors drawn from place and sometimes those metaphors do not only adorn our thought, but actively produce it" (Macfarlane, 2012, p. 26). As I walk back towards the summerhouse I think of Vanessa and her travels in Central America, she gave me *The Old Ways* for my thirtieth birthday. Then she calls! I had forgotten that I had logged onto Skype on my phone.

I have sought aloneness here by the fjord but I am not lonely. If I feel lonely my friends are no further away than the push of a button. I wonder about the mixed blessing of virtual networks. Are we strong enough to not let our attention fragment by all the information

[2] As far as numbers go, around one third of all the species that have been assessed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature are under threat of extinction and their chances of survival are decreasing overall. See: http://www.iucnredlist.org. The last Red List was published in 2012 and includes around 5% of all species.

[3] See: http://patternwhichconnects.com/lib/kalaallit_nunaat.html.

that gets hurled at us online and can we use our connectedness wisely to build stronger relationships offline? I certainly would not be without them. In the evening I speak with my family on Skype and my niece gives me 'kisses' across the physical distance and thereby smears my dad's iPad in yoghurt. Dark Mountain could not have happened in the way it has if it was offline. My research would have been radically different if it had been purely offline. But at the same time virtual reality can steal away our attention if we are not careful, I've experienced this with myself, my friends and my family. And the danger is that the internet becomes just another prison that amplifies our deafness to the natural world: "The fragmentation of attention diminishes the quality of our presence, and we are never fully in one place. Without attention we are lost. What distracts attention kills our potential to be free"[4]. We simply cannot listen to what is here now if we let our minds drift off into virtuality.

A few days ago, I received a message from Dougie who is curating one of the stages at this year's Uncivilisation festival. He has invited me to run a session on the time culture project[5] I have started with one of my best friends. He began his email, tongue-in-cheek, with these words:

> "You mean you were there? But I thought it was just a legend – the tale told of a moment in history when the minds of a generation were sprung open, their eyes startled by strange beauty, their hearts engulfed. You were there? We still talk of it now, fifty years hence, when we gather at the fire and give thanks. But what was it you did there?"

I smiled when I read it. This is what Dark Mountain feels like. A sweeping up of the heart into history but a different history to the one I learned in school. A history that exists outside the bounds of civilisation. I guess that is the meaning of *uncivilisation*: finding a place to re-tell the stories that modern society has wilfully forgotten and a way to re-learn how to inhabit the world without reproducing the violence that is littered across the history of civilisation.

These words tell the story of what it was I did there. I have had many considerations about how to write this thesis and who it is for. As a text it reflects a three year process of immersing myself in the questions I am asking here. One could perhaps even say its roots stretch much further to another text that started when I travelled to Greenland for the first time in 2008 and which came to a standstill during my MSc in Climate Change the following year[6]. I already sensed some aspects of the questions then, perhaps even earlier. My central question is how narratives, and sustainability narratives in particular, shape our lifeworlds: how we come to imagine what the world is like and how this affects what kinds of knowledge and action we have access to within that world. Behind this

[4]This is from the blog post 'In the Field of Time' which I wrote in advance of co-hosting a session on time at 'Redrawing the Maps', a week-long event celebrating the work of John Berger. See: http://www.redrawingthemaps.org.uk/blog/?p=262.

[5]See: http://time-culture.net.

[6]This text is available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/lib/greenland_diary.html.

question lies an understanding that the world we move in is storied and that the stories we tell about the world shape our actions and relationships. They also delimit what we accept as knowledge and what type of facts we come to take for granted. Those are the 'facts' that blend into the backdrop of what we call everyday reality or – with a phenomenological term – the 'lifeworld'. If we story our lifeworld, and what we think of as 'sustainable', within a framework which sees the human and natural worlds as separate I fear we will keep on treating 'nature' as something that can be subjected to our will. So I began to ask what it means to learn to experience the lifeworld differently and some of the answers, however tentative, are recorded here.

The research that has gone into this project spans reading across disciplines from anthropology, narrative sociology, ethnography, ecology, transition theories and sustainable consumption, cultural theory and philosophy. I would probably call it 'narrative ethnography' with the proviso that this work sits within the tradition that is actively decolonising ethnography as a discipline. It also includes 'field' research that ranges across conversations offline and online, blogging, participation in festivals, joining Dark Mountain groups and meetings, writing articles, setting up a website, photography, giving workshops, going to local events, writing several diaries, email discussions, written interviews and engaging with the literature and art that has emerged from the Dark Mountain Project in the years since its launch with the publication of the manifesto in 2009. The data this text draws on is multi-layered and comes from many 'fields': because it grows from such diverse sources, the challenge for me as a researcher is to write it in a way that both reflects this diversity and draws it into a whole – let form emerge from the body of work it draws on. To do this I will have to avoid the pitfall of splitting my own subjectivity into 'doctoral researcher' and 'participant' and my world into Academia and Field. These identities play into a dualistic mindset where one easily ends up judging the other. This reduces the data 'collected' in the research process by placing the academic *outside* even as participant: eventually she 'withdraws' from the field to retreat into the one-sided identity of analyst. The 'field' envelops this place I am writing from now (as does academia) and I am also myself a 'source of data'.

This is the odd thing about Dark Mountain: it is as much a metaphor, an attitude or a way of being as it is a literary, cultural or social 'movement'. It exists in the imagination as much as it exists in physical place when it incarnates in festivals, meetings, performances or writing. It is an ongoing conversation within networks of people who create community by finding new ways of being together that resist the objectification of selves and others. As such, I see it now as an experiment in *how the world could also be* if we let go of our engrained tendencies of control, dualistic thinking and individualism. *What do you do, after you stop pretending?*[7] In this way, Dark Mountain is also present here in these words, at least if I write well. However, it is not an *agreement* and there is no consensus about what Dark Mountain is or does. This text is written from my own research experience, I

[7]This is one of the first questions Dark Mountain poses, it has been a key question in many writings and conversations.

cannot claim to speak for any of the people I have met on the way. Rather, I hope what Dark Mountain *is* will be evident in the inquiry, questions and thinking that surface over the duration of this text. For me, it has been an important encounter with ways of seeing, knowing and being that offer a way of living in an age of loss that does not require me to turn the blind eye but inspires creative responses and nourishes my relationship with the living world. If we are to find effective responses to climate change, mass extinction, deep structural inequality, patriarchy and all the heartbreak that results, this is territory we have to explore, on our own and together. The key is patient listening and learning, trusting and keeping an open mind to tune in to the languages beyond the silence that is spreading across wild places.

It is already the evening of the next day since the Chaffinch flew into my dissertation. I have finished dinner and learned how to create block quotes in Latex, the programme I am writing these words in. The internet has gone, and I wonder whether it is the stormy weather outside messing with the weak connection on the USB-modem. It is not late by my normal standards and yet soon time to go to bed. The windows of the summerhouse have dimmed into rectangular, black frames that reflect my own image. It splits my reflection into two blurry versions of me, one on top of the other. They seem to ask me what I am doing. Underneath a mocking glance, two animal eyes peer back at me. They don't ask anything, they just observe this funny creature staring into a screen typing away on black squares. They are curious as to where these words go and who they might reach. I already know something about my immediate 'audience' but if I imagine to be writing for anyone it is my niece, Atsa Louise, and the generations who fifty years down the line will wonder what happened during those years in the second decade of the twenty-first century. *What was it you did there?* I wrote in my research diary[8]:

> "If she one day reads these words, she might look back at my generation and our present age and think 'what an absolutely crazy and terrifying time to be living'. Perhaps she will find many of my thoughts and ideas amusing, strange or foreign. Or maybe she will think that the way of the olden days was utterly incomprehensible in its limitations and narrowness. My hope for this project is that it will at least offer an insight into what it was like to be alive and to be asking these questions about the world back in 2012."

Listen, dear future reader: I was alive in a time when the Chaffinch was a common bird in most of Europe. Know this as a measure by which you can tell where the world went since then.

[8]See: 'Reflections: Finding home', http://patternwhichconnects.com/phd/diary_2/Entries/2012/1/12_Reflections__Finding_home.html.

Chapter 1

Introduction

As evidence is mounting that the earth is undergoing a period of change that is unparalleled in the history of human civilisations (Solomon *et al.*, 2007; Allison *et al.*, 2009; Stocker *et al.*, 2013), it is increasingly incontrovertible that complex, modern societies are faced with unprecedented challenges in curtailing and reversing the damage caused by industrial modes of organisation, over-consumption of natural resources and the concurrent degradation of the environment. At the heart of these challenges lie long-established social and cultural assumptions about 'nature' and the human position within it (Latour, 1992; Norgaard, 1994; McIntosh, 2008; Moore, 2013). There is increased recognition that "widely based cultural change" is needed (Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 2013, p. 5) to contend with the social-ecological crises of the 21st century and that "socio-cultural and political processes need greater attention" (Butzer and Endfield, 2012, p. 3628) in understanding transformations of the social. While recent scholarship on sustainability transitions has probed into the feasibility of creating more sustainable forms of social organisation both from 'above' (Geels, 2011; Farla *et al.*, 2012) and from 'the grassroots' (Seyfang and Smith, 2007; Smith and Seyfang, 2013), little is known about the practical implications of transformations in worldviews for societal transitions in the context of current social-ecological change. This gap is what motivates this thesis.

Understanding the dynamics of sustainability transitions – which revolve around the meanings and visions of what a sustainable society might be – entails inquiring not only about how sustainability is envisioned and enacted but also about the ways in which such beliefs and visions are formed by wider social norms and cultural assumptions about the world at large. This involves examining the ontological and epistemological foundations of particular worldviews and connected understandings of sustainability within interpretive communities. Seeing 'grassroots innovations' as potential sites of transitions in onto-epistemology – understood as transformations in beliefs about the structure of the world and how it is known – this thesis explores questions about how such changes takes place in relation to sustainability narratives: How are ideas about sustainability narrated and enacted within interpretive communities? What is the significance of dominant cultural narratives in shaping situated understandings of sustainability? In what ways do shared inquiries into social-ecological crises affect everyday lives? How can mutual narration

reframe the challenge of sustainability and give rise to new meanings and actions within participants' lives? While such questions are not new, they have not yet been asked within social research on transitions where a theoretical and practical understanding of transformations in worldviews is currently lacking.

To address the need for a better understanding of the role of assumptions inherent to particular worldviews in sustainability transitions, this thesis brings insights from Radical Human Ecology, eco-linguistics and narrative sociology to bear on transitions theory, creates a methodological framework for researching transformations in onto-epistemology and conducts an empirical study of changes in worldviews and sustainability narratives. The case study was undertaken with participants in the Dark Mountain Project, a network which arose out of a critique of the meta-narrative of progress (Kingsnorth and Hine MA). The remainder of this chapter will outline the motivation behind the study, situate the thesis within the wider research on sustainability and transitions, summarise the questions that guide the empirical inquiry and provide an overview of the structure of the thesis.

1.1 Motivation and rationale behind this research

This study grows out of my interest in how environmental change is known and given meaning as well as how personal identities are impacted or shaped by social-ecological crises. It is in many ways a continuation of some of the questions that arose during my MSc Climate Change about the disjunction between the scale and nature of contemporary social-ecological change and the lack of effective responses within mainstream culture and politics. As a student of climate change, I learnt how humanity is affecting the structure and composition of different parts of the earth system adversely through collective behaviours that produce detrimental amounts of waste and pollutants (cf. UNEP, 2012; WI, 2013) and which alter terrestrial habitats (cf., Goldewijk, 2001; Field *et al.*, 2014), ocean chemistry and ecology (cf. Doney *et al.*, 2012; Poloczanska *et al.*, 2013) and atmospheric composition (cf. Forster *et al.*, 2007; Hartmann *et al.*, 2013) on a planetary scale. The resulting changes in local and global environments have severe effects on resource availability (cf. Steffen *et al.*, 2005; Field *et al.*, 2014) and cause accelerating extinction of animal and plant populations (cf. Barnosky *et al.*, 2011; Wake, 2012) which in turn undermine the ecological foundations for human habitation. The possibility for (abrupt) shifts in parts of the earth system towards states which diverge significantly from the climates that humans have inhabited during the Holocene (cf. Scheffer *et al.*, 2001; Alley *et al.*, 2002; Lenton *et al.*, 2008; Rockström *et al.*, 2009) is a matter which has caused both anxiety and delight as I have gasped alternately in fright and awe of our inter-connected and inter-dependent world.

At the same time, it became clear to me that climate change has failed as a social narrative because it has framed debates negatively and left out the element of wonder. Rather than being a source of wonderment it has become a source of fear: a narrative which ultimately divides collective efforts into 'for' and 'against' rather than connecting

people around shared concerns. Reframing the narratives of climate change and social-ecological crises therefore seems a necessary step for enabling pro-active responses. As Professor Mike Hulme suggests:

> "Understanding the ways in which climate change connects with foundational human instincts opens up possibilities for re-situating culture and the human spirit at the heart of our understanding of climate change. Rather than catalysing disagreements about how, when and where to tackle climate change, the idea of climate change should be seen as an intellectual resource around which our collective and personal identities and projects can form and take shape" (Hulme, 2009, p. 326).

However, 're-situating culture' also means confronting those cultural assumptions that climate science is challenging. We cannot simply choose which aspects of social-ecological crises to look at: it is necessary to accept *both* wonder and fright for a sober understanding of the future(s) that climate change is revealing. Why is it so hard for us to collectively come to terms with the prospects of climate change? And how did a culture where waste and toxic by-products are normalised as inexorable 'externalities' emerge in the first place? To answer such questions involves taking a deeper look at the assumptions and habits that shape the way that we collectively think about, and relate to, 'nature', and to elucidate what is meant when something is designated 'sustainable'.

My approach to researching particular ideas and practices of sustainability begins from an observation that the effects of *un*sustainable ways of life are not a result of separate environmental, social and economic crises but rather part of an interconnected problematic with deeper roots in the worldviews, cultural values, and organisational modes connected with modernity and late-capitalism (cf. Ekins, 1992). As an 'all-encompassing idea' (Blowers, 1997) or a 'grand compromise' (Kates *et al.*, 2005) the notion of sustainability is inherently ambiguous, so much that "our ability to conceive what it would really be in an operational sense is very limited" (Norgaard, 1994, p. 15). To me, this calls for directly engaging with the ways in which sustainability is imagined, storied and corroborated within peer groups and interpretive communities. Further, the scale of the sustainability challenge is such that scientists and commentators are discussing the possibilities of short-term failures in key systems and infrastructures that sustain modern civilisation (cf. Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 2013). This points to the *nature* of the sustainability challenge: it is not simply about finding ways to sustain contemporary society through optimisation or efficiency gains but about the relations that humanity sustains with more-than-human nature. Wendell Berry has explicated the cultural dimension of this problematic:

> "The problem of sustainability is simple enough to state. It requires that the fertility cycle of birth, growth, maturity, death, and decay—what Albert Howard called "the Wheel of Life"—should turn continuously in place, so that the law of return is kept and nothing is wasted. For this to happen in the stewardship of humans, there must be a cultural cycle, in harmony with the fertility cycle, also continuously turning in place. The cultural cycle is an unending conversation between old people and young

> people, assuring the survival of local memory, which has, as long as it remains local, the greatest practical urgency and value" (Berry, 2012, na.).

In this perspective, the sustainability challenge is about finding practicable responses to establish viable relations between humans and more-than-human nature for the long-term. In other words, it is not just a challenge to human ingenuity and prowess, it is a challenge to our self-understanding as a species and to our consciousness of the planet we inhabit. Thus, the sustainability challenge is 'onto-epistomological' as it concerns our experience of reality and what we consider to count as knowledge – our worldview and 'vision of what is real and possible' (Williams *et al.*, 2012, p. 1) as the field of Radical Human Ecology affirms (section 2.2 in the following chapter delves into the question of worldviews and onto-epistemology in detail). The next sections explain how I examine human-nature relationships in this text and expand on the conceptual basis for this study.

1.1.1 Sustainability: framing humans and nature

It is critical to acknowledge the deeper assumptions implied by the concept 'sustainability' to be able to appreciate the outcomes of particular enactments of this term. The Oxford English Dictionary includes the following definitions for the words 'sustainability'[1] and 'sustainable'[2]:

sustainability, *n.*
2.
a. The quality of being sustainable at a certain rate or level.
b. *spec.* The property of being environmentally sustainable; the degree to which a process or enterprise is able to be maintained or continued while avoiding the long-term depletion of natural resources.

sustainable, *adj.*
3.
a. Capable of being maintained or continued at a certain rate or level.
b. Designating forms of human activity (esp. of an economic nature) in which environmental degradation is minimized, esp. by avoiding the long-term depletion of natural resources; of or relating to activity of this type. Also: designating a natural resource which is exploited in such a way as to avoid its long-term depletion. Cf. SUSTAINABILITY, *n.* 2b.

As this definition shows, 'sustain-ability' designates a quality or measure of an entity or process to be 'maintained or continued' without (long-term) depletion. This implies

[1] "sustainability, n.". OED Online. June 2014. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/299890 [accessed 10.07.14].

[2] "sustainable, adj.". OED Online. June 2014. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/195210 [accessed 10.07.14].

questions about the degree to which something remains the same (e.g. in appearance, content, components, internal relations) while it also poses questions about *what* is being maintained, *why* and *how* it is being sustained. The definitions shown above imply a relation where humans are actively maintaining natural processes which in turn are seen as passive: definitions 2.b and 3.b describe sustainability in terms of processes or enterprises which involve human use of natural resources, specifically as activities which minimise or preclude their degradation. According to this definition, sustainability entails a particular relationship between humans and their natural environment, one which perceives nature as 'resources' which are used or 'exploited' by humans. I will call this the *user-resource relationship* in this thesis in order to designate how the prevalent understanding of sustainability implies a radical separation of humans and the natural world, one where the health of one is subsumed to the interests of the other. The user-resource perspective thus refers to worldviews – and related onto-epistemological assumptions about the world – which are rooted in beliefs that cast self-other, human-environment and nature-culture as essentially different rather than inextricably connected (this is discussed in more detail in section 2.3 in the following chapter).

As a dominant construct in environmental discourse, sustainability has emerged over the last decades to become a central concept for envisioning, theorising and managing the various social, political and economic endeavours to address the long-term challenges of over-consumption and exploitation of resources (cf. Norgaard, 1994; Jamieson, 1998; Mebratu, 1998; Kates *et al.*, 2005; Grober, 2007). Conceived as a problem of balancing present human needs with those of future generations by protecting the regenerative capacity of natural resources (WCED, 1987), sustainability has been implemented as a policy target in various forms at local[3], national[4] and global[5] levels. The understanding of sustainability as balancing human needs and environmental protection has emerged largely as a consequence of the concept's evolution within the nexus of ideas and values centred on the interlinked institutions of capital, scientism and the nation-state (cf. Ekins, 1992). The cultural implications of this history has been a re-imagining of plural nature in terms of the singular category of 'environment' (Banerjee, 2003) and the gradual subordination of the natural world to the realm of the market (Prudham, 2009). In this way, the natural world has come to be subordinated to the needs and, more often, wants of humans (cf. Jackson *et al.*, 2004). This is exemplified in the story of the Canadian lumberjack who sees 'money' when he sees a tree: the way he goes on to treat the tree is, of course, different than if he had first seen a living being (Jensen, 2004).

However, over the last decades, environmental scholarship has explored both the power and the limits of 'nature' and 'society' as an explanatory framework for understanding history and social change. In various disciplines the division of the human and natural spheres – what Latour (1992) describes as the 'modern constitution' – has given

[3]E.g. Local Agenda 21 initiatives.

[4]In national sustainabilities strategies, see e.g. Swanson, 2004.

[5]E.g. the UN Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development.

way to seeing humanity and nature as interconnected, interdependent and entangled; what Moore (2013) aptly describes as *humanity-in-nature* rather than humanity *and* nature. Within this shift in perspective, growing and diverse academic literatures are exploring the ways in which humans are not only the producers of environments but also the products of those environments. This is a move which overturns the collapse of pluralistic nature into singular environment. It opens up for understanding the manifold ways in which nature is imagined and represented socially and culturally as well as it asks questions about the political nature of those representations. As Swyngedouw puts it: "what enters the domain of politics is the coded and symbolised versions of nature mobilised by scientists, activists, industrialists and the like" (2007, p. 21). The point here is not to provide a detailed account of this burgeoning literature (I will return to some of these literatures later) but rather to explore what it means for understanding sustainability and how I employ the concept in this study. For this purpose I summarise below what I consider to be the core elements of this perspective based on three different but related bodies of work.

First, it is worth reiterating what an awareness of humanity-in-nature is *not* in order to avoid reproducing the vocabulary and meanings of the binary humanity vs. nature. Humanity-in-nature is not a perspective where humans collectively (as in societies, nations, or civilisations) 'interact' with nature (whether conceptualised as the environment, climate, or the natural world). In the words of Moore, nature is better understood as "the matrix within which human activity unfolds" (2013, na.). Neither is it meaningful to treat the agency of humans and the agency of nature as separate because one is impossible without the other. Moore proposes that human agency is better understood within, and in relation to, nature as a whole: as "specific 'bundles' of human and extra-human nature, dialectically joined rather than interactionally fused" (ibid., na.). Within such bundling, humans and their natural environments are continually making and un-making each other. This means that a concern with sustainability is not primarily about intervention in human systems to make modes of organisation and production less degrading to the environment. Rather, the focus of sustainability is *environment-making*, understood as "the ever-changing, interpenetrating, and interchanging dialectic of humans and environments in historical change" (ibid., na.), and, more specifically, "the *relations that guide* environment-making, and also the *processes that compel new rules* of environment-making" (ibid., na., my emphasis). In this way, environment-making can be seen as the enactment of particular onto-epistemological assumptions, of a worldview. And to study sustainability, then, is to study how these assumptions are expressed in the kind of relations we have, individually and collectively, within nature-as-matrix (section 2.1.2 in the next chapter discusses environment-making in more detail).

Second, although environment-making is an activity in which humans are particularly forceful, it is an activity of all other life forms as well (and we humans are ourselves environments shaped by more-than-human natures). This is an explicit rejection of the historical framing of the human-nature relationship as one of dominion. It is part of a project that Mick Smith (2011) calls a decentering of human exceptionalism. In *Against*

Ecological Sovereignty, Smith interrogates the connections between the metaphysical distinctions that elevate the human above the natural world and political decisions based on this premise. He shows how ecological sovereignty – i.e. human dominion over ecologies – simultaneously subjects the more-than-human to, and excludes it from, the realm of politics and ethics. At the same time, the reduction of more-than-human nature into resource, or 'standing reserve', is a reduction of humanity and the possibility of being alive to the world: "[i]f we regard the natural world as nothing but a resource then humanity is left, at best, with nothing to become other than the orderer of that resource" (ibid., p. 105). The danger is that we in this way partake in a self-fulfilling (and self-negating) process where "we come to consider everything of worldly significance a product of our own doing" (ibid., p. 106). What this means for our understanding of sustainability is that sustainable relations with more-than-human nature are free from claims of human sovereignty. This is the political dimension of sustainability: "to release [the more-than-human] into their singularity" (ibid., p. 103), as Smith puts it.

Third, to give the more-than-human world political and ethical agency is a move towards a moral pluralism where there can be no recourse to objective truth but meanings and valuations of sustainability are contingent, that is to say "competing in a complex rhetorical economy of claims and counter-claims, values and counter-values, all of them with actual and potential losers" (Curry, 2006, p. 111). This is a consequence of leaving behind abstract monism and universalism but it does not correspond with a relativist rejection of truth as such. It is a commitment to the intrinsic value of nature which cannot be exhausted by any particular use or understanding. In Curry's words it is "deeply appreciative of, and involved in, the so-called material world in all its *sensuous particulars*, and recognizes that being ultimately and fundamentally [is] a mystery, [more-than-human natures] are not only or merely 'material'" (ibid., p. 105, original emphasis). In the absence of an absolute moral guideline, values can at times conflict and working out the ethical dimensions of an action is a kind of deliberation similar to many other aspects of life. This means that acting ethically (or sustainably) is primarily a *skill* with roots in compassion, intelligence, practical wisdom and cunning that need to be honed rather than deferred to an external codex. This shifts the notion of truth from abstract thought and verbal statements to the relations that we sustain with each other and the more-than-human world (ibid.). Sustainability, in this perspective, is a recognition that it is impossible to remove ourselves from these relations and judge them from the 'outside'. Evaluating what sustainability means in practice is only possible by participating in a relationship with what is known and by assessing that relation from 'inside' without recourse to ostensible, preceding, 'independent' facts or criteria.

These philosophical, political and ethical considerations lay the foundation for an understanding of sustainability which sees nature as intrinsic to human societies and perceives human actions as flowing through nature rather than acting upon it. This integrates insights from across various disciplines in an attempt to move beyond the limitations of the modern constitution. It is a present scholarly endeavour which is continually being explored and expanded and I do not claim to have presented a full view of it here. For

now, I conclude that rather than seeing the sustainability challenge as a question of harmonising human needs for – and demands on – natural resources with protection and maintenance of those resources, it is a matter of enquiring into, and coming to terms with, what kind of relations we wish to sustain within nature-as-matrix and how this can be achieved. In contrast with the user-resource perspective, this understanding begins from an onto-epistemological position that perceives an inherent *connectivity* and *relationality* between human and more-than-human worlds (cf. Williams, 2012) and which gives rise to a radically different understanding of relationship and agency. This approach, and the meaning of the perspective outlined above, will be developed further in the course of this study.

1.1.2 Transitions: fostering alternative sustainabilities

Discerning the 'relations that guide environment-making' thus involves engaging with the deeper 'rules' that compel new forms of living (cf. Moore, 2013). The nascent literature on sustainability transitions provides a theoretical starting point for understanding the emergence of sustainable practices, technologies and social networks around alternatives to unsustainable forms of environment-making. This field approaches societal change towards sustainability as a process of destabilising and reconfiguring relationships in dominant systems of provision by supporting and propagating radical innovations in alternative, protected spaces (Markard *et al.*, 2012). Sustainability transitions has rapidly established itself as a research area with an associated research network[6], an academic journal[7] and a series of international conferences[8]. It has also gained traction as a political project with the notion of transition being adopted into Dutch environmental policies (Kemp and Loorbach, 2006) and attracting resources and funding across different (mainly European) sectors and programmes[9]. Within this emerging framework for studying sustainability a research agenda on 'grassroots innovations' has been formulated (Seyfang and Smith, 2007) to examine the role of 'bottom-up' approaches to the sustainability challenge, and this research area provides the theoretical starting point for this thesis.

Growing out of the wider literature on 'transitions theory', this approach to studying social and technological change originates in the fields of science and technology studies (STS), evolutionary economics and innovation studies (Van den Bergh *et al.*, 2011) – see also section 2.2.1. Sustainability transitions encompasses research into "institutional, organizational, technical, social, and political aspects of far-reaching changes in existing socio-technical systems [...] which are related to more sustainable or environmentally friendly modes of production and consumption" (Markard *et al.*, 2012, p. 959). The field broadly examines how adjustments in the "cognitive routines, regulations and

[6] Sustainability Transitions Research Network (STRN), see http://www.transitionsnetwork.org.

[7] Environmental Innovations and Societal Transitions, see http://www.journals.elsevier.com/environmental-innovation-and-societal-transitions/.

[8] In Amsterdam (2009), Lund (2011), Copenhagen (2012), Zürich (2013) and Utrecht (2014).

[9] See e.g. the section on associated projects on the STRN website: http://www.transitionsnetwork.org/projects/associated-projects.

standards, societal norms and practices, and specialized assets and competencies" (Garud and Gehman, 2012, p. 981) guide longer-term social-technological developments. Thus, sustainability transitions views the sustainability challenge as achieving broad scale, "major changes in technological, organizational and institutional terms for both production and consumption" (Farla *et al.*, 2012, p. 991) through qualitative changes in social and technical relationships by new innovations.

Such change is conceptualised as occurring through "social (inter)actions within semi-coherent rule structures that are recursively reproduced and incrementally adjusted by interpretive actors" (Geels, 2010, p. 505) and transitions research is interested in understanding how emerging and alternative rule structures that 'might work' become configurations 'do work' among a plurality of transition pathways (Berkhout *et al.*, 2004). At the level of socio-technical 'regimes', where rule-sets are mostly susceptible only to marginal change, innovation processes tend to be incremental and new innovations are consistently adapted to suit existing socio-technical configurations (Schot and Geels, 2008). Radical or path-breaking innovations take place in 'niches', where rules, institutions and motives are different from the regime; these are 'protected spaces' where "nurturing and experimentation with the co-evolution of technology, user practices, and regulatory structures" take place (Schot and Geels, 2008, p. 538). Developments within and between niches and regimes take place against the background of the socio-technical 'landscape' which describes broader social, economic, political and cultural changes that are not open to unilateral change from actors within any single regime (Berkhout *et al.*, 2004). The three analytical levels of niche, regime and landscape form the theoretical basis of the multi-level perspective (MLP), a model which describes socio-technical systems as comprised of different levels of structuration (see Figure 1.1).

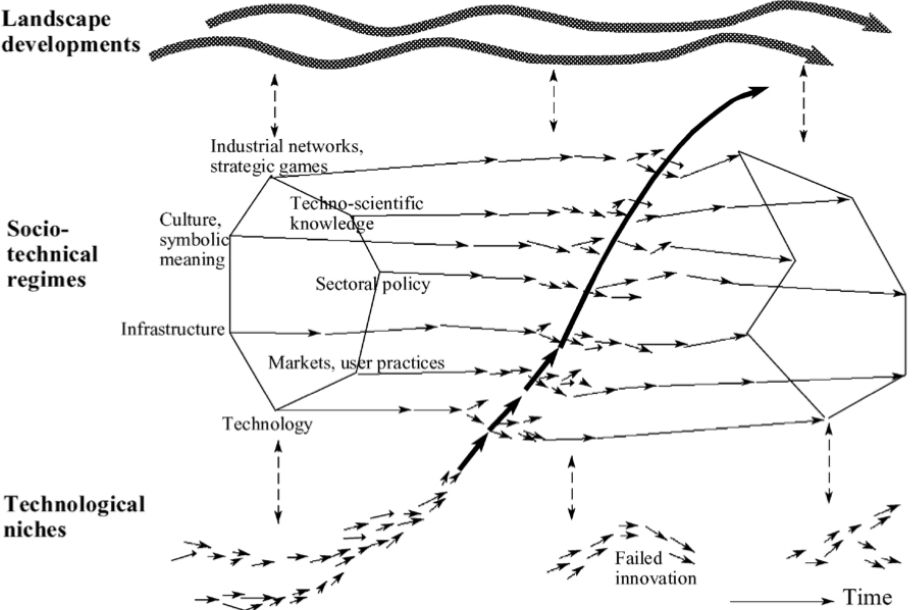


Figure 1.1: The multi-level perspective. Source: Geels, 2002, p. 1263.

While there are a number of different approaches to transitions theory (cf. Markard *et al.*, 2012), sustainability transitions generally applies this heuristic of systemic, socio-technical change to social innovations which are guided by normative, long-term (and contested) visions of sustainability (Farla *et al.*, 2012). The inquiry here focuses on social learning processes and socio-cultural context as well as specific technologies (Verheul and Vergragt, 1995), seeing reconfiguration of socio-technical relationships as opening up new realms of collective sustainable behaviours (Truffer, 2003). In this way, niches are conceptualised as a space for the emergence and transformation of new subjectivities framed around sustainability issues (ibid.). This occurs through learning processes which gradually lead to the embedding of particular sustainability visions in the social fabric (Hegger *et al.*, 2007), and visions occupy a central place in the sustainability transitions literature. Farla *et al.* (2012) identify three main challenges for future research on sustainability transitions: 1) developing the importance and dynamics of larger networks and collective action; 2) finding agency-sensitive approaches to understand what actors can (and cannot) achieve; and, 3) conceptualising how actor strategies and resources impact sustainability transitions at the system level.

In light of the foregoing observations about sustainability, and considering various critiques of the lack of clarity about the implicit assumptions and politics in many studies of socio-technical transitions (cf. Shove and Walker, 2007; Genus and Coles, 2008; Meadowcroft, 2009) as well as the 'quasi-evolutionary' theoretical assumptions and implicit knowledge mode which effectively divides the analyst and the analysed (cf. Ingold, 2000; Gibson-Graham, 2008), it is relevant to add a fourth concern about what kind of (sustainability) relations are implied and performed by this approach to studying social change. This thesis draws on insights from Radical Human Ecology and the philosophy of science to critically engage with transitions theory and create a theoretical framework for studying onto-epistemological transitions as transformations in the rules and visions that structure environment-making as a social activity. This is explored in detail in the development of the theoretical understanding of this thesis in the following chapter.

1.1.3 Transitioning to new forms of environment-making

On this background, the present study examines if and how transitions away from 'user-resource' conceptions of human-nature relationships can be studied as enactments of alternative onto-epistemological assumptions in alternative forms of environment-making. I believe that this kind of research has to acknowledge how current 'rules of environment-making' in Western societies are tied up with socio-material systems that are 'hard-wired' for consumption (Burgess *et al.*, 2003) and how socio-cultural beliefs, norms and practices underpin 'inconspicuous' consumption and tacit assumptions about nature as resource or 'standing reserve' (cf. Smith, 2011). Individuals are 'locked-in' to this social context, which is not just about material reality but includes everyday practical consciousness. Jackson (2005) puts it in the following terms:

> "... we must think of individual behaviour as being 'locked-in' not just in a static but also in a dynamic sense. We are locked into behavioural trends as much as and possibly more than we are locked into specific fixed behaviours" (p. 105).

Thus, finding ways to address the implicit nature of the 'rules' which guide dominant forms of environment-making seems to me to be a key challenge for sustainability research. The sustainability literature is riddled with paradoxes, like the (micro-economic) rebound effect[10] and the (macro-economic) Khazzoom-Brookes postulate[11], which highlight the problem of pursuing techno-centric forms of sustainability without considering the deeper assumptions embedded in such forms of environment-making. If efficiency gains alone are envisioned as the route to sustainability, it may well be that sustainability simply becomes a mere pursuit of elite forms of knowledge (Hobson, 2002).

Given the counter-intuitive nature of many of the problematics involved in debates about sustainability, it is imperative that the underlying 'rules and visions' of particular forms of environment-making are examined. As Røpke (1999) puts it: "the environmental benefits of a change in consumption practices in one area can easily be counterbalanced by increased consumption in other areas, if overall growth is not limited" (p. 401). The literature on sustainability shows a need to address the cultural narratives of growth, development, and progress and engage with the deeper social ideals and practices that shape everyday consumption patterns (Urhammer and Røpke, 2013). This requires interdisciplinary perspectives which acknowledge that "sustainability requires a realigning of development priorities away from the primary goal of economic growth towards wellbeing instead" (Seyfang, 2009, p. 23). Because sustainability transitions involve the transformation of subjectivities around normative, long-term visions of the future it is requisite to inquire into the role of cultural narratives in enacting alternate rules of environment-making. This in turn calls for directly engaging with the ways in which the notion of sustainability is imagined, storied and corroborated within peer groups. And it highlights the importance of community: notions of 'sustainability' or 'the good life' which guide the direction of social change are established and validated in interpretive communities (Hatton, 2007).

Grassroots innovations, conceptualised as situated sustainability experiments with an explicit focus on social learning and where rules and visions are different to the mainstream (Seyfang and Smith, 2007), provide a good starting point for an inquiry into new forms of environment-making. As catalysts of new knowledge and learning processes, grassroots innovations are prospective sites of transformative sustainability visions and (counter-)narratives, and when alternative knowledges become embodied in new practices grassroots innovations become sources of socio-cultural transformation, creating new possibilities for living differently. In this way, grassroots innovations are potential

[10]Where energy (or resource) savings from more energy efficient technology can be offset by increases in consumption (Binswanger, 2001).

[11]Which shows that increased energy efficiency on a macro-economic scale can actually increase energy use because, overall, more money is invested in energy-intensive goods and services than would be the case without the efficiency gain (Monbiot, 2007).

sites of transition not just in material practices but in worldviews: sources of transformation in the experience and interpretation of reality which give rise to new ways of being and thinking. Current research on grassroots innovations has furthered an understanding of how alternative sustainability visions are driving participation in, and growth of, grassroots initiatives by conceptualising subjectivities as co-constructed in social learning processes which gradually lead to the embedding of new sustainability concepts in social contexts (cf. section 2.1). However, more emphatically developing an understanding of how grassroots innovations become sites for transformation in onto-epistemological assumptions about the world is needed to discern how they nurture particular forms of sustainabilities and how different (radical) visions of sustainability shape the kind of actions grassroots initiatives engage with.

1.2 Framing and composition of the thesis

A perhaps obvious, but necessary, point to make is that this research is by nature interdisciplinary combining understandings from sustainability transitions, Radical Human Ecology and eco-linguistics with ethnographic, narrative and participatory methods. It is now almost a given that research on sustainability is interdisciplinary in style considering the complexity of the problematics pertaining to this topic (Gallopín *et al.*, 2001). Examining worldviews or onto-epistemologies only adds to this imperative: the nature of the knowledges involved in such research calls for a variety of approaches to knowing *about* them. Furthermore, as Morin (2007) affirms, theorising profoundly complex issues like sustainability means that "[t]he principle of disjunction, of separation (between objects, between disciplines, between notions, between subject and object of knowledge), should be substituted by a principle that maintains the distinction, but that tries to establish the relation" (p. 11). In parallel, we can say that worldviews are not simply 'in our heads' we are also *in them* and knowing about them requires that we accept positions – and gain competences – as both producers and products of our onto-epistemological beliefs about the world. As a performative research project that seeks to overcome the tendencies of the modern project to erect new conceptual dualisms (cf. Ekins, 1992), the theoretical and methodological orientations of this thesis aim to embody a knowledge mode which avoids (re)producing the binary framework of society/culture vs. environment/nature by proceeding in a way which "neither imitates the older orders nor denies their validity altogether" (Bohm, 2004a, p. 17). This resolve has not always been an easy practice: as a product of my own worldview I have frequently encountered my own inabilities, habits and limits. And so this study is also an exploration of researching as a transformative practice as it is my contention that speaking of and evaluating sustainability in practice is necessarily a form of participation in the relations and activities that are being examined.

The empirical research has been undertaken with the Dark Mountain Project, a cultural movement that has recently emerged from the UK and which describes itself as "a

network of writers, artists and thinkers who have stopped believing the stories our civilisation tells itself"[12]. The sustainability challenge, in the terms used by the Dark Mountain Project, entails *uncivilising* and unlearning many of the assumptions embedded in the Western meta-narrative of progress. The work challenged both my ideas about social change and my identity as a researcher and it is therefore also marked by the gradual evolution of my own worldview and way of thinking. As an in-depth qualitative study of onto-epistemologies undertaken with participants in a network which has formed in part around online interactions, I have had to engage with a variety of methods which convey differing knowledges in different activities and contexts. I have also had to include my own experience and lifeworld as an object for reflection (I explain the implications of this further in the methodology). In this way, the empirical chapters are written as an ethnography drawing on participatory methods, phenomenological practice, and narrative inquiry. The aspiration has been to create an immersive 'virtual reality' (cf. Flyvbjerg, 2006) for readers to be able to explore my findings on their own terms.

1.2.1 Research questions

The starting point for this thesis is, as outlined above, the need to understand the ways in which the sustainability challenge is narrated within interpretive communities and how this affects individual and collective worldviews and actions. Therefore, the overarching question that guides the research is:

How do sustainability narratives affect lifeworlds within grassroots innovations?

In the course of developing the theoretical framework and undertaking the empirical research, four further questions were identified in order to help answering that broader question:

1. *How do sustainability narratives inform what kinds of knowledge and action participants engage with in grassroots innovations?*
2. *How are transformations in individual and collective cultural narratives expressed in participants' worldviews and actions?*
3. *How do sustainability narratives affect the organisation and diffusion of grassroots innovations?*
4. *What is the role of stories in enabling emerging practices and tools for social change?*

These questions grew out of an understanding of mutual narration of the sustainability challenge as an activity which positions narrators within wider cultural narratives, generates a sense of self/other and gives meaning to human-nature relationships. In addressing these questions, this thesis seeks to make a contribution to understanding transformations

[12]See: http://dark-mountain.net/.

in worldviews within situated interpretive communities and to conceptualising how alternative sustainability visions are imagined and embodied in grassroots innovations. It does so by building a theoretical understanding of qualitative changes in the rules and visions that guide particular forms of environment-making, constructing a methodological framework for researching onto-epistemological change and conducting an empirical case study. In this way, the thesis moves three related research agendas on sustainability forward as it aims to: 1) show how social change and innovation can be studied without reproducing the division between analyst and analysed inherent to transitions theory; 2) construct a transformative, transparent and emergent methodological framework for studying onto-epistemological change *with* research participants; and 3) enable new sustainabilities by creating a 'virtual reality' which allows the reader to query the arguments of this thesis and become sensitised to the problematics it addresses.

I have come to see my personal process as part of a wider cultural and academic current which is in the throes of transforming modernistic and reductive assumptions about the self and the wider world (cf. Varela *et al.*, 1991; Ekins, 1992; Bohm and Hiley, 1993; Norgaard, 1994; Capra, 1996; Lovelock, 2000; Gibson-Graham, 2008; McGilchrist, 2009; Latour, 2010; Ingold, 2011; Williams *et al.*, 2012). Into what, is a question that cannot be answered quite yet – at least for me – and for this reason it is necessary to acknowledge budding sustainability experiments for what they are: seeds of change that have yet to flourish, and to avoid projecting unrealistic hopes or powers onto them in our search for ways of addressing the momentous challenge of sustainability. Nonetheless, I hope to have shown that a wider qualitative change in experiencing and perceiving 'nature' and the problematics pertaining to 'sustainability' is possible and to have established theoretical and practical pointers for further work in this vein. The following section provides an overview of the structure of the thesis.

1.2.2 Outline of the thesis

The next chapter begins with a review of the existing literature on grassroots innovations, its objectives and current research challenges. This provides the starting point for building a theoretical understanding of sustainability innovations as instances of re-imagining human-nature relationships and conceptualising grassroots sustainability experiments as sites of transformation in worldviews. The chapter then explicates how onto-epistemological transitions can be studied as transformations within social life, that is, as qualitative changes in how the world is experienced and known. It does this by contrasting the theoretical framework of transitions theory, which ultimately isolates actors and their environments, with approaches that take relational coherence and context as their starting point. This exposition suggests that research on onto-epistemological transformation needs to avoid certain modes of theorising if it wishes to discontinue the assumptions inherent to the user-resource perspective on sustainability. The rest of the chapter continues to expound how onto-epistemological transitions can be studied by examining the rules and visions that guide particular forms of environment-making. To do this, it draws on

insights from across literatures on the philosophy of science, Radical Human Ecology, eco-linguistics and narrative sociology.

Chapter 3 then proceeds to create a methodological framework for studying changes in onto-epistemologies. Grounding the research in approaches spanning ethnography, phenomenology, narrative inquiry and participatory research, the chapter explains how the methods for this study were designed to introduce a radical transparency into the research and generate an emergent framework for the case study. Through the approach of 'following the narrative', the aim has been to produce a 'virtual reality' which allows the reader to access and assess the findings on their own terms. This method is explained in detail as are the ethics and specific strategies for ensuring accountability. The chapter then describes how the data was collected, interpreted and patterned in a recursive movement between observation, reflection, analysis and theory. Lastly, the construction of the empirical chapters is discussed and, as much of the data which forms the empirical basis of this thesis is publicly available, guiding comments for following the various data points back to their sources are provided.

Chapters 4-6 present an in-depth ethnographic narrative of the Dark Mountain Project and the ways in which participants explore aspects of individual and collective worldviews in mutual inquiries. Chapter 4 considers how the Dark Mountain narrative constitutes an alternative narrative framing of current social-ecological crises which allows participants to position themselves differently in relation to mainstream narratives about climate- and environmental change. It shows how the Dark Mountain Project can be viewed from different perspectives and proposes that a key quality and point of attraction for participants is its ambiguity as a space of inquiry. Chapter 5 inquires into the ways in which participants re-imagine their lifeworld by exploring new ways of speaking and interacting in conversations and creative practices. It also explores how new meanings can emerge outside deeper, acculturated ways of seeing by questioning language and concepts that has been naturalised as 'real'. And Chapter 6 probes how new ideas and experiences are embodied in participants' lives through acquiring new attitudes and skills as well as it considers how new social institutions emerge from the activities within the Dark Mountain Project. The three chapters each address different aspects of the research questions outlined above.

Finally, Chapter 7 concludes this thesis by answering each of the research questions, explicating how re-narrating cultural narratives of sustainability opens up for transforming the meanings, stories and practices that are shaped by the user-resource view of human-nature relations, and discussing the implications of the empirical findings for the theoretical understanding of sustainability transitions. This chapter suggests that the critical factor in transforming modes of environment-making is not so much particular sustainability visions or narratives but the creation of supportive spaces which can hold open and inclusive inquiries into the meaning of particular sustainabilities. This has, if accepted, wide-ranging significance for practicing and theorising sustainability and the chapter ends with proposing ways that further research on onto-epistemological transitions can create new possibilities for changes in worldviews beyond grassroots innovations.

Chapter 2

Onto-epistemological transitions towards sustainability

> When we see a "problem", whether pollution, carbon dioxide, or whatever, we then say, "We have got to solve that problem." But we are constantly producing that sort of problem – not just that particular problem, but that sort of problem – by the way we go on with our thought. If we can keep on thinking that the world is there solely for our convenience, then we are going to exploit it in some other way, and we are going to make another problem somewhere.
>
> *David Bohm in* On Dialogue

This chapter examines how the sustainability challenge can be understood and approached as a question of transformations in human-nature relations. By conceptualising grassroots innovations as sites of transformation in the deeper onto-epistemological assumptions that guide environment-making, I explore how changes in worldviews can be known and studied. On this basis, a framework for understanding the co-production of ontologies and epistemologies is developed with a view to undertaking an empirical investigation of onto-epistemological transformation in grassroots innovations. Section 2.1 reviews the literature on grassroots innovations, outlines current research challenges in this emerging field and positions this study in relation to the need for understanding the role of narratives and visions in the development of particular sustainabilities within grassroots projects. Section 2.2 clarifies how the idea of onto-epistemological transitions is conceptualised in this thesis and explains my theoretical approach through a critical assessment and revision of the theoretical assumptions concerning social change in transitions theory. The key elements of the theoretical framework of this thesis are then elaborated in section 2.3 which sets out the specific ways in which onto-epistemological transformation is studied in this research.

2.1 Grassroots innovations for sustainable consumption

If the sustainability challenge involves cultivating new rules and visions of environment-making which go beyond the binary of society vs. nature, this suggests that sustainability research needs to engage with the social beliefs and cultural narratives that express this paradigm. And this means addressing people not just as individuals but in the communities and locales which structure their lives because, as Hale (2010) observes, "[i]ndividual action on the scale necessary will only emerge through collective decisions in the networks and communities with which people have strong personal affiliations, and which can give them both the motive and opportunity to act" (p. 263). Drawing on a diversity of approaches to studying grassroots environmental action, the emerging field of grassroots innovations inquires into the plurality of knowledges, identities, social contexts and structural relations that have potential to transform dominant unsustainable practices from the bottom up. Building on the wider literatures on sustainability transitions, sustainable consumption and community activism, Seyfang and Smith (2007) define grassroots innovations as:

> "networks of activists and organisations generating novel bottom–up solutions for sustainable development; solutions that respond to the local situation and the interests and values of the communities involved. In contrast to mainstream business greening, grassroots initiatives operate in civil society arenas and involve committed activists experimenting with social innovations as well as using greener technologies" (ibid., p. 585).

Viewing such networks of activists and organisations as innovative niches (cf. section 1.1.2), the focus of research on grassroots innovations is understanding the learning processes that take place within civil society sustainability experiments. In this way, community initiatives are theorised as ‘green niches’ that explore problem framings and practical solutions for sustainability.

Seeing the grassroots as sites of ‘innovative diversity’ where ‘the rules as different’, research on grassroots innovations is concerned with "the contexts, actors and processes under which niche lessons are able or unable to translate into mainstream situations (and transform sustainabilities)" (ibid., p. 598). The focus of analysis is "the social networks, learning processes, expectations and enrolment of actors and resources in emerging niche practices" (ibid., p. 590). Seyfang and Smith identify two main challenges for grassroots innovations: the first is related to intrinsic challenges around internal organisation and the other is related to diffusion challenges around external take up of niche innovations. They distinguish between ‘strategic’ and ‘simple’ niches, the former seeking reform and proliferation while the latter are not explicitly concerned with expansion. The objective of research in this area is to "gain a better understanding of the potential and needs of grassroots initiatives, as well as insights into the challenges they face and their possible

solutions" (ibid., p. 585). Thus, this research agenda proposes to build theoretical frameworks that focus on how contextualised knowledges and actions can bring about sustainability outcomes and it raises important questions related to the normative understandings and enactments of sustainability within the grassroots (and more widely in sustainability research).

2.1.1 Overview of the field and current research challenges

Initial research on grassroots innovations has been undertaken in projects investigating areas such as community energy, local food networks, complementary currencies and sustainable housing. Case studies on organic food networks (Seyfang, 2007), community housing (Seyfang *et al.*, 2010), energy transitions (Hielscher *et al.*, 2012; Smith, 2012; Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012; Seyfang *et al.*, 2013), and complementary currencies (Seyfang and Longhurst, 2013a,b; Longhurst, 2013) have examined questions about how grassroots innovations develop and diffuse in practice. While Seyfang and Smith (2007) take the lenses of sustainable consumption and socio-technical transitions as their theoretical starting points, later research has seen the field embrace other theories, notably social practice theory (e.g. Hargreaves *et al.*, 2011, 2013b), new social movement theories (e.g. Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012; Smith *et al.*, 2013), and the literature on social-ecological systems (e.g. Smith and Stirling, 2008 and Haxeltine and Seyfang, 2009). In addition to these articles, a number of studies have also explored the deeper theoretical foundations for grassroots innovations, including work on green niches (Smith and Raven, 2012), the multi-level perspective (MLP) and sustainability transitions (Smith *et al.*, 2010), power relationships and dynamics between green niches and commercial regimes (Hess, 2013), the significance of local contexts and the role of intermediaries in the development of grassroots innovations (Ornetzeder and Rohracher, 2013; Hargreaves *et al.*, 2013a), as well as comparative studies (Smith *et al.*, 2013).

From this body of work some of the insights in the original research agenda have been expanded. Seyfang's (2009) study of community housing, organic food networks and complementary currencies shows how grassroots innovations are important 'generators of ecological citizenship values and practices' and identifies three ways in which such values and practices spread: through scaling up (growth in scale), replication (multiplication), and translation (learning is taken up by mainstream). Smith's (2007) investigation of eco-housing and organic food initiatives further develops the ways in which sustainabilities translate from grassroots to mainstream. Seyfang and Haxeltine (2012) identify how awareness of social-psychological aspects of grassroots innovations (such as identity, belonging, purpose, and community) are critical to resolve tensions between internal organisation and external diffusion. Comparing the appropriate technology movement with current grassroots movements around technologies for social inclusion in Latin America, Smith *et al.* (2013) find this tension to involve three fundamental and enduring challenges for grassroots innovations; they have to navigate being: 1) locally-specific, yet widely-applicable; 2) appropriate to, yet transforming situations; and 3) project-based solutions,

yet seeking structural change. From this perspective three different but related forms of (contested) knowledge production can be identified within grassroots innovations: ethnographic (grassroots ingenuity), instrumental (empowering inclusion), and critical (structural critique).

Hargreaves *et al.* (2013a) explore the role of intermediaries in building institutions, sharing information, providing tools and resources, offering professional advice and engaging with policy makers. They find that intermediation is more about *opening up spaces for new kinds of activity* rather than developing "a single successful approach or a strategic vision for its growth and diffusion" (p. 879). A key challenge found across many of the studies on grassroots innovation is securing the necessary resources for activities (Hielscher *et al.*, 2012; Seyfang and Longhurst, 2013b). In a study of local food networks in England, Kirwan *et al.* (2013) find that there is a real danger that grassroots innovations end up spending a disproportionate amount of time and energy securing resources rather than focussing on their core needs. Hess (2013) finds that grassroots innovations in established industrial fields face substantial opposition and that their inability to match the resources and power of corporate structures diminish their influence. In their study of community growing projects, White and Stirling (2013) suggest that the development of grassroots innovations is best understood as taking place within the context of multiple provisioning systems with a diversity of stakeholders, motivations and identities (e.g. 'food' initiatives are just as much about 'education' and 'health' as they are about growing). This opens up for exploring how grassroots innovations identify and connect across 'niches', 'fields', 'regimes' or 'systems of provision'.

In a special issue on grassroots innovations in *Global Environmental Change*, Smith and Seyfang (2013) establish four main challenges for current research on grassroots innovations:

- whether and how grassroots innovators network with one another;
- the extent to which movements for grassroots innovation approaches exist and how they operate;
- whether and how innovations diffuse through processes of replication, scaling-up, and translation into institutions; and,
- whether or not these developments constitute alternative pathways for sustainability.

As initial studies in this emerging field show, "[g]rassroots innovations are no respecters of boundaries" (ibid., p. 829) and, as such, grassroots activities, objectives, roles and domains often evade classification into neat categories. In this way, applying theoretical concepts and frameworks from literatures that do not pay sufficient attention to the contested and plural nature of core concepts like sustainability, social innovation, and the grassroots is not straightforward. In light of the foregoing concerns about how underlying onto-epistemological assumptions frame the human-nature relationships implied by

the notion of sustainability, a further challenge can be added to this list: what is the role of sustainability narratives and visions in the structuring, mobilisation and diffusion of particular forms of environment-making in grassroots innovations?

This question cuts across all of the four research challenges raised above in that it asks about how assumptions about sustainability affect grassroots innovations and whether they link particular projects and initiatives beyond the specific practices and strategies they engage. It builds on the understanding in this emerging field that innovation should not be understood in a narrow technological sense nor in a provisional sense of technical *and* social, but should rather be seen from within the practices, identities, institutions and ideas that enable sustainable forms of living. In this way, innovation is as much about the assumptions about, and visions of, sustainability that are enacted in particular practices as it is about socio-technical 'solutions'. Grassroots innovations are different from typical market-based innovations as they originate in the social economy and are driven by concerns with particular social or ecological problems (Seyfang and Smith, 2007). As such, 'innovation' includes producing transformative agencies, narratives and networks which undermine dominant (unsustainable) practices (Smith and Raven, 2012). Because subjectivity, agency, and normativity are ultimately storied or scripted within a wider cultural meta-narrative, asking about the role of narratives in the development of grassroots innovations opens up for approaching innovation as conceptual just as much as social or technical. Challenging the relations, values, identities, visions, attitudes and lifestyles that are implied by the 'lock-in' of fixed behaviours, social contexts and cultural narratives could in this way present a potential for transforming the rules that guide environment-making.

2.1.2 Conceptualising grassroots (sustainability) innovations as transformations in ontology and epistemology

This thesis argues that, at a historical moment where there is a genuine prospect of short-term failure in key social, economic and biological systems which support human and non-human life (cf. Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 2013), the dominant user-resource perspective on sustainability is no longer sufficient to enable new ways of living. Alternative sustainability narratives and visions in grassroots innovations could provide clues to ways of being and thinking that embody new forms of human-nature relations and which make unsustainable ways of life (more) unacceptable, meaningless or even unimaginable. This study inquires into this aspect of grassroots innovations by examining the 'rules that guide environment-making' (cf. Moore, 2013), or, in other words, the onto-epistemological assumptions that underpin the ideas, visions, concepts and stories that organise and structure (un)sustainable ways of living (section 2.3 expands on this). The key to enacting new forms of life is thus not perceived to be about innovation per se but about *the relations that guide new forms of environment-making*. Rather than casting innovation simply as socio-technical intervention in human systems of consumption and production, this study sees innovation just as much as conceptual: sustainability innovations implicitly involve a (re)imagining of human-nature relationships.

While it might at first sight seem peculiar to engage with assumptions about being and knowing in a study about grassroots innovations and sustainability transitions, this should be understood from the perspective that the root of the sustainability challenge is metaphysical: the condition of *un*sustainability has arisen from dominant onto-epistemological beliefs which disregard the many ways in which the fates of the human and more-than-human worlds are intertwined. To be clear, a transformation in onto-epistemological assumptions implies a corresponding change in subjectivity and agency – it means the world is experienced as qualitatively different because "the very framework of people's reality structures" have altered (McIntosh, 2012b, p. 235). This has effects for a subject's way of being in the world and way of thinking about the world. So an onto-epistemological transition is conceptualised as making new ways of being, thinking and doing available for the subjects involved. Further, this is viewed as a radical form of innovation which gives expression to new relations between human and more-than-human worlds – here, innovation is not seen narrowly as modification of artifacts or agencies but pertaining more broadly to what sort of entities are granted agency. Viewing innovation as inextricably entangled in more-than-human nature positions sustainability scholarship as an inquiry into what kind of relationships are (re)produced and enacted within nature-as-matrix (the meaning of this term is further elaborated in section 2.2.3). This is the work that the term 'environment-making' (cf. Moore, 2013) is employed to do: it both describes particular forms of human-nature relationships (such as the user-resource relation) and opens up for examining the deeper 'rules' that structure those relationships (the onto-epistemological assumptions that give rise to specific modes of being and thinking).

The beliefs, concepts and visions which guide a change in human relations with more-than-human nature are thus seen as key to understanding what kind of sustainabilities emerge from grassroots innovations. And, because nature and society are part of an imaginary which is both understood and represented narratively, the role of narratives in enabling new sustainability practices and ways of doing is central. Jerome Bruner observes that "one important way of characterizing a culture is by the narrative models it makes available for describing the course of a life" (2004, p. 694). Narratives, as habitual ways of speaking and conceptualising, "become recipes for structuring experience itself, for laying down routes into memory, for not only guiding the life narrative up to the present but directing it into the future" (ibid., 708), so that they eventually "create the realities they purport to describe" (Atkinson and Delamont, 2006, p. xxxiv). As cultural narratives in this way construe how people understand 'nature', as well as their relationship with social and ecological place and their sense of self, they directly affect what actions are perceived as sensible in order to achieve sustainability as well as what is accepted as valid forms of knowledge. Sustainability narratives tell a story of what the challenge of sustainability is about and what actions make sense to meet this challenge. At the same time, narratives express particular worldviews, identities, and normativities held within interpretive communities which sanction appropriate avenues of action (Squire, 2008).

As localities where 'the rules are different', grassroots innovations are a good starting point for an inquiry into alternative sustainability narratives. Investigating how grassroots

innovations constitute communities of interpretation, narrative-building and meaning-making, opens up for better understanding if and how they generate change through (de)stabilising particular narratives, concepts and meanings. By seeding change in sustainability narratives, grassroots innovations are potentially not just building alternative networks and infrastructures but transforming the ways of being and thinking which characterise unsustainable forms of living in the first place. While the existing literature on grassroots innovations provides a basis for theorising the formation and diffusion of particular radical social innovations, little is known about the practical and experiential aspects of qualitative changes in worldviews within grassroots projects. This thesis aims to address this gap by providing a coherent framework for thinking about sustainability as a quality of relationship between human and more-than-human worlds. The deeper question this thesis grapples with is *how sustainability narratives affect lifeworlds within grassroots innovations* and the ways in which sustainabilities are envisioned and enacted. Four supporting questions have been formulated to help answer this question:

1. *How do sustainability narratives inform what kinds of knowledge and action participants engage with in grassroots innovations?*
2. *How are transformations in individual and collective cultural narratives expressed in participants' worldviews and actions?*
3. *How do sustainability narratives affect the organisation and diffusion of grassroots innovations?*
4. *What is the role of stories in enabling emerging practices and tools for social change?*

The remainder of this chapter builds an understanding of the relation between narratives and worldviews, and creates a theoretical framework for answering these questions. It explores how concepts and insights from the literatures on Radical Human Ecology, complexity science, (counter-)narratives and eco-linguistics can aid a more detailed understanding of transitions in epistemology and ontology with a view to undertaking an empirical investigation of transformation in onto-epistemologies. The next section will substantiate the meaning of onto-epistemological transitions, expand the basic framework of this study and provide a basis for theorising social phenomena from the perspective of humanity-in-nature. Section 2.3 will then describe how onto-epistemological transitions can be studied as enactments of 'alternate realities' and introduce the key concepts and ideas that guide the empirical investigation of this thesis.

2.2 Onto-epistemological transitions

The envisioning and enactment of qualitatively different relationships to those of the user-resource perspective implies a deeper transformation in ontology and epistemology, or the perceived nature of being and knowing. A transformation in ontology (*what is* or what constitutes the phenomenal world) here indicates a change in someone's sense of being

and of being human. Correspondingly, a transformation in epistemology (*ways of knowing* or what counts as knowledge) denotes a change in what someone considers valid knowledge and how knowledge is derived. 'Onto-epistemology' therefore refers to the beliefs or assumptions that 'shape individual and social consciousness' and 'people's sense of being and what being human means' (McIntosh, 2012a, p. 40). Acknowledging that "the deeper recesses of human agency are inevitably located in our onto-epistemological relationship to the world" (Williams *et al.*, 2012, p. 4), a change in onto-epistemology is in this way seen as opening new possibilities for people to experience and engage differently with the wider cosmos – a shift which is revealed and expressed in the personal and collective narratives that describe positionalities and context. This section outlines the importance of ontological and epistemological assumptions for the concept of sustainability, specifies the meaning of onto-epistemological transitions and clarifies how transformations in how the world is experienced and known are approached and theorised in this study. This explication also illustrates how social research can move away from modes of theorising which reproduce the assumptions of the user-resource view.

Concerned with questions of being, ontology shapes the experience of and participation in the world profoundly: my engagement with some*thing* depends on what kind of existence I consider this thing to have and whether I see it as real or unreal. Because it is impossible to know the whole of existence in a dynamic and evolving universe (Bohm and Hiley, 1993), I am left to make assumptions about the overall nature of existence and reality. Such assumptions about existence (e.g. men and women are fundamentally different, genetic makeup matters more than culture, race decides intelligence, trees have language, gods exists, animals are insentient) affect my interactions in the world. If I believe I exist within a hierarchy of being, I will tend to perceive humans – with their advanced language, thoughts and feelings – as separate and higher than other entities in the natural world. It is in this way that the ontological hierachy of God-Humanity-Nature which characterises modernity (cf. Curry, 2006; Smith, 2011) supports a worldview which perceives nature as 'resource' or 'raw materials' and humanity as 'users' or 'managers' whose task it is to optimise the consumption of natural 'assets' in order to achieve sustainability – even if God is 'crossed out' in this hierarchy as Latour (1992) explains. On the other hand, if I perceive myself as 'already inside' a densely woven web of ecologies, as participant in myriad fields of life without a fixed position in a given existential order, I may see not forest 'resources' or 'services' provided by a neutral background environment, but other forms of life which are co-creators of the world I inhabit (cf. Capra, 1996). While these two contrasting assumptions or beliefs are typecast, they illustrate the difference between sustainability as a goal or an index (a quantified future target to reach) and sustainability as relation (a quality of relationship). Ontology in this way deeply affects personal and collective ways of being together.

A change in assumptions about existence entails a concurrent transformation in epistemology – the process of knowing or what is considered as sound knowledge. Knowing, in the context of the modern constitution, is typically understood as involving a knower

or observer (a 'self' or an 'I') which receives and interprets information from surrounding social phenomena or the wider external world (cf. Marsh and Stoker, 2002). In this conception, I subjectively *know* about this independently existing and objective world by way of representing it in my mind. I can then – with the right application of method – derive true or accurate knowledge about the known by deducing from these representations (abstract) universal laws which govern the universe. And because I can in turn encode this information in symbolic thought or notation, knowledge itself appears separate from the knower and from life: it can be stored as equations and maxims in books or as bits on a hard-drive (cf. Midgley, 2004). At the heart of this epistemological outlook is a fallacious assumption of a division between knower and known which has been overturned by insights across a range of fields, including cybernetics, complexity theory and quantum physics (in this study I draw in particular on the works of Gregory Bateson, Edgar Morin and David Bohm respectively). These understandings show that *knower* (e.g. organism) and *known* (e.g. environment) are inseparable and that *knowing* is not a process of representation of an external world but of 'bringing forth a world' according to the structure of a being's perceptual-biological constitution (Capra, 1996). This is of vital importance in understanding the sustainability challenge because the consequences are such that "[i]f we degrade [the environment], we degrade ourselves, and if we destroy it, we destroy ourselves" (Morin, 2007, p. 19). Epistemology thus has to do with the explanatory models, or ways of thinking, one engages with to explain worldly phenomena.

Taken together, people's ontologies (models of reality) and epistemologies (theories of knowledge) structure their worldview – how they experience and make sense of the world[1]. In this text, 'onto-epistemological change' is used to denote a shift in someone's worldview, i.e. in her assumptions about being and knowing which presents a qualitative different perspective on and relationship between subject and object[2]. If such a shift in the 'deeper recesses of agency' takes place, new avenues of action become possible. At the same time, a change in onto-epistemological commitments implies a transformation in the 'experience of reality' and the 'corresponding experience of relationship' between self and other (Williams *et al.*, 2012, p. 4) which creates a ground for new ways of being in and thinking about the world (section 2.3 continues to examine how this change can be conceptualised). Changes in ways of being and thinking are evidently part and parcel of the development of human societies and they have been studied from a variety of perspectives, e.g. as the transformation of social relations (Polanyi, 1957), rationalisation of society (Weber, 1946), paradigm shifts (Kuhn, 1970) and change in cultural mythology (Campbell, 1969). While historical transformations in ontology and epistemology are uncontroversial, it is perhaps less clear how to identify and theorise such changes in

[1]The term 'worldview' has a long and windy history as a philosophical term which falls outside the scope of this thesis. In this text I take 'worldview' to mean 'sets of experience and assumptions about reality' (McIntosh, 2012a) which allow people to construct a 'global image of the world' (Vidal, 2008) and thus help them make sense of new experiences. Ontological and epistemological assumptions are therefore integral components of worldviews.

[2]The term is thus employed to indicate a change in personal *commitment* or *perspective* and not in a theological sense to signify one sort of substance turning into another form of substance.

the present. The rest of this section considers how this can be done in the context of the present study. I will clarify the particular approaches and concepts involved in studying a transformation of onto-epistemological assumptions further in section 2.3 but first I will substantiate the meaning of a *transition* in onto-epistemology and engage critically with the conceptualisation of social change in transition theory in order to develop a framework for studying onto-epistemological transitions. The next sections examine the ontological and epistemological assumptions in transition theory while section 2.2.3 shows why a 'quasi-evolutionary' approach to studying changes in ways of being and thinking is problematic. Section 2.2.4 then goes on to describe how this thesis conceives of broader, collective changes in worldviews and ways of being as a transition.

2.2.1 Transitions theory and social change

The Oxford English Dictionary defines transition (n.)[3] as "a passing or passage from one condition, action, or (rarely) place, to another; change" and transition (v.)[4] as "to make or undergo a transition (from one state, system, etc. to or into another); to change over or switch". Etymologically the word derives from the latin 'transire' meaning *going across or over*. As a word, transition therefore aptly describes what a change in worldview might mean: a passage to a different condition of being or thinking, implying the crossing over of certain thresholds as well as qualitative changes in underlying structures. In relation to the notion of sustainability transitions being characterised by fundamental changes or adjustments in social and technological relationships, onto-epistemological transition would then be concerned with qualitative changes in the organising assumptions and beliefs that structure those relationships.

However, the notion of transition in grassroots innovations carries with it theoretical assumptions from the wider field of transition theory which explains social change partly in terms of Universal Darwinism (i.e. the application of Darwinian theory beyond biology) and which retains some of the epistemological fallacies identified by recent ecological thinking as outlined above. Dutch transition theory originates in the 'quasi-evolutionary' theories of the Twente school which "aimed to make evolutionary variation–selection–retention mechanisms more sociological via crossovers with interpretivism/constructivism" (Geels, 2010, p. 504) and this evolutionary view of innovation carries with it – at least in outlook – the ontological separation between variation and selection processes implied in evolutionary biology, which does not self-evidently apply to sociocultural processes (Lane *et al.*, 2009). A (neo)Darwinian approach to explaining

[3]"transition, n.". OED Online. June 2014. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/204815 [accessed 10.07.14].

[4]"transition, v.". OED Online. June 2014. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/242997 [accessed 10.07.14].

social and cultural development seems insufficient theoretically[5] and therefore my conception of the term transition differs from transition theory in significant ways (see also section 2.2.4). To see how the onto-epistemological assumptions of transition theory affect its understanding of, and approach to, researching sustainability it is necessary to briefly outline the key premises of this theoretical framework.

In the Dutch variant of transition theory, a transition is a system-wide transformation of the rules – encompassing formal regulations, normative assumptions and cognitive heuristics (Scott, 1995) – which guide or structure 'organisational fields', denoting a community of interacting groups (Geels and Schot, 2007). Building on Nelson and Winter's (1982) concept of the 'technological regime' as a domain where the cognitive routines of different actors are co-ordinated, Rip and Kemp (1998) widened this idea to include not just routines but the wider cognitive 'rule-set' or 'grammar' which is "embedded in a complex of engineering practices, production process technologies, product characteristics, skills and procedures, ways of handling relevant artefacts and persons, ways of defining problems; all of them embedded in institutions and infrastructures" (p. 338). Following Giddens (1984), transition theory views rules as existing primarily in practice: actors are at the same time rule-followers and rule-makers (Geels, 2011). Seeing rule structures as gradually rigidifying when moving from individual to community to wider organisational field, rules become constraining institutional habits and routines which are effectively reproduced in practice by narrowing the 'search space' for new ideas, practices and visions (ibid.). This is why transition theory sees innovation within socio-technical regimes as incremental and looks to niches, conceived as 'protected spaces' where rule structures are less rigid, for 'path-breaking' innovations (Smith and Raven, 2012).

The idea of *rules* being the element where transition 'occurs' potentially sits well with the notion of ontological and epistemological transformation: it incorporates foundational assumptions, beliefs and narratives as well as their internal relation or structure. But the explanatory model for the development of, and relationship between, different levels of rule structuration is a 'quasi-evolutionary' model, which explains socio-technical transitions in terms of variation-selection processes (Geels, 2005). The co-ordination of rule structures in socio-technical regimes (and in niches although rules are less stable and hence less constraining here) functions as retention or hereditary mechanism, which 'replicate' rules (Geels, 2010). As Hodgson (2002) explains:

> "Darwinian evolution is not tied to the specifics of genes or DNA: essentially it requires some mechanism of inheritance. On planet Earth, we find that DNA has the

[5]Here, I follow Tim Ingold who explains that biological form is an emergent property of the whole evolutionary system rather than an expression of an inherent design specified in the genome. In this way, organisms are not products of a timeless variation-selection mechanism but producers (and products) of their evolution. Ingold observes: "In order to explain how change can occur in the absence of significant genetic modification, orthodox evolutionary theory has had to conceive of a 'second track', of culture history, superimposed upon the baseline of an evolved genotypic heritage. Once it is realised, however, that capacities are constituted within developmental systems, rather than carried with the genes as a biological endowment, we can begin to see how the dichotomies between biology and culture, and between evolution and history, can be dispensed with" (2000, p. 385).

> capacity to replicate. But other ‘replicators’ may exist, on Earth and elsewhere. One possible and relevant example is the propensity of human beings to communicate, conform and imitate, making the replication or inheritance of customs, routines, habits and ideas a key feature of human socio-economic systems" (p. 270).

Socio-technical regimes are conceptualised as that level of structuration where certain rule-sets have become stable and dominant across the different communities involved (such as policy-makers, market actors, scientists, civil society), but importantly regimes are ‘dynamically stable’ experiencing constant pressure from lower and higher levels of structuration (Geels, 2005). The different levels of structuration were originally envisioned as sitting within a ‘nested hierarchy’ of niches, regimes and landscapes (see Figure 2.1), but later conceptualisations have rather referred to ‘levels of structuration’ which denote degrees of stability of practices rather than hierarchically understood entities (Geels, 2011). The various pressures coming from socio-technical niches and landscape, in combination with internal reform, together constitute the selection environment which determine the reproduction of rules within the regime (Geels and Schot, 2007).

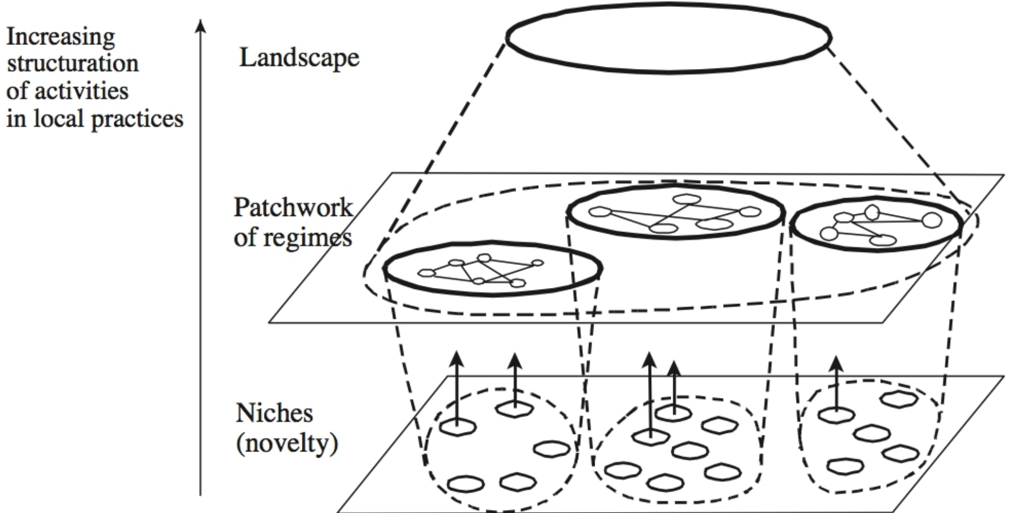


Figure 2.1: Niche-regimes-landscape as nested hierarchy. Source: Geels, 2005, p. 684.

These selection pressures work at different levels of structuration (niche and regime) where ‘adaptive agents’ engage with different problematics in search of solutions (Geels, 2010). As mentioned above, because established rules are less of a constraint on the ‘search space’ in niches, this is also the level where radical innovations tend to occur. In relation to the regime, the niche provides evolutionary variation: they are ‘protected spaces’ or ‘incubation rooms’ for learning processes occurring in a multi-dimensional space comprising "technology, user preferences, regulation, symbolic meaning, infrastructure, and production systems" (Geels, 2005, p. 684). Thus, niches provide a space to build the relationships and networks that support new innovations. In general, variation is understood as "guided by expectations, visions and beliefs that provide cognitive

substance to search and innovation processes by intentional actors" (Geels, 2010, p. 504) and applies to both rule-following and rule-enactment (Dopfer *et al.*, 2004). Thus, as 'carrier' of rule-sets (routines, strategies, technologies, practices) a given 'level of socio-technical structuration' responds to selection pressures (collective interactions across different socio-technical domains) by incorporating new rules from among the variation produced at another level of structuration thereby producing *change* (see e.g. Dosi, 1997, for a review of the evolutionary view of economic change and Dopfer *et al.*, 2004, for an overview of replication and actualisation of rule structures in evolutionary economics). While transition theorists make reservations about the ontological foundation of niche, regime, and landscape concepts, seeing them primarily as "analytical and heuristic concepts to understand the complex dynamics of sociotechnical change" (Geels, 2002, p. 1259), I argue with Gibson-Graham (2008) that theorising is in itself ontologically performative and that seeing the niche-regime-landscape framework as the theoretical 'plot' for transitions (cf. Geels, 2011), involves ontological commitment, if not in principle then in praxis, to a view of social change as (neo)Darwinian. And the analytical concepts of the 'population thinking' implied by (quasi-)evolutionary approaches to socio-technical innovation (Hodgson, 2002), do not seem to explain innovation and social change processes effectively. The next section goes on to explain this in more detail.

2.2.2 Transition as cultural evolution

In *Complexity Perspectives in Innovation and Social Change*, Lane *et al.* (2009) examine different applications of the variation-selection framework of innovation and find that the explanatory power of Darwinian population thinking is limited regarding sociocultural innovation. The fundamental reason for this is that the ontological and spatio-temporal distinctions between variation and selection processes which obtain in biological evolution (variation occurring at the genetic level and selection occurring at the level of the organism) do not apply straightforwardly to sociocultural developments. The authors find that variation and selection processes are 'inextricably intermingled' in sociocultural innovations due to single actors' involvement in different organisational levels, a lack of correspondence between organisational level and temporal process, and the absence of co-ordination of selection criteria. This means that in practice "several of the most important [innovation processes] do not seem to be decomposable into variation and selection components" while "other kinds of processes, in particular organizational transformation achieved through structured negotiations, seem even more fundamental in achieving the kind of sociocultural innovation in which we are interested" (ibid., p. 32). Rather than seeing innovation processes as involving the evolution of rule structures through distinct processes of variation and selection, Lane *et al.* see them as 'negotiations structured by rules structured by negotiations'[6]. Without needing to formulate a complete theory of

[6]This is expressed in what the authors call the reciprocality principle: "the generation of new artifact types is mediated by the transformation of relationships among agents; and new artifact types mediate the transformation of relationships among agents" (p. 28). This locates an explanation of innovation processes in

innovation here, I agree with Lane *et al.* that it is not obvious how variation and selection apply to ideas or relationships (including ontological and epistemological assumptions) at larger organisational levels – not least because "it is still not clear that the inventions and strategems which are rewarded in the individual necessarily have survival value for the society; nor, vice versa, do the policies that representatives of society might prefer necessarily have survival value for individuals" (Bateson, 2002, p. 163). I return to this issue in the following section.

For now, I will simply point to the logical conclusion of Universal Darwinism when it comes to transitions in onto-epistemological assumptions. This is expressed by Beddoe *et al.* (2009) in their article ‘Overcoming systemic roadblocks to sustainability: The evolutionary redesign of worldviews, institutions, and technologies’. The authors conclude that:

> "Changes in our current interconnected worldviews, institutions, and technologies (our socio-ecological regime) are needed to achieve a lifestyle better adapted to current and future environmental realities. This transition, like all cultural transitions, will be evolutionary. *Cultural selection will, with feedback from other institutions and environmental factors, exert pressure favoring institutional variants that are better adapted to current circumstances, while at the same time exerting pressure away from those variants that are less adaptive*. Assuming that our society can overcome path dependence and can avoid becoming locked-in to maladaptive institutions, the process of cultural evolution will push our society toward the adoption of institutions that best suit the new circumstances" (ibid., p. 2488, my emphasis).

The authors assert that, at least to a certain extent, humanity "can design the future that we want by creating new cultural variants for evolution to act upon and by modifying the goals that drive cultural selection" (ibid., p. 2488). In this view, a transition in worldview is a process of design: by consciously constructing ‘cultural variants’ that increase adaptive capacities to crises, evolution will then select those that best fit new social-ecological circumstances. This seems, at best, an optimistic view of cultural evolution. A more nuanced view of cultural variation occurring through a process of ‘normative contestation’ in innovative niches is found in Elzen *et al.* (2011), who see sustainability transitions as a process of exerting normative pressure on regimes (through resource mobilization, framing processes, and political opportunity structures). Sustainability then enters the evolutionary framework as a normative goal which could influence the future orientation of a socio-technical regime. However, it is not clear that a theory which conceptualises sustainability transitions narrowly as a process of normative contestation (in this case environmental advocacy and campaigning) can capture transformations in ontology and epistemology which include changes in beliefs about what the world is like and how it is known – processes which pertain to the psyche and cognition (see section 2.3.1). And if

‘agent-artifact’ space rather than in the adoption of new rules, a move which forms part of the authors’ move towards ‘organisation thinking’.

dominant socio-technical regimes are inherently unsustainable it is by no means obvious that selection mechanisms would (or could) favour *sustainable* cultural variants. As Elzen *et al.* (2011) remark: "[n]ormative pressure, even when it is increasing, cannot bring about substantial regime change on its own" (p. 265). Further, in a future characterised by crises and potential strife over vital life support systems evolutionary mechanisms may revert to favour brute force. The idea of cultural evolution as an explanatory model for transformations in worldviews seems much less tenable once we imagine the absence of a monopoly of violence implied by current socio-technical systems.

This section has provided an overview of the assumptions and implications of viewing transitions as occurring through variation and selection mechanisms in order to show how ontological and epistemological change would enter such a framework. It shows that, even as a mere heuristic, transition as a quasi-evolutionary social theory does not seem to provide a fitting 'plot' for changes in worldviews. While transition theorists simply aim to provide causal narratives by applying a process-based (explaining outcomes as event-chains), middle-range (a cross-over between evolutionary economics and constructivism) theory, they are at the same time performing specific ontological and epistemological assumptions through their representations (cf. Gibson-Graham, 2008). The basic assumptions inherent in this approach to transition create a framework which theorises by separating the world into specific domains: 'cultural sequences' are analysed as distinct from other socio-economic and institutional processes and 'environmental sequences' enter the framework mainly as a source of selective pressure forcing change in socio-technical systems (see Geels, 2011, for a complete formulation of this view). Taking "the realisation of 'societal functions' through the configuration and alignment of heterogeneous socio-technical elements and processes" (Smith *et al.*, 2010, p. 439) as their analytical starting point, transition theorists proceed to treat socio-technical systems as complex adaptive systems but these are still conceptualised as fundamentally separate (although co-evolving) with their environment (see e.g. Fischer-Kowalski and Rotmans, 2009). The ongoing pursuit in transition theory for 'an epistemological middle way' between "the search for laws and statistical correlations between variables" and "an emphasis on complexity, contingency, fluidity, untidiness and ambiguity" (Geels, 2011, p. 36), suggests a 'restricted' view of complexity (Morin, 2007) which remains within the paradigm of classical science. Theorising by way of decontextualising and (over-)simplifying complex phenomena confirms this view. Assuming that actors are collectively able to predict, anticipate and control future events or re-orderings of socio-technical 'configurations' by abstracting and modelling pathways according to which the social world is supposed to unfold (see e.g. Geels and Schot, 2007, and Rotmans and Loorbach, 2009), transition theorists effectively perform a knowledge mode which isolates objects from each other and their environment.

The next section proposes that it is helpful instead to view social change as occurring within one ontological plane – namely that of life itself – and puts forward an approach to studying onto-epistemological transitions that recognises the inseparability of the researcher or observer from the wider phenomena she is studying.

2.2.3 The double disengagement from social phenomena

These observations about the pitfalls of viewing a transition in ontology and epistemology as a process of cultural evolution occurring through a hypothesised mechanism of variation-selection, point to the need for coherence between epistemological assumptions and theoretical concepts: researching is in itself an enactment of ontological or epistemological assumptions as (academic) subjects (Gibson-Graham, 2008). Without this recognition any theory about changes in ontology and epistemology is likely to re-enact the 'double disengagement' of the observer from the world implied by the classical scientific knowledge mode (Ingold, 2000), effectively objectifying the ontologies and epistemologies studied. Here, the theorist firstly creates a division between humanity and nature and secondly divides humanity into cultures – see Figure 2.2. This perspective sees cultures as alternate worldviews imposed on the deeper objective reality of nature and proceeds to enact this division in academic discourse and studies. However, such a view is inconsistent with the epistemological and ontological implications of cybernetics (Bateson, 2002), general complexity (Morin, 2007), quantum physics (Bohm and Hiley, 1993) and theories of living systems (Capra, 1996). This section will set out the foundations for an epistemologically coherent approach to studying transitions in worldviews and ways of thinking.

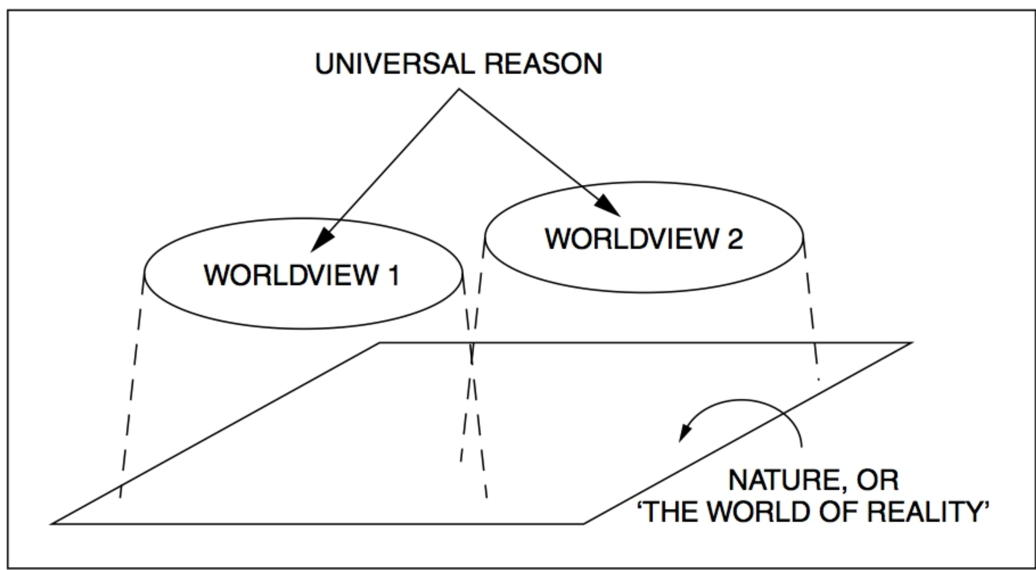


Figure 2.2: Worldviews from the vantage point of the 'doubly disengaged' observer. Source: Ingold, 2000, p. 15.

Avoiding the double disengagement means engaging a mode of theorising which is consistent with the view of humanity-in-nature and knower-and-known as inseparable, and which allows us to think about evolution as a process which unfolds, not on separate planes, but continuously within *nature-as-matrix*. Nature-as-matrix can here be understood as the "relational matrices wherein organic forms are generated and held in place" (Ingold, 2011, p. 11) and where "living beings of all kinds [...] constitute each other's

conditions of existence, both for their own and for subsequent generations" (ibid., p. 8). This situates theorists, objects, natural laws, social phenomena, and all living beings on the same ontological plane: that of life itself. To understand what this means, it is useful to think of the unfolding of life as a 'holomovement' which – as an unbroken wholeness – carries within it all particular forms so that "the whole universe is in some way enfolded in everything and [...] each thing is enfolded in the whole" (Bohm and Hiley, 1993, p. 382). This *implicate order* is the ground of perception and thought and is contained 'holo-grammatically' in any physical or mental appearance at any given moment (ibid.). This ontological understanding of quantum physics is the lifework of David Bohm whose work shows the possibility of integrating (ontological) dualities (e.g. thought-substance, life-matter, humanity-nature), not by combination but by showing, in the words of Tim Ingold (2011), that "any particular phenomenon on which we may choose to focus our attention enfolds within its constitution the totality of relations of which, in their unfolding, it is the momentary outcome" (p. 236). The implications of this understanding are wide-ranging and constitute a complete overturning of the view of reality which underpins the double disengagement of the observer from the world[7]. Rather than viewing theory as sets of concepts which correspond to or describe objectively existing realities, this 'holographic view' shows that theoretical concepts reflect realities which are inherently dependent on context and on the totality of wider relations. This is not a reduction of the inter-subjective field to solipsism but a corollary to the insight in cognitive science that "[i]nstead of representing an independent world, [minds] enact a world as a domain of distinctions that is inseparable from the structure embodied by the cognitive system" (Varela *et al.*, 1991, p. 140). Importantly,

> "the view that our theories constitute appearances does not deny the independent reality of the universe as a whole. Rather it implies that even the appearances are part of this overall reality and make a contribution to it. What we emphasise is, however, that the content of the theory is not by itself reality, nor can it be in perfect correspondence with the whole of this reality, which is infinite and unknown, but which contains even the processes that make theoretical knowledge possible" (Bohm and Hiley, 1993, p. 326).

To the 'doubly disengaged' theorist this view is not immediately obvious, and potentially quite problematic, because symbolic thought and ordinary language tend to treat reality as if it consisted of 'objective facts' represented in 'subjective constructions' of the world. To understand the implications of the universe as an implicate order a 'holographic' epistemology is needed.

Such accounts of knowledge and thought have emerged from those fields of science which have developed descriptions of development in self-organising networks, notably

[7]It is not possible to do justice to the notion of the universe as an implicate order here – I am merely pointing to the consequences of this insight for understanding the human and natural domains as part of the same movement. See Bohm (1986; 1993; 2004a; 2004b) for the wider implications of this ontology.

cybernetics, complexity theory and dynamical systems theory. Gregory Bateson, a systems thinker and founding father of cybernetics, developed an ‘ecology of mind’ which advanced the understanding of knowing as a process taking place within the totality of ‘organism plus environment’ (better yet: organism-in-environment). In his famous example of the blind man who finds his way with the help of a stick, Bateson asks us to consider where this man’s self begins: at the end or at the handle of the stick, or at some other place encircling his organism or brain? (2000, p. 318) Instead of thinking of the self as a unit existing within the separate or enclosed sphere of a head or body, in this case it is clearly more accurate to see it as extending outwards into the world via sensory pathways which include his organism and the stick:

> "The total self-corrective unit which processes information, or, as I say, "thinks" and "acts" and "decides," is a *system* whose boundaries do not at all coincide with the boundaries either of the body or of what is popularly called the "self" or "consciousness"; and it is important to notice that there are *multiple* differences between the thinking system and the "self" as popularly conceived" (ibid., p. 319).

While Bateson did not complement his epistemology with a ‘holographic’ ontology[8], he paved the way for understanding mind and world not as separate entities of knower and independent reality but as "stand[ing] in relation to each other through mutual specification or dependent coorigination" (Varela *et al.*, 1991, p. 150).

The implications of this insight for studying and understanding sustainability transitions are profound. In this light, it does not make sense to look at sustainability as a ‘goal to reach’ or an ‘inherent characteristic’ within a specified entity or system independent of context: sustainability is a quality pertaining to the relationships between human and non-human actors (people, animals, ecologies, social-ecological systems, climatic systems, etc.). From the epistemological perspective of living systems the idea of essential or innate attributes is incoherent:

> "I will get nowhere by explaining prideful behaviour, for example, by referring to an individual’s "pride". Nor can you explain aggression by referring to instinctive (or even learned) "aggressiveness". Such an explanation, which shifts attention from the interpersonal field to a factitious inner tendency, principle, instinct, or whatnot, is, I suggest, very great nonsense which only hides the real questions" (Bateson, 2002, p. 125).

By substituting ‘prideful’ with ‘sustainable’ in this quotation, it is possible to sense the epistemological difference between theorising as ‘double disengagement’ and the view of ‘organism-in-environment’ or ‘humanity-in-nature’.

[8]Bateson never explicitly developed an ontology. He based his epistemology on a fundamental division between the living (what he calls ‘creatura’) and the non-living (‘pleroma’) worlds (2002) and effectively embraced the idea of cognition as the representation of an independent world in the mind. Capra (1996) provides an account of this in his Appendix comparing Bateson to the Santiago theory of cognition.

It is now possible to put forward a clearer formulation of what an onto-epistemological transition means and how it is possible to study such phenomena. The following section summarises the preceding observations on ontology and epistemology and shows how and why the sustainability challenge can be conceived as a question of deepening the relations within nature-as-matrix.

2.2.4 Transition as a transformation within social life

Seeing sustainability as a challenge to the way human-nature relationships are conceived and enacted brings the issue of normativity into play not as a matter simply of different notional perspectives on nature but also as one of actual relationship. Circumventing the double disengagement of the theorist from reality situates both scholarship on transition and phenomena in transition within the same realm, that of social life. Here, *social life* refers to Bohm's notion of an implicate order in which mind and world cannot be adequately understood as separate domains but rather, and again with a formulation by Ingold, as "the unfolding of a continuous and ever-evolving field of relations within which beings of all kinds are generated and held in place" (2011, p. 237). Because social life is a *field of relations* which is enfolded within any particular phenomena (and vice versa), any proper understanding of it cannot ignore relational coherence and wider context. While this understanding of transition diverges from Dutch transition theory by seeing (non)human actors and social phenomena as inextricably intertwined and enmeshed – rather than as separate but linked through causal narratives – it agrees that a good starting point for understanding change is the rules that govern relations within any particular field of relations. Seeing humans and their environments (be they forests, farmlands or factories) as interpenetrating concepts, what compels change in such relations is the introduction of new rules of environment-making (cf. Moore, 2013) – from the broader logics that govern power and production to the specific regulations, assumptions and heuristics that structure particular organisational fields. Importantly, this perspective acknowledges and emphasises the interdependence of species and environment, what Morin (2007) calls 'self-eco-organization': "a self-generating and self-producing process, that is to say, the idea of a recursive loop which obliges us to break our classical ideas of product → producer, and of cause → effect" (p. 14). In this way, "species and environments are at once making and unmaking each other, always and at every turn" (Moore, 2013, na.)[9]. The implications of these observations for how transitions in worldviews and ways of being can be studied will be explored in the following section. For now, it is possible to explicate how (sustainability) transitions in ontology and epistemology can be theorised without having to conceptualise culture as evolutionary in the sense of a selection process taking place among cultural variants.

A transition in ontology is not so much a change between different cultural 'lenses'

[9]For Moore humanity and extra-human natures are dialectically joined through his concept of the *oikeios* through which "bundles of relations between human and extra-human agents" are "formed, stabilized, and periodically disrupted" (2013, na.).

through which the objective world is represented or constructed as it is a transformation in the very constitution of the phenomenal world. Here it might be useful to return to the Canadian lumberjack who sees ‘money’ when he sees a tree (Jensen, 2004). If he learns to experience the tree not purely as a resource but as a living being with its own unique history and existence, then the nature of that tree is qualitatively altered for him. This change in his belief about the nature of the tree has profound consequences for his experience and engagement with the tree: this signifies a change in the ontological status he assigns to the tree and, consequently, a transformation in his relation with it. The tree is no longer just a source of income but an entity with its own form of agency. Thus, the lumberjack’s immediate and experienced sense of reality is changed, the world itself is different – not through substituting one assumption with another but by *learning to alter his experience of the world*. We can say that a transition has taken place not so much in the lumberjack’s world*view* but in his lifeworld: "the world as we organically experience it in its enigmatic multiplicity and open-endedness, prior to conceptually freezing it into a static space of ‘facts’" (Abram, 1997, p. 40). Clearly, this change is complex and gradual but it signifies an experiential difference and not simply an ethical or attitudinal one. The lifeworld, as a ‘continuous creation’, ‘an intertwining of past, present, and future’ (Dorfman, 2009, p. 298) is rooted in an intuitive understanding of the world beyond conceptual thinking. It is "the living source behind rigid structures" (ibid., p. 300) which is always in motion but ‘sediments’ in the concepts we employ to describe it[10].

In indigenous (cf. Williams *et al.*, 2012) and eco-philosophical (cf. Abram, 1988) understandings of the lifeworld it is an "organic, all-encompassing, gestalt, *thing* in which knowledge arises" (Mehl-Madrona and Mainguy, 2012, 207). It is in this sense I use the term here. It is similar, as Tim Ingold (2000) points out, to what anthropologists call ‘cosmology’ but to view people’s everyday experience of the world in such terms is to "already [take] a step out of the world of nature within which the lives of all other creatures are confined" (p. 14) through the implicit ontology that specific cultural understandings of the world take place against a wider background of an objective reality (cf. section 2.2.3 above). The personal lifeworld is embedded in the inter-subjective field of social life, it is an *inside view* of the wider field of relations which is simultaneously enacted or brought into being by virtue of an individual’s perceptual-biological structure. However, mind is not confined to individuals and is immanent in the entire system of organism-in-environment. Thus, worldviews are not ‘inside our heads’ and the use of the word ‘worldview’ in the context of this study refers not to a *view* of something (the representation of some object or relation) but to how a particular *world* is enacted. Section 3.1.1 in Chapter 3 expands on how I employ the notion of the lifeworld in the empirical study.

Concurrently, a transition in epistemology refers to a change in the understanding of

[10]Dorfman (2009) draws on Merleau-Ponty’s concept of *radical reflection* to situate the concept of the lifeworld as a historical co-production of ideality and sees the task of phenomenology as "contribut[ing] to the reactivation and (re)foundation of sense" (p. 300).

what counts as knowledge, including what it means to know something and what constitutes a knower. Inquiring into transformations in ways of knowing entails first of all that problems of knowledge should be seen in connection with the wider questions pertaining to human life. Here, I agree with Midgley (2004) when she points out: "[t]hinking out how to live is a more basic and urgent use of the human intellect than the discovery of any fact whatsoever, and the considerations it reveals ought to guide us in the search for knowledge, as they ought in every other project we pursue" (p. 161). Secondly, the inquiry needs to acknowledge the specificity and contextual nature of knowledge within the ongoing stream of social life: a practical understanding of the lifeworld with its "multiple ways of knowing environments, of living in places and of imagining the future" (Hulme, 2010b, p. 560) cannot be adequately understood through context independent modes of knowing (Morin, 2007) – at least not without exercising 'epistemological violence' to the people and places that are (re)presented in terms of abstracted concepts (Radcliffe *et al.*, 2010). Following Bohm, Ingold (2011) describes this dilemma in terms of the contrast between the implicate order of social life (which is by nature relational, context-dependent and processual) and the explicate order of symbolic thought (which operates in terms of separate categories, events and identities). Any theorising that does not want to reduce lived phenomena to fragmented parts, needs to be a theorising *with*, not a theorising *of*, social life (ibid.).

In this way, we can now say that a transition in ontology and epistemology is a qualitative transformation in how the world is experienced and known within interpretive communities. As part of sustainability transitions, such transformations involve abandoning the rules and visions of environment-making implied by the user-resource perspective and enacting human-nature relations which acknowledge 'social' and 'natural' phenomena as inextricably intertwined. This entails a shift from seeing the world as consisting of separate entities which are ordered along a hierarchy of being to understanding the relationships that generate those entities in the first place. As Fritjof Capra (1996) observes:

> "The origin of our dilemma lies in our tendency to create the abstractions of separate objects, including a separate self, and then to believe that they belong to an objective, independently existing reality. To overcome our Cartesian anxiety, we need to think systematically, shifting our conceptual focus from objects to relationships. Only then can we realize that identity, individuality, and autonomy do not imply separateness and independence" (p. 295).

This shift is explicitly 'onto-epistemological' (cf. Williams *et al.*, 2012) as it implies a transformation from within social life, one that recognises and sustains the interconnected 'self-eco-organisation' of human societies.

It is now possible to explicate what the onto-epistemological dimension of the sustainability challenge entails. As a shift away from those ontological and epistemological assumptions which produce a relation between humans and more-than-human entities that can be described as *users* of *resources*, an 'onto-epistemological transition' denotes the emergence and stabilisation of alternative beliefs or assumptions about reality that gives

rise to experiencing the world as fundamentally interconnected and which sees human and more-than-human agencies as inextricably entwined. This is more than a shift in attitude or moral stance towards the natural world: it is a transformation in the experience of reality. There are clearly various alternative onto-epistemological commitments which recognise the interconnectedness of human and more-than-human worlds. In addition to the literatures I draw on above pre-modern or indigenous perspectives should not go unmentioned (cf. McIntosh, 2012a). The point here is not to advance a claim for any one onto-epistemology but to acknowledge the need to move beyond positivist and reductionist beliefs "predicated on logic or reason usually applied in ways that reduces the basis of reality down to materialistic formulations" (ibid., p. 32). Neither is it helpful to think of onto-epistemological transitions as a process with a fixed end point where one set of beliefs have simply replaced another. In light of the hegemony of the user-resource perspective (cf. Smith, 2011) this is first and foremost a ‘decolonisation of consciousness’ (cf. Williams *et al.*, 2012, p. 4) which *deepens* experience and cannot be said to ‘end’.

This section has substantiated the meaning of onto-epistemological transition and formulated a mode of theorising which is capable of examining onto-epistemological change without exerting ‘epistemological violence’ in order to be able to conceptualise changes in worldviews in grassroots innovations. The next section now goes on to examine how onto-epistemological transitions can be studied as a process of envisioning and enacting alternative forms of environment-making.

2.3 The rules and visions that guide environment-making

If the sustainability challenge involves a change in view from objects to relationships, this requires concepts which aid the perceptual change from the user-resource relationship to humanity-in-nature[11]. This is what the notion of environment-making aims to do by moving away from viewing societies and nature as separate towards understanding these abstractions within the larger (holo)movement or field of relations which constitutes social life (cf. Moore, 2013). Drawing on the insight from transitions theory that it is a change in *rule structures* – beliefs, routines, and regulations performed in practices – which constitute societal transitions, this study proceeds to examine ‘the rules and visions of environment-making’ in grassroots innovations, in particular the onto-epistemological assumptions that structure alternative worldviews and sustainabilities. However, these rules and visions are not replicated via a mechanism of selection and variation, they are more akin to dynamic patterns of meaning enacted in different practices and activities (cf. section 2.3.3). As described above, a transformation in onto-epistemology occurs as these patterns change – the experience and perception of the world alter.

[11] However, to even begin something as circumstantial as *changing view* (and thereby the meanings pertaining to particular ideas, narratives and terminologies) something more than a new vocabulary is needed: a recognition that creating a new way of speaking about things is not simply a matter of mapping out an alternative phraseology and an acceptance of the limits of whatever the current position is. There are inevitably aspects of the *other* way of seeing which are obscure (one could say there is a paradox inherent to attempting to reach *beyond* what is *here*).

This provides a starting point for examining how transitions in onto-epistemology come about and how we can know about them. First of all, certain onto-epistemologies can be considered *alternative* insofar as they diverge from the dominant conceptions and practices of sustainability as a user-resource relation. Second, as a transformation in how phenomena are experienced and known, a change in onto-epistemology involves a shift in the *concepts, language and practices* that make sense of the world. And third, a *transition* in onto-epistemology implies that certain meanings (and enactments) of alternative sustainabilities stabilise within a broader social context where new concepts and practices take root and proliferate. Chapter 3 proceeds to discuss how this thesis examines such changes in meaning drawing on ethnographic, phenomenological and narrative methods while the following sections expand on the above understanding and set out the theoretical ground on which onto-epistemological transitions can be conceptualised. Section 2.3.1 introduces the idea of enacting alternative (sustainable) realities by engaging with symbols of transformation and connecting with wider social contexts, while the following section bridges this idea with sustainability transitions by expanding the conceptual vocabulary of transition theory. Sections 2.3.3 and 2.3.4 proceed to examine the role of metaphors and language in structuring social reality and deepening meanings and relationships within nature-as-matrix. Finally, section 2.3.5 describes how social realities are co-created narratively and section 2.3.6 brings these insights home to grassroots innovations and the attending empirical study of onto-epistemological transition.

2.3.1 Constellating an alternate reality

Growing from a diversity of disciplines concerned with the 'study of relationships between man and environment', Radical Human Ecology is an approach to "the study and practice of community" which explicitly "views people as co-participants with the rest of the earth community" and takes as its starting point "our experience of reality and the corresponding experience of the relationship between ourselves and our larger Life World" (Williams *et al.*, 2012, p. 4). *Radical Human Ecology – Intercultural and indigenous approaches* sets out a range of research theories, epistemologies and practices that engage with the 'onto-epistemological challenge' of global scale ecological crisis (ibid.). Employing a range of approaches spanning (auto)ethnography, action research, phenomenology, participatory and collaborative methods, grounded theory and native science, this volume engages with different aspects of the 'metaphysical underpinnings of material reality' in order to understand the processes involved in onto-epistemological change. Describing the work of the Koru International Network (KIN) which aims to strengthen "human cultural diversity in support of bio-diversity through the revitalization of indigenous worldviews or literacies within all peoples" (p. 398), Lewis Williams (2012) writes that a major task is coming into awareness of our own histories and positions within both local and global society:

> "the focus becomes not so much what we know but how we know what we know. This includes not only being aware of our own psycho-spiritual histories, the stories of where we come from, but understanding the meaning of privilege, (and I would argue psycho-spiritual trauma) from our various subject positions, including the cultural-power locations from which we speak and the ways in which we accordingly position others" (ibid., p. 415).

This is the kind of 'inside' view which ensures that onto-epistemological transformation does not get reduced to a set of abstract 'mechanisms' or 'pathways' but becomes anchored in worldviews and cultural identities as they are experienced and enacted within the stream of social life.

Such an approach to a recent and ongoing transition is found in the work of Alastair McIntosh who describes the transformation in social and political realities that initiated and accompanied national land reforms in Scotland. In *Soil and Soul* (2001), McIntosh explains how the grassroots work and campaigning that led to the community buyout of the Isle of Eigg in 1997 was successful in part due to the deliberate expansion of 'consensual reality' as the ordinary frame of reference for the events that took place. Seeing consensual reality as a conditioned view which focuses awareness and attention to a few narrow aspects of reality (which in the context of the neoliberal economy are primarily consumerist), the key to onto-epistemological change is subversion and enlargement of the usual frames of reference by the introduction of new relations and meanings. Drawing on research into human consciousness, sociology, liberation theology and ecology, McIntosh provides a compelling account of the interventions that the Isle of Eigg activists undertook to transform 'the fabric of social reality' by way of "alter[ing] the co-ordinates by which reality was mapped and reset them" (ibid., p. 166). Such transformation entails a repositioning of the involved human actors within their wider social relations:

> "The principles at play involved changing what sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann call 'the social construction of reality'. It's a matter of developing 'plausibility structures' that give an alternative to what has previously constituted social power. It's a question of understanding symbolic actions towards this not as hollow gestures, but, in Jungian terms, as 'symbols of transformation'. At the deepest level of the psyche this transformation has got to be cosmological. It has got to position the human person more meaningfully than before in relation to the universe" (ibid., p. 166).

Such repositioning required "drawing presumed authority structures into question and helping to build an exciting and sustainable alternative" (ibid., p. 140) allowing people to envision and enact a qualitatively different reality.

McIntosh describes the process as one of 'constellating an alternate reality'[12]. Interestingly, he does so in language which is remarkably similar to the transition concepts of

[12] 'Constellate' meaning "to group meaningfully together" by deepening consciousness and conscience (McIntosh, 2001, p. 124).

'niche', 'regime' and 'landscape' (ibid., p. 140): a first step is to assess the *set* in which an intervention takes place (the 'arrayed forces'), a second step is to gauge the *setting* (the 'ground upon which those forces are positioned') and, lastly, to consider the *stars* or the global perspective ('the constellations taking shape in the really big picture'). Key to a change in view are *visions* which connect with broader contexts in order to "lift the debate beyond negativity and to accept confrontation but not get stuck there" and "to make a connection in many people's minds, so that even far away from Eigg headlines would be made and passion for change aroused" (ibid., p. 140). Opening up for broader levels of meaning to infuse the setting, an outward vision can connect the different levels in which an action is taking place:

> "Figure out the constellations taking shape in the really big picture. Get the setting not just into local perspective, but also out into the global scheme of things. Let the small picture blur, reorganise and re-emerge in relation to the big picture. Let yourself hear the old myths and also the new ones coming forward. Discern, then navigate. Never be so vain as to expect to reach the stars, but do set your course by them" (ibid., p. 140-1).

By providing a language which puts relations at the centre and allows connecting 'by metaphor' to greater contexts of meaning, McIntosh provides a 'plot from within' which engages with phenomenal reality as experienced by the people involved rather than a doubly disengaged outside view. It takes little imagination to see how the set gets populated with characters cast in different *roles*, and who engage with different *props* and *storylines* to enact a wider narrative of transition. The next section bridges these observations with the transitions literature and shows how this vocabulary provides a basis for conceptualising the enactment of alternative worldviews.

2.3.2 New vocabularies and 'plots' for onto-epistemological transitions

A critical feature of McIntosh's approach to understanding social transformation is that it embodies a radically different way of theorising than one which aspires to an objective view of socio-technical transitions and which sees change as occurring through a mechanism of variation and selection unfolding according to certain pathways. As Smith *et al.* (2010) observe, the 'allure' of transitions theory is that "[i]ts terminology of niche, regime and landscape provides a language for organising a diverse array of considerations into narrative accounts of transitions" (p. 442). However, it does so by risking to "become counter-productively simplistic in its abstraction" (ibid.). By assuming an epistemological position which takes a 'restricted' view of complexity and casts changes in worldviews as a (quasi-)evolutionary process of selection among cultural variants (cf. Section 2.2.2), the attraction of the niche-regime-landscape framework is nominal for students of onto-epistemological change as this is inevitably concerned with an experiential 'inside' view of how worlds are brought into being within lived realities. The (neo)Darwinian evolutionary perspective of transitions is ultimately limited to the vantage point of the disengaged observer because its abstract and decontextualised conceptual language affords

little explanatory effectiveness in understanding the qualitative nature of transformations in onto-epistemology. The danger is that lacking the depth and richness necessary for describing the inherent experience and meaning of onto-epistemological transformation the language of transition risks misrepresenting the fundamental processes. As Alastair McIntosh observes, all too easily "histories become reconfigured in the mind as image defines reality rather than the other way around" (2001, p. 175). By directly engaging with the metaphysical nature of constellating an alternate reality, McIntosh opens up a vocabulary which expands the metaphorical qualities of the multi-level perspective to include concepts that convey the performative nature of worldviews.

By shifting the imagery of niche-regime-landscape towards one of set-setting-stars a whole new set of metaphors become relevant which have the potential to circumvent the polarising dynamic of niche-regime through introducing a vocabulary which allows a more nuanced conceptualisation of change processes. It now becomes possible to talk of *players* and their *roles*, of *props*, *stage-setting*, and *storylines*. Such dramatisation of social change is likely to bear directly on the people involved. It introduces relationships as a central feature of the plot. And perhaps most importantly, it parachutes the researcher of onto-epistemological change directly into the heart of the drama: as narrator it is impossible to remain doubly disengaged as the observer now has to reflect on and clarify her own position among a variety of characters (writer, co-author, researcher, participant, etc.). This, I suggest, is a direct way of honouring Williams' (2012) call for awareness of how our own histories and subject positions shape "how we know what we know" (p. 415). It allows for incorporating multiple modes of knowing by acknowledging the performative nature of ontologies while it permits the researcher to engage in a field of relations as participant *and* acknowledge her own onto-epistemology as narrator. This approach helps enable the study of both the multiplicity of realities involved in a certain plot as well as the different ways these realities are drawn into a singular representation as certain viewpoints win out and become an authoritative narrative. It can provide an overarching plot for a transition while it remains ambiguous and flexible enough to abide the idiosyncratic nature of particular transitions by establishing a vocabulary which privileges contextual relationships over abstract conceptual placeholders.

This can be seen as a way of bridging the evolutionary ontology of transitions theory with narrative or relational ontologies by deliberately broadening core theoretical concepts and allowing insights from different approaches to sustainability research to cross-pollinate. However, this is not to say that one can simply choose from different aspects among various ontologies: if one is not clear about foundational assumptions, findings can easily become contradictory or inconsistent (Geels, 2010). Garud and Gehman (2012) argue that sustainability research is explicitly *not* a boundary object (cf. Star and Griesemer, 1989) but entails genuine semantic, syntactic and pragmatic differences between approaches. In their overview of three different meta-theoretical approaches to sustainability research and policy-making, Garud and Gehman (2012) show how ontologies vary across research paradigms. As a student of sustainability, the challenge is to use the distinctive advantages of each of these lines of thinking to clarify one's own position. As

should be clear from the discussion of onto-epistemological transformation, my approach is grounded in a narrative ontology which engage with how meaning is created through narratives ‘in action’ as well as the deeper cultural symbols and assumptions that shape identities and action. Radical Human Ecology thus provides a good starting point for studying onto-epistemologies (and their implication for sustainability). Seeing the immediate lived context as the cornerstone for a sense of belonging which is "grounded in the soil and has grown together with all the natural-spiritual elements emanating from it" where "we can be deeply connected with all our relations, past and present, human and non-human" (Kockel, 2012, p. 59-60), presents the possibility of theorising non-human nature(s) as more than just ‘coded and symbolised’ in particular subjective constructions of reality (cf. Swyngedouw, 2007). Holding ‘all our relations’ lived contexts express and embody the rules and visions that guide environment-making: we learn something about ourselves, our modes of knowledge and our relations with more-than-human nature by engaging with the way social contexts simultaneously inscribe and erase aspects of the wider field relations of which it is part (cf. Ingold, 2011).

Viewing the ‘environment’ not as object but as a place of belonging or a field of habitation makes it possible to conceive of human action not as an imposition *on* nature but as originating *within* and occurring *through* nature. Further, it places the researcher as participant and co-creator in her world, rather than as a detached observer or analyst. This is illustrated by Ingold’s (2000) contrasting of a Heideggerian ‘dwelling perspective’ of the environment as *lifeworld* with the dualistic view of the environment as *globe* – see Figure 2.3. The next section expands on the approach to sustainability research taken in this study through a discussion of how the guiding rules and visions of environment-making can be recognised through the imagery and metaphors that express particular qualities of human-nature relationships.

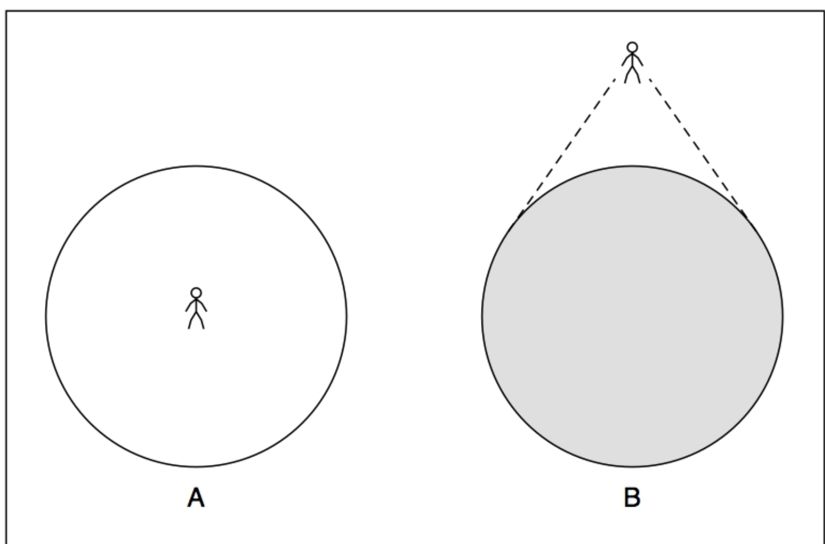


Figure 2.3: The environment viewed as (A) lifeworld and (B) globe. Source: Ingold, 2000, p. 209.

2.3.3 Mythopoesis and meaning

A key insight in McIntosh's account of the campaigning and activism that led to the community buyout of the Isle of Eigg, is that a transformation in the fabric of social reality needs to connect with the mythological nature of the lifeworld. He writes that "[w]e would do well [...] to distinguish between that which is 'imaginary' and therefore unreal, and that which is 'imaginal', and therefore beyond the normal bounds of consciousness – but not necessarily any less 'real' because of it" (McIntosh, 2001, p. 72). By engaging with the mythopoetic framework of reality[13] it is possible to access the deeper structures that shape the worldviews which substantiate our relationships. This acknowledges that any account of reality is necessarily storied and it pays attention to the imagery, metaphors and myths that express what lived reality is like. McIntosh observes: "where you come from, who you are and what your destiny proves to be are all linked within that story, which is nothing less than the story of the world's creation, of the human and animal forebears, and of the world's destiny" (ibid., p. 45). In this sense, how we story our experiences is a direct expression of how we attribute meaning to our participation in life and reciprocally affects the meaning we ascribe to new events within the lifeworld.

This corresponds with research in cognitive science that underpins the view of knowing as a process of *bringing forth a world* in accordance with one's own psychological and physiological constitution. As a central part of this structure, the imagination plays an important role in giving meaning to experience, as George Lakoff's work is showing:

> "Meaningful conceptual structures arise from two sources: (1) from the structured nature of bodily and social experience and (2) from our innate capacity to imaginatively project from certain well-structured aspects of bodily and interactional experience to abstract conceptual structures. Rational thought is the application of very general cognitive processes – focusing, scanning, superimposition, figure-ground reversal, etc. – to such structures" (Lakoff quoted in Varela *et al.*, 1991, p. 178).

The 'projection of abstract concepts' is a key function of the imagination, which, according to Lakoff, occurs through 'frames' or 'schemas' which include the semantic roles and relations involved in a given context[14]. Frames are in this way 'habits' of the imagination which give structure to thought by way of reference to other frames: "All thinking and talking involves "framing." And since frames come in systems, a single word typically activates not only its defining frame, but also much of the system its defining frame is in" (Lakoff, 2010, pp. 71-2). Crucially, this process is not just 'mental' as these habits of the imagination become enacted and physical: "frames can become reified – made real – in institutions, industries, and cultural practices. Once reified, they don't disappear until the

[13]Combining 'myth' and 'poesis' (to make), 'mythopoesis' literally means 'the making of myth' indicating the storied nature of how we experience reality.

[14]Lakoff gives the following example of semantic roles and relations: "A hospital frame, for example, includes the roles: Doctor, Nurse, Patient, Visitor, Receptionist, Operating Room, Recovery Room, Scalpel, etc. Among the relations are specifications of what happens in a hospital, e.g., Doctors operate on Patients in Operating Rooms with Scalpels" (2010, p. 71).

institutions, industries, and cultural practices disappear" (Lakoff, 2010, p. 77).

The significance of this insight for understanding transitions in onto-epistemology is unambiguous: the images and symbols which express (sustainable) relationships are more than just 'mental representations' which form part of 'cultural sequences', they play a critical role in shaping how those relations are interpreted and enacted. Viewed within the mythopoetic framework of reality metaphors are central as they both reveal and shape the nature of lived experience. They do so through analogy (Hofstadter, 2007), or framing, as Lakoff puts it above, and thus deepen meaning by expanding the frames of reference. McGilchrist (2009) observes that this is a process in which metaphors endow meaning by broadening context:

> "Any one thing can be understood only in terms of another thing, and ultimately that must come down to a something that is experienced, outside the system of signs (i.e. by the body). The very words which form the building blocks of explicit thought are themselves all originally metaphors, grounded in the human body and its experience. Metaphors *embody* thought and places it in a living *context*" (p. 118, original emphasis).

In this way, metaphors guide how and what we imagine the world to be like through connecting with auxiliary contexts through analogy and framing. They connect with the larger 'world-pictures' that constitute our worldview and which "are so general and so vast that they affect the whole shape of our thinking" (Midgley, 2004, p. 309). These nexus of metaphors affect what *kind* of world is brought forth in perception and thought. In turn, acculturated meanings direct how individual concepts and metaphors are understood, and meaning is therefore a primary concern in onto-epistemological transition.

Meaning can be seen as the dynamic that 'holds together' the various sensations, thoughts and impressions that arise within the lifeworld, as it gives *form* to perception (Bohm, 2004b) by means of (self)reference to previously cognised phenomena (Hofstadter, 2007). In this way, meaning shapes the lifeworld in a deep way: it organises what is deemed relevant and what is not by giving both a cognitive 'pattern' and 'restraint' to lived reality (Bateson, 2000). It is through the distinct meanings infused into the 'organic experience' of our lifeworlds that we come to understand our particular place within the world at large, our relations to other living beings and the specificities and applications of things. Meaning structures people's sense of purpose or veracity, and, as particular meanings become acculturated as 'true' or 'real', they play an important role in shaping new perceptions and behaviours (Kajtar, forthcoming)[15]. Conversely, meaning is revealed narratively in the values we hold, the stories we tell about ourselves and others; they are embedded in the language we use and, with a nod to Wittgenstein, in the wider 'form of

[15]Peter Kajtar (forthcoming) observes that meaning and thought are part of a dynamic where "meanings give form to thought, and thoughts shape meanings" (na.). In this mutually informing process thought and meaning are abstracted from the deeper holomovement which gives rise to them and because meaning and thought are necessarily limited they are relevant only within limited contexts.

life' in which we are immersed[16]. And because particular meanings are constituted by context, understanding onto-epistemological transitions calls for a mode of inquiry which focuses on relationships, admits the reality of divergent ontologies within social relations and sees mind or agency as inherent to all the elements which constitute social life.

An example of a study which examines the social world from such a perspective is found in Annemarie Mol's (2002) *The body multiple*, which shows how the meaning of atherosclerosis changes when it is viewed through the various practices in which it is treated by doctors, patients and medical staff. In this way focusing on practices rather than objects shows that any one object is in fact multiple: reality itself multiplies when viewed through the diversity of particular enactments of atherosclerosis. But "far from necessarily falling into fragments, multiple objects tend to hang together somehow. Attending to the multiplicity of reality opens up the possibility of studying this remarkable achievement" (ibid., p. 5). This move from universality to the 'manyfoldedness' of objects allows examining the myriad nature of reality as well as the processes that draw this multiplicity together into a singular thing – e.g. as a certain disease with a specific treatment – through various modes of coordination. Mol's deeper point is that ontologies are not given but brought into being, sustained or discontinued in day-to-day practices. Taking this insight as a starting point, it is possible to study environment-making as the enactment of particular ontologies revealed through linguistic and social practices. The following section continues to examine how the relations implied by particular onto-epistemologies can be discerned in relation to the language and imagery of wider cultural narratives.

2.3.4 Metaphoric resonance and cultural myth

In his in-depth study of the role of metaphors in shaping cultural values and social relations, *Metaphors for Environmental Sustainability*, Brendon Larson (2011) describes the matrix of framing metaphors as a *metaphoric web*. It can be thought of as a large cluster or assemblage of interconnected metaphors which mutually generate and embody specific worldviews by connecting different cultural realms. Larson denominates the conceptual and contextual connotations that metaphors draw on to impart meaning as *metaphoric resonance*. This is what prompts analogy or activates other cognitive frames. Through a detailed examination of the prevalence and use of metaphors in different scientific research areas[17], Larson identifies how certain cultural assumptions have come to influence scientific practice through their metaphoric resonance. Describing the gradual adoption of certain metaphors as supposedly value-free renditions of the world, he shows how preexistent metaphysical and cultural suppositions come to be accepted as 'facts' in scientific and social discourse. This process of 'naturalising' metaphors obscures their inherent values and makes it increasingly difficult to critique or even be conscious of them as they

[16]Marie McGinn describes Wittgenstein's understanding of meaning (and language) as rooted in, and deriving significance from, *forms of life* understood as "historical groups of individuals who are bound together into a community by a shared set of complex, language-involving practices" (1997, p. 51).

[17]Larson studies four such 'feedback metaphors' in biology: progress, competition, barcoding and meltdown.

become part of, and begin to shape, the metaphoric webs that compose worldviews. In this sense, "what we envision as possibility, what should be, becomes what is" (ibid., p. 91) as metaphors are enacted in scientific or social practices.

However, this is not to say that metaphors ‘determine’ social realities, they "simply highlight [aspects] of relations between ourselves and others and between ourselves and the world" (ibid., 86). Thus, metaphors focus attention on certain aspects of the wider holomovement of life and privilege certain ways of understanding over others with real social and political consequences. In his study of how the metaphor of ‘competition’ has in large part come to be seen as inherent to social and natural order within Western cultures, Larson describes the emergence of this metaphor and its gradual adoption in common language and persuasion as a reinforcing process between a search for explanation and rationalisation:

> "it was our perception of competition in the cultural world that contributed to a large extent to our search for it in the natural world. Having found it there, it became the way things are. Once the metaphor was naturalized in this way, people could more easily defend it in the cultural realm: not only is competition found in societies, but we should actively promote it because it is the way the world works – it is natural" (ibid., p. 75-6).

Through such feedback, metaphors can come to reinforce prevalent ways of thinking and seeing. But they also have the potential to alter received notions when they shift preexistent frames or ways of thinking – different metaphors embody alternate ways of seeing problems (cf. Lakoff, 2010). Because metaphors have the ability to "act to renew our relation with the natural world" and thereby "bring us closer to the world rather than separating us from it" (Larson, 2011, p. 226) an increased awareness of the latent meanings and values of metaphors brings the prospect of envisioning and expressing qualitatively different relationships within the lifeworld.

The challenge for research on onto-epistemological transitions is to recognise the role of language in structuring social reality and to avoid "reducing the abundance of life around us into reductive and ultimately false systems that are given more importance than our holistic experience" (ibid., p. 228). Because metaphors place thought and language in living context the choice and proclivity of theoretical metaphors are not neutral or innocent; they carry metaphorical resonance which place them within larger metaphorical webs that embody particular worldviews. The biologist and mathematician Brian Goodwin has observed about metaphors that they consolidate certain attitudes or ways of seeing which are in turn substantiated by the larger cultural myths of which they are part:

> "They give meaning to scientific theories, and they encourage particular attitudes to the processes described: in the case of Darwinism, to the nature of the evolutionary process as one predominantly driven by competition, survival and selfishness. This makes sense to us in terms of our experience of our own culture and its values. Both culture and nature then become rooted in similar ways of seeing the world, which are

> shaped at a deeper level than metaphor by cultural myths, from which the metaphors arise" (Goodwin, 1997, p. xii).

The ability of metaphoric webs to connect different social realms, value systems and 'world-pictures' make them critical in understanding the larger cultural myths which form the mythopoetic basis of experiential reality. Larson's work shows that it is infeasible and ill-conceived to try to avoid myth altogether by stripping language of metaphor. As Mary Midgley (2004) reminds us: "We have a choice of what myths, what visions we will use to help us understand the physical world. We do not have a choice of understanding it without using any myths or visions at all" (p. 235). It is possible to achieve greater reflexive understanding of our own point of view by embracing the polysemy of metaphors. By acknowledging the myths that shape and define our relationships, we open up for the possibility to transform our ways of thinking by consciously shifting the meanings that underpin our thought and language. On the other hand, "[i]f we ignore them, we travel blindly inside myths and visions which are largely provided by other people" (ibid., p. 235).

It is now possible to see more clearly the significance of viewing sustainability as a quality which pertains to certain kinds of relationships or modes of environment-making. It brings into play the foundational assumptions, images and symbols, modes of knowing and cultural myths that together affect our experience of and relation to the environment. Shifting focus from objects to relations emphasises the ways in which we come to understand 'nature' over particular strategies or targets that enact a specific definition or meaning of sustainability. The next section goes on to show how a transformation of the relationships that characterise interactions as (un)sustainable, involves engaging with the ways in which deeper cultural narratives shape particular worldviews.

2.3.5 Co-creating reality through stories

This chapter has shown how the rules and visions that guide environment-making – the beliefs, routines and regulations which shape interactions within nature-as-matrix – can be seen as an expression of the deeper cultural meanings, metaphors, and myths that structure ways of conceiving and enacting 'sustainability' and, more broadly, 'nature'. They give meaning to the various pieces of information, scientific facts and future scenarios of the sustainability challenge by narrating them in terms of lived experience and established frames or 'habits' of the imagination. Cognitive science and communication studies show how new information is assimilated according to one's existing worldview rather than a process of ratiocination (cf. section 2.3.3). This suggest that enabling new forms of environment-making needs to move beyond the 'deficit model' which envisions humans as rational actors who respond to scientific facts by rational adaptation (cf. Hulme, 2009). Rather than people reasoning their way to a specific conclusion faced with a certain set of facts, "the facts must make sense in terms of their system of frames, or they will be ignored" (Lakoff, 2010, p. 73). This is the cogency of the mythopoetic approach: it acknowledges that perception and experience becomes intelligible in *story*, that it is here

facts are made to ‘fit’ lived reality and imbued with personal meanings.

To investigate this process, studies into onto-epistemological transition can draw on research on narrative and story, which has a long and varied history cutting across disciplines including psychology, anthropology, sociology, literary studies and cultural theory. Despite the ‘narrative turn’ in the social sciences over the last couple of decades which has brought with it a stronger focus on narratives, performances and qualitative methods (Atkinson and Delamont, 2006), there is no unified approach to studying narratives. For the purposes of inquiring into onto-epistemology it is important to avoid the objectifying view of the double disengagement – stories should not be seen as vehicles for cultural selection but as bringing forth a world with particular kinds of actors and relationships. This can be done by complementing Jerome Bruner’s (2004) constructivist approach which holds that life narratives ‘become recipes for structuring experience’ and for ‘directing us into the future’ (p. 708) with Tim Ingold’s (2011) anthropological approach to stories as ‘wayfaring’: occurring within a world of movement and becoming, storying is in itself knowing and to tell a story is to bring what is known to life[18]. In this way, narratives both constitute and represent reality, they structure relations within the lifeworld at individual and collective levels.

Narratives operate within interpretive communities of speakers and listeners (Squire, 2008) and are broadly defined as "connect[ing] events into a sequence that is consequential for later action and for the meanings that the speaker wants listeners to take away from the story" (Riessman, 2008, p. 3). Thus, narratives designate meaning and guide collective interactions. Expanding on Bruner’s (2004) understanding that a culture can be characterised by the narrative models it offers for describing life choices and events, narrative inquiry can be seen as a way to find out about the rules and visions that direct social developments within interpretive communities. Cultural narratives tie together different realities – or enactments of ontologies – by establishing common frames of reference and suggesting particular ways of doing:

> "Narratives are produced and performed in accordance with socially shared conventions, they are embedded in social encounters, they are part and parcel of everyday work; they are amongst the ways in which social organizations and institutions are constituted; they are productive of individual and collective identities; they are constituent features of rituals and ceremonies; they express authority and expertise; they display rhetorical and other aesthetic skills" (Atkinson and Delamont, 2006, p. xxi).

This makes narratives apt for investigating onto-epistemological change: they both constitute and represent identities and relationships within nature-as-matrix. These observations on meaning, metaphors and cultural narratives are considered further in relation to grassroots innovations and sustainability transitions in the next section which summarises what

[18] Ingold (2011) holds that because any thing "enfolds within its constitution the history of relations that have brought it there" things "do not exist, they occur" and upon encountering a thing we come to know it through its story (p. 160). Thus, "[t]o know someone or something is to know their story" and to tell it is to partake in its becoming (ibid., p. 160-1).

a narrative approach to onto-epistemological transitions entails.

2.3.6 Re-narrating sustainabilities in grassroots innovations

As sites of 'alternate constellations of reality' grassroots narratives of the sustainability challenge can be considered to express alternative rules and visions of environment-making which hold the potential to enable qualitatively different relationships between human communities and more-than-human nature both in narrators' 'global' image of the world and in 'local' action. By organising events, characters, and plots as well as contextualising perspectives, relationships, and actions, narratives position narrators in relation to the wider universe and give meaning to the complex phenomena of the lifeworld. Communications theorist Walter Fisher (1987) explained how stories are "meant to give order to human experience and to induce others to dwell in them in order to establish ways of living in common, in intellectual and spiritual communities in which there is confirmation of the story that constitutes one's life" (ibid., p. 63). This view considers narratives as expressive of onto-epistemologies by virtue of their inherent meanings and relations rather than simply positioning subjects in relation to an objective reality which is inaccessible to perception and knowable only through abstract reason (Roberts, 2010). And it sees narratives as ontological as much as analytical: the stories we tell are constitutive as well as representative of the realities we inhabit and co-create.

Recognising narration as a process of meaning- and identity-making in which the narrator 'positions' herself interactively within a wider field of relationships, Bamberg (2004) describes participation in 'locally situated narrating practices' as potentially emancipatory: by situating subjectivities differently to given positions in a cultural meta-narrative, the narrator creates a possibility for a transformation in onto-epistemology. When her role shifts within the narrative, so does her worldview and relationships. Such positioning within a narrative is thus crucial in the construction of identity and a narrator "maneuvers simultaneously in between being complicit and countering established narratives that give guidance to one's actions but at the same time constrain and delineate one's agency" (ibid, p. 363). Viewing narratives as 'landscapes for the perception of different possibilities', re-narrating one's own life-story can be seen as a process of opening up for new realities to emerge (ibid.). Cultural master- or meta-narratives can then be conceptualised as persisting features of such landscapes which shape the story but are nonetheless malleable. This stands in direct relation to McIntosh's imagery of navigating according to the 'big picture' constellations and introducing change by connecting with wider contexts.

A narrative approach to studying onto-epistemological transformation in grassroots innovations as described in this chapter affords a theoretical understanding and conceptual vocabulary which can describe the main actors, social forces, relations, strategies, knowledges and plots that affect how people come to view themselves in relation to place and more-than-human nature. Sustainability narratives tell a story of what the challenge of sustainability is about and what actions make sense to meet this challenge – they express particular beliefs and ways of doing held within interpretive communities and

which can sanction apposite avenues of action (Squire, 2008). Investigating how grassroots innovations constitute such communities of interpretation, narrative-building and meaning-making, opens up for better understanding how they generate change through (de)stabilising particular sustainability concepts and meanings. By seeding change in sustainability narratives, interpretive communities are potentially not only building alternative networks and infrastructures but transforming the worldviews which shape unsustainable modes of environment-making. And recognising the multiplicity of realities as rendered in personal and collective narratives, allows for studying how different enactments of sustainability are drawn together and coordinated in different contexts.

Such an approach to studying onto-epistemological change in grassroots innovations addresses the identified need for a better understanding of the role of sustainability narratives and visions in the formation and diffusion of grassroots innovations. It bridges current theoretical approaches to sustainability transitions with relational and situated research paradigms which expand and deepen the conceptual vocabulary available for studying how sustainability visions, normativities, identities and knowledges shape grassroots innovations. As such it is also a contribution to the wider debates on sustainability transitions, counter-narratives and cultural change. And further, acknowledging that onto-epistemological transition is a process of bringing forth alternate realities which have not yet stabilised more widely, this approach is also itself an expression of the experimentation with meanings, concepts and language that is necessary for transforming ways of being and thinking. The following chapter goes on to describe the methodology developed for this study and how the ideas and concepts discussed here inform the empirical research. But first the next section will outline the main arguments and findings of this chapter and bring them to bear on the key research questions of this thesis.

2.4 Chapter summary

This chapter has described how transformations in onto-epistemology can be seen as qualitative changes in how the world is experienced and known, and explored how onto-epistemological assumptions form part of 'the rules and visions' that guide environment-making (cf. Geels and Schot, 2007; Moore, 2013). As such, onto-epistemologies are key to understanding how particular sustainabilities are enacted and their significance can be studied through the assumptions, metaphors and narratives that interpretive communities employ to describe their lifeworlds (cf. Bruner, 2004; Dorfman, 2009). Explaining how theorising cultural change as a (neo)Darwinian evolutionary process reproduces a division between humans and nature (cf. Ingold, 2000; Morin, 2007), this chapter went on to describe how onto-epistemological transitions can be conceptualised as transformations in social life which situate the researcher, her observations and social phenomena within the same ontological plane (cf. Bohm, 1986). Drawing on 'holographic' understandings of ontology and epistemology, an approach was formulated that focuses on relational qualities rather than separate objects and which acknowledges researched phenomena as a momentary outcome of a wider totality or field of relations (cf. Bohm and Hiley, 1993;

Bateson, 2000; Ingold, 2011).

Seeing onto-epistemological transformation as a process of constellating and enacting alternate realities (cf. McIntosh, 2001), a transition in onto-epistemology involves a shift in the meanings that shape the lifeworld (cf. Bohm, 2004b). Drawing on insights from Radical Human Ecology, the technical vocabulary of transitions theory was broadened to include elements of narrative and storytelling in order to describe such shifts in meaning from the perspective of narrators in grassroots innovations. It was argued that this 'inside' view of transitions is better placed to describe the processes of change in worldviews and onto-epistemological assumptions. Investigating the role of metaphors and myths in assigning meaning and focussing attention within the lifeworld, it was then argued that acknowledging the cultural meta-narratives that shape and define our relationships presents a possibility for transformations in onto-epistemology (cf. Larson, 2011; Midgley, 2004; Bamberg, 2004). Finally, the role of narratives in co-creating social realities and shared conventions, identities and institutions was outlined (cf. Fisher, 1987), and a rationale for a narrative approach to studying onto-epistemological transitions in grassroots innovations was put forward.

The considerations in this chapter has furthered a theoretical understanding of the research questions that guide the empirical investigation in several ways:

1. How do sustainability narratives inform what kinds of knowledge and action participants engage with in grassroots innovations?

Seeing narration as a social activity which positions actors within the landscape of a wider meta-narrative, sustainability narratives situate narrators spatio-temporally and give meaning to new experiences and perceptions in relation to 'nature'. If sustainability narratives in this way construe how people understand their sense of self and relationship with place, they are likely to affect directly what is accepted as valid knowledge and what actions are perceived as sensible in order to achieve sustainability. The question of what kinds of action become available when a life-narrative undergoes transformation can be addressed by examining the onto-epistemological assumptions inherent to a (new) sustainability narrative.

2. How are transformations in individual and collective cultural narratives expressed in participants' worldviews and actions?

As narratives are both indicative and productive of particular worldviews, they are also a gauge to transformations in personal beliefs and actions. Such changes can be perceived in the patterns of language, the concepts and metaphors which describe narrators' beliefs and actions. But, considering the mythopoetic nature of reality, some of these changes are likely to be unconscious or only experienced gradually as new modes of being and thinking. There is conceivably also a potential for conflict between different the 'rules and visions' inherent to different narratives, which suggests that onto-epistemological transformation is a complex and possibly difficult experience.

3. How do sustainability narratives affect the organisation and diffusion of grassroots innovations?

Alternative sustainability narratives in grassroots innovations tell a story of the nature and scale of the sustainability challenge and what actions make sense in light of this perspective. Therefore, such narratives position participants individually and collectively in relation to dominant narratives about sustainability and presumably play an important role in attracting or deterring participation in specific activities. This raises questions about how onto-epistemological assumptions affect grassroots innovations both in terms of participants' experience of their involvement and the wider impact of a project.

4. What is the role of stories in enabling emerging practices and tools for social change?

Because stories have the potential to either constrain or make new modes of action available, they are key to the activities that take place within interpretive communities; they can weave new visions, practices and technologies into people's lifeworlds. What *kinds* of stories circulate within grassroots innovations is therefore a guide to the forms of environment-making that emerge and they are likely to have a central role in directing activities and establishing relationships as particular practices or projects develop.

In line with this theoretical exposition of onto-epistemological transitions, the next chapter proceeds to construct a suitable methodology for researching changes in worldviews and onto-epistemological assumptions.

Chapter 3

Researching onto-epistemological change

> Stories go in circles. They don't go in straight lines. It helps if you listen in circles because there are stories inside and between stories, and finding your way through them is as easy and as hard as finding your way home. Part of finding is getting lost, and when you are lost you start to open up and listen.
>
> *Terry Tafoya in* Wilson, 2008

The foregoing observations about inquiring into transformations in onto-epistemologies as a process which involves describing 'how we know what we know' (Williams, 2012) and understanding how we come to enact particular assumptions about the world as academic subjects (Gibson-Graham, 2008) in order to generate a contextualised theoretical 'plot from within' social life (Ingold, 2011), calls for an approach to empirical research which asks fundamental questions about "how far the process of knowing [something] also brings it into being" (Law, 2004, p. 3). Seeing all social phenomena as taking place within the same ontological plane – the holomovement of life (Bohm and Hiley, 1993) – overturns many conventional assumptions about the research process because "to move, to know, and to describe are not separate operations that follow one another in series, but rather parallel facets of the same process" (Ingold, 2011, xii). At the same time, attending to the various ways in which particular phenomena are enacted in practice, singular Reality becomes a multiplicity of lived realities (Mol, 2002) and the academic becomes co-creator of the phenomena she describes. Analysis is therefore not separate from observation or interpretation; a simple method for arriving at more or less objective descriptions or for producing 'facts'. It is an activity which explains why certain interpretations are privileged by recounting how particular patterns of meaning are derived (Maines, 1993).

In this chapter, I outline how I address these methodological challenges in this thesis, explain the specific strategies and methods I employ and describe the ways in which the research evolved in the course of the study. The next section explains how this study draws

on methodological approaches spanning ethnography, narrative inquiry and participatory research in order to establish a framework which both sets clear standards for evaluating the validity of the research and acknowledges the multiple perspectives, ambiguities and contradictions that 'problem driven' social science needs to include in order to develop sensitivities to a problematic that theory alone cannot afford (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Section 3.2 then describes how the case study was developed, while section 3.3 reflects on the research process and explains the 'nuts and bolts' of this thesis.

3.1 Constructing the travel guide

In the course of formulating research questions and strategies, scoping potential cases, practicing my research skills, building a theoretical understanding of onto-epistemological transitions, doing empirical work and writing about this process, I have had to acknowledge the actuality that my research topic includes what John Law (2004) calls *elusive realities*: phenomena which "necessarily exceed our capacity to know them" and so "def[y] any attempt at overall orderly accounting" (p. 6). This realisation opened up for a lot of questions and considerations about how the research process itself performs a worldview, it brought my own self into play as a source of data, made it necessary to develop my own methods for establishing inter-subjective meaning, and called for finding ways to allow for and handle uncertainty and emergence. Law describes the methodological challenge for research into the "generative flux of forces and relations that work to produce particular realities" (ibid., p. 7) as one of finding and imagining new methods for knowing such realities, and he asks whether 'knowing' is the appropriate metaphor for these activities. These concerns encapsulate much of the search for and motivation behind the particular methods I engage with in this study.

Building on Latour's (2005) analogy of 'method' as a shorthand for describing "where to travel" and "what is worth seeing there" (p. 17), I would like to add "*how* to travel" as an aspect to include in this 'travel guide' of methodology. As a case study – "an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence" (Yin quoted in Robson, 2011, p. 136) – of individual and collective modes of environment-making, the attempt is to create a 'virtual reality' where "[r]eaders will have to discover their own path and truth inside the case" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 238). This means that I have come to understand my main responsibility as a researcher to be providing 'traceable links' for my findings (Mol, 2002) and to make my conclusions accessible and apparent to those who choose to follow – here, I follow Annemarie Mol when she contends that "[m]ethods are not a way of opening a window on the world, but a way of interfering with it. They act, they *mediate* between an object and its representations" (ibid., p. 155). It is my hope that part of the original contribution of this thesis is the way it introduces transparency – traceable links – into the research process. Before going on to describe the ways in which I have done this in practice, I will first outline the methodological considerations that have shaped my practice.

3.1.1 (Auto-)ethnography and phenomenology

Early on in formulating my approach to this research I came to the conclusion that what was perhaps more important than following any particular method was a "commitment to enhancing my skills in observation and description as well as maintaining an open frame of mind regarding causes and effects"[1]. This meant interrogating my own practices and reasoning to explain why and how I make sense of things the way I do because, as Moses and Knutsen (2007) explain, "[w]hen faced with a given context, we tend to select certain facts; we use these to establish a pattern which is subsequently used to make sense of the remaining facts (in terms of that pattern)" (p. 205). In this way, ethnographic methods became an important starting point for me. While ethnography has its roots in an anthropology which was "unreflexively a spoil of colonialism" (Bourgois, 2002, p. 417) recent 'strategic turns' over the last decades have produced disruptive ethnographies which "desire to emphasize dialogue instead of monologue and communication instead of information" (Koro-Ljungberg and Greckhamer, 2005, p. 292). Broadly, ethnography

> "... is a practice that evolves in design as the study progresses; involves direct and sustained contact with human beings, in the context of their daily lives, over a prolonged period of time; draws on a family of methods, usually including participant observation and conversation; respects the complexity of the social world; and therefore tells rich, sensitive and credible stories" (O'Reilly, 2012, p. 11).

As a form of 'iterative-inductive' process which "involves constantly moving forwards and backwards from our research questions to the data, and back to refine our questions or line of inquiry in light of what our participants share with us" (ibid., p. 226), ethnographic methods align well with the need for allowing for openness and uncertainty in the research process.

Ethnographic approaches and methods vary greatly – Robson (2011) describes ethnography as "very much a question of general style rather than of following specific prescriptions about procedure" (p. 143) – but are generally "based on fieldwork using a variety of (mainly qualitative) research techniques including engagement in the lives of those being studied over an extended period of time" (Davies, 2008, p. 4-5). Describing the qualitative researcher as a 'bricoleur' or 'quilt maker' who "creates and brings psychological and emotional unity – a pattern – to an interpretive experience" using "the aesthetic and material tools of his or her craft" (p. 4-5), Denzin and Lincoln (2005) suggest that a key aspect of qualitative research is finding and inventing suitable approaches for particular research questions and contexts. In this way, the 'quilter' ethnographer "stitches, edits and puts slices of reality together" (ibid., p. 5). However, not haphazardly but out of her sensitivity and craft. Thus, 'craft skill' in representation and application of methods is just as important as theoretical and analytical competence (Seale, 1999). Ethnographies often produce

[1] I documented the evolution of my research and approach in a series of written expositions, some of which are available online. All quotes concerning my own learning process refer to these documents. See: http://patternwhichconnects.com/phd/academic_writing.html.

'thick descriptions', through detailed description and interpretation, which are based on participatory methods (Moses and Knutsen, 2007). Because such thick descriptions cannot be entirely reduced to, or verified by, statistical techniques or criteria, ethnographic research engages with other ways to ensure the quality of qualitative research, often by developing a 'methodological awareness' and practical proficiency (Seale, 2002) and invariably by "respect[ing] the irreducibility of human experience, and acknowledg[ing] the complex, messy nature of human lives and understandings" (O'Reilly, 2012, p. 227). This requires both recognition of one's own positionality as researcher and transparency about the strategic choices made in the course of the research process.

For these reasons, I approached the empirical work by developing a 'reflexive' attitude "whereby ethnographers consider their position within their research, their relationship to their field subjects and their wider cultural context" (Scott-Jones, 2010, p. 8). To me, this meant that preconceptions "about the researched should be left behind the moment the researcher enters the public field of the subject matter"[2]. But as I progressed in my research, I began to question the limits of this stance, not just because it disregarded the inescapably stable nature of parts of my own identity, definitions and assumptions (cf. Crang, 2003), but because it reinforced a relation between researcher and researched which I was not comfortable with. This became particularly apparent towards the end of the empirical work when the phrase "withdrawing from the field" frequently emerged in my reading and discussions. The division between 'academy' and 'field' felt contrived, not least because by that point I had become part of the 'case' I was studying. Unwittingly, I was confronted with my own 'double disengagement' (cf. section 2.2.3) and association with the attitude of the 'modern constitution' (Latour, 1992) which encloses the subject (myself) and object (what I was observing) within a foundational polarity which imposes a conceptual stranglehold on interpretation. So I found it necessary to attempt to discontinue this division, however, more as a matter of trying to understand how I participated in its production than as a matter of denying its reality – which I felt firsthand.

I was relieved to find D'Amico-Samuels' (1991) pertinent observation that "[t]he mythology of the field allows for the contradictory assumption that ethnographers can suspend those aspects of their identity without which they would not be able to do research in the first place" (p. 72). This effectively divides the academic subject and weakens the effort to introduce transparency into the research because crucial connections between the researcher and the object of study are obscured:

> "... although "the field" is supposed to signal a set of experiences that adds intensive inquiry and observation to our always present participation with other humans in living, it in fact deletes salient dimensions of contemporary life by claiming that a qualitatively different relationship and events obtains during that bounded time" (ibid., p. 74).

[2]This quote is from my research diary. See: online research diary, 26.01.12, 'Theoretical considerations: The world and I', http://patternwhichconnects.com/phd/diary_2/Entries/2012/1/26_Theoretical_considerations__The_world_and_I.html

As D'Amico-Samuels suggests, an antidote to this facet of reflexivity is a combination of awareness, an attitude of humility and clarity about the aims, methods and ethics of the research project. Or, in Mol's (2002) words, discontinuing this division between researcher and researched can be achieved "by doubting the assumptions of the relation between knowledge and practice that come with it" (Mol, 2002, p. 48). This attitude helped me question my research without feeling distanced from it.

As I was increasingly engaging with my own experience as a source of data, I began to employ aspects of auto-ethnographic methods for the study. Combining autobiographical qualities with ethnographic practice, auto-ethnography performs different modes of storytelling aiming to "use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders" (Ellis *et al.*, 2010, p. na.). Recognising that "the researcher is the epistemological and ontological nexus upon which the research process turns" (Spry, 2001, p. 711) auto-ethnographies engage with a range of expressions to reflect upon their authors' life experience and to "express more fully the interactional textures occurring between self, other, and contexts in ethnographic research" (ibid., p. 708). Through practices such as my online research diary, blog reflections, interactive interviews and creative collaborations I used different elements of auto-ethnographic methods, including personal and co-constructed narrative ethnography, layered accounts, reflexive ethnography and interactive interviews (Ellis *et al.*, 2010). I also benefited from insights from the literature on auto-ethnography in the considerations about positionality, reliability and ethics discussed throughout this chapter (e.g. D'Amico-Samuels, 1991; Davies, 2008; Collins, 2010).

As a theoretical perspective, ethnography embraces a range of epistemological positions and shares methodological outlook with non-positivist approaches like hermeneutics and phenomenology (Koro-Ljungberg *et al.*, 2009). As I developed my "commitment to enhancing my skills in observation and description", I found that I shared a certain attitude with some phenomenologists. While recognising that perception and interpretation are inseparably part of the same process (cf. Ingold, 2011) I became sympathetic to seeing research as a practice which, as far as possible, "consider[s] *every* phenomenon, including known ones, as if they are representing themselves for the first time to consciousness" in order to "become aware of the fullness and richness of these phenomena" (Maso, 2001, p. 138, original emphasis). Rather than being a naïve assumption that it is possible to disregard or 'bracket' previous or past experiences, I see this as a practical way to sharpen observation and reflection. In this way, my own lifeworld entered my research as the object of radical reflection about worldviews and ways of being. As "the totality of certainties, skills, practices, and interpretative frames that we take for granted as we each find our way in the everyday worlds that form the changing horizons of our experience" (Gross, 2010, p. 125), the lifeworld encompasses all those objects, relations, beliefs and narratives which are the subject of research into onto-epistemological transformation as discussed in the previous chapter. And, as the lifeworld incorporates both what is present and absent in lived experience, it is "always in motion, always in a process of sedimentation and foundation" (Dorfman, 2009, p. 300). Because "we create a world according

to our mode of participation" (Bohm, 2004a, p. 130), the concept of the lifeworld is a way into examining and thematising aspects of how those worlds are enacted in a process of becoming (cf. Gross, 2010). As a tradition which focuses on the relationship and co-constitution of the self and the world (Finlay and Molano-Fisher, 2008), and which gives special attention to the meaning of lived experience, phenomenology is able to probe into these processes (Lindseth and Norberg, 2004).

It is in this way, without explicitly following a set phenomenological methodology, that phenomenology enters this ethnography: as an approach which provides both a suitable concept, the *lifeworld*, and an apposite method, *radical reflection*, to study onto-epistemological transformation. As described in section 2.2.4, the lifeworld is rooted in an intuitive understanding of the world beyond conceptual thought. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the lifeworld as the *entwining* of 'self', 'world' and 'other' before these categories are conceived conceptually, Dorfman (2009) describes how the endeavour to understand the lifeworld is necessarily an activity which at the same time revives and transforms it. Acknowledging that the reproduction of concepts is necessary for the very kind of inquiry phenomenologists are interested in, Dorfman describes how Merleau-Ponty's notion of radical reflection – which is "conscious of its own acquisitions and effects" (ibid., p. 299) – as a method provides a way of probing into the lifeworld without relying on concepts which are unreflexively 'emptied' of meaning as they are reproduced. If the temptation to bestow permanence on the concepts used in describing the lifeworld can in this way be resisted, a different kind of inquiry becomes possible: one which does "not look for the origin, but rather for the *sense* of origin" and where "this sense can be empty or full according to the degree of reactivation exercised upon it" (ibid., p. 300). It is in this light the ambition of the present inquiry to participate in the onto-epistemological transformation it examines should be understood: it seeks to be conscious of its own effects and to (re)activate the sense of origin in the concepts it employs.

Here, my understanding and usage of the notion of 'radical reflection' draws in particular on David Bohm and Jiddu Krishnamurti's dialogue practice[3]. In relation to reflecting on the lifeworld, I have found two insights from their dialogues particularly helpful: the first is the value of *suspending* thoughts or actions, the second is *proprioception* or the self-perception of thought. Suspension is a practice which brings attention to the way thoughts, feelings and actions are inter-related and affect each other – often without being produced by a subject. This can allow the subject to reflect on the content of the mind without reacting to it. Proprioception is the perception by thought of the process of thought, in other words: an awareness of the ways in which thought produces effects inside and outside of ourselves. This kind of reflection has been helpful in the research both on a personal level and in interviews. On the one hand it has helped bring attention to the ways my own thoughts participate in perception and on the other it has motivated me

[3]Bohm and Krishnamurti's dialogues, of which there were more than thirty, took place over the course of the 1960s to the 1980s and were recorded in a series of video, audio and book publications. Many of the core insights of this collaboration are related by Bohm in his book *On Dialogue*, 2004b.

to learn "a certain way of knowing how to come in and how not to come in, of watching all the subtle cues and the senses and your response to them – what's happening inside of you, what's happening in the group" (Bohm, 2004b, p. 45). This also pushed me to think further about how to narrate my own role in the research and how to find ways of strengthening participants' reflections on their lifeworlds.

3.1.2 Narrative inquiry and methods

I was initially attracted to narrative research paradigms because I saw them as a way to understand how situated narration expresses and empowers new ways of thinking and being within grassroots movements: narratives order characters and events in space and time, and so they hold a lot of information about the actors they include, their identities, relations and worldviews. The development of a narrator's experience and position gives insight into her lifeworld and presents a format for examining the construction and transformation of subjectivities (Bamberg, 2004). Thus, taking personal and collective narratives as a starting point for social inquiry and focussing on the social role of stories in grassroots innovations are ways of finding out more about how situated narration enable (or disable) new perspectives on, and actions in, the world. As I began the empirical work and read more about narrative methods and analysis, I realised that this approach also resolved some of the difficulties I had encountered with ethnographic research: through engaging directly with my 'ethnographic self' I could define and widen my role as researcher-participant in the gradual process of narrating my own development. By 'bridging' these identities, this became a key way to acknowledge my own role as mediator:

> "... we are simultaneously members of many worlds, some overlapping in a simple ideological sense, others separate – unless, of course, we are active in bridging the distance between them. This 'bridging' is made possible by the narrative proclivity of the self, by our extraordinary facility for trading stories" (Collins, 2010, p. 236).

This also brought my own subjectivity to the fore in unexpected ways. I was challenged with both respecting the 'irreducibility of the human experience' and representing those experiences – now including my own. Helpfully, narrative research introduces distinctions which bypass this predicament by identifying *who* is trading stories. Kohler Riessman (2008) describes three levels of analysis in narrative research:

1. Stories told by the research participants;
2. Interpretive accounts by the investigator (narrative of narrative); and,
3. The readers' reconstruction (narrative of narrative of narrative).

Because narrative inquiry takes place at three distinct levels (at least), I could incorporate or accommodate my own 'ethnographic self' without getting conflicted about finding an 'unbiased' viewpoint – as long as I could avoid obscuring the different levels. While these

distinctions are not absolute they are a helpful heuristic insofar as they aid distinguishing who is doing the narrating and interpreting.

As an umbrella term for distinct but related types of analyses and methods that focus on the role, function and context of stories, narrative research requires some clarification of foundational assumptions. Different strands of narrative analyses have their own histories and theoretical starting points which sometimes conflict and often produce very different approaches. Figure 3.1 displays some of the broader contentions within narrative research, showing established differences as well as some newer approaches which address some of these dichotomies (note that the columns are not prescriptive so that different approaches do not necessarily ascribe to all standpoints within a particular column).

Facet	Longstanding dichotomies		Alternatives
Analytical focus	Events – recounting of particular past events	Experience – analyses general or imagined phenomena	Co-construction – interested in the social patterns and functioning of stories
Audience	Narratives say something about individual thought or emotion	Social production of narratives by the audience	Narratives follow larger patterns of social and cultural story-telling
Agency	Stories express personal identity and agency	Individual agency does not operate through narrative	Social roles are performed in narratives
Language	Underlying cognitive structures or social functioning of narrative	Focus on meanings and social positioning of language	Narratives reveal social positioning as discourses
	Data contains stable or unified narratives of experience	Language is non-transparent and stable data is not produced	
Time	Time as it is experienced	Chronological time	Non-temporal sequencing

Figure 3.1: Overview of different approaches in narrative research. Based on Squire *et al.*, 2008.

Highlighting the 'strategic, functional, and purposeful' role of stories, Kohler Riessman (2008) identifies the following social functions of narratives: 1) reassessing memories; 2) argumentation; 3) persuasion; 4) engaging an audience; 5) entertainment; 6) misleading an audience; and 7) mobilisation for social change. In these ways, stories connect personal biographies and societal narratives by giving individual lifeworlds meaning and purpose in a wider social context; and, because identities are storied in relation to other actors, narratives are also potentially transformative: "[t]hey build collective identities that can lead, albeit slowly and discontinuously, to cultural shifts and political change" (Squire, 2008, p. 55). This happens, as Tamboukou (2008) points out, through a questioning of existing knowledge structures:

> "How has our present been constituted in ways that seem natural and undisputable to us, but are only the effects of certain historical, social, cultural, political and economic configurations? By revealing this contingency we become freer to imagine other ways of being" (p. 102).

Thus, rather than closing down interpretations by providing 'final' readings, it is the researcher's task to provide openings for new and further readings of a narrative. Here, I agree with Squire (2008) that *stories are completed in the reader* and with Andrews (2008) that the richness of narrative data should be taken as "evidence of its resilience and vitality, and of its infinite ability to yield more layers of meaning when examined from yet another lens, as we explore the ongoing changes of the world within and around us" (p. 98-9).

In accordance with Ingold's (2011) view that storying is in itself a form of knowing, I see narratives not only as evincing social roles and positioning but as representing localised forms of knowledge. As Squire *et al.* (2008) articulate: "[w]ithout overextending its remit, or treating personal narratives as universal theories, research on narratives as ordered representations can indeed claim to be mapping forms of *local* knowledge or 'theory'" (p. 12, original emphasis). However, because stories travel beyond local contexts and become part of yet wider narratives they also reflect wider knowledges and relations: "the local knowledges that [narrative research] produces [...] may be particular, but they can enter into dialogue with each other and produce [...] larger and more general, though still situated narrative knowledges" (ibid., p. 12). Viewing the grassroots as sites of situated narrative practices which reflect on both local meanings and macro contexts, they can be seen as instances of counter-narratives (Bamberg and Andrews, 2004), which open up for new ways of seeing, doing and acting. Bamberg (2004) suggests that a narrator's 'positioning' within both personal and meta-narratives is a good starting point for examining the emancipatory potential of stories. The next section outlines the ways in which this study engages with participatory modes of inquiry to examine such processes of narrative re-positioning.

3.1.3 Participatory research

This study draws on insights from participatory action research (Reason and Bradbury, 2001) as well as approaches from two recent research projects: community economies (Gibson-Graham, 2008) and Autonomous Geographies (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010; Chatterton *et al.*, 2010). As a way of including the subject(s) of research in the research process itself, action research "seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice" in order to generate "practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities" (Reason and Bradbury, 2001, p. 1). By engaging actively with the perspectives of the persons or communities involved it may become possible for the researcher to establish both how subjectivities are "constituted in ways that limit their

possibilities" and to "detect glimmers of new forms of subjectivity that offer enabling futures" (Cameron and Gibson, 2005, p. 328). Action research is also a challenge to the researcher because it brings new elements and relations to the research project and poses questions about how theory is done and what it is used for. And because many of these relations are fundamentally uncontrollable it is necessary to find ways of handling uncertainty in the research process. Reason and Bradbury (2001) identify *emergence* as a key characteristic of action research – see Figure 3.2 – and describe action research as a praxis which is not just about creating new knowledge(s) but extends to creating new *abilities* and new *forms* of knowledge.

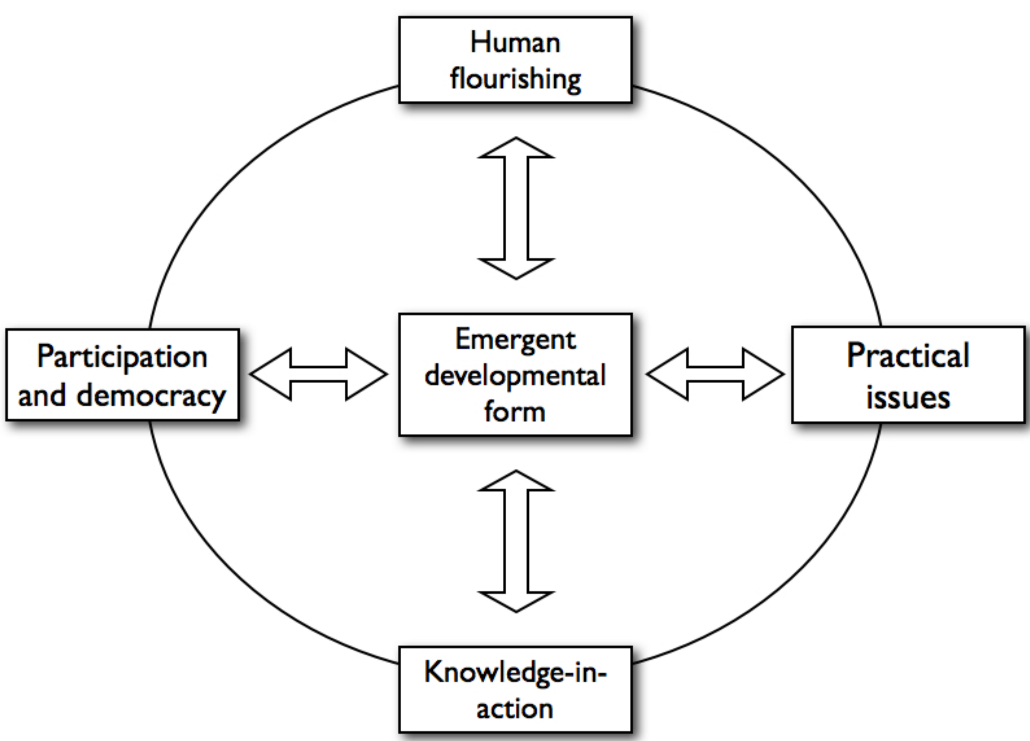


Figure 3.2: Characteristics of action research. Source: Reason and Bradbury, 2001, p. 5.

Drawing on Law and Urry's (2004) insight that "[t]he social sciences have always been embedded in, produced by, and productive of the social" (p. 392), Gibson-Graham (2008) developed an approach for their diverse economies programme which sees research as a performative ontological project. Seeing in the endeavour to become "discerning, detached and critical" observers of the world a kind of theorising which "is tinged with skepticism and negativity, not a particularly nurturing environment for hopeful, inchoate experiments", the authors describe this theoretical mode as producing strong claims about social research which affirm "an ultimately essentialist, usually structural, vision of what is and reinforces what is perceived as dominant" (p. 618). This stands in direct relation to Latour's (2004) observation that "[t]he critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to

gather" (ibid, p. 246). In developing their approach of 'doing thinking' as a starting point for performing new worlds as academic subjects, Gibson-Graham show how Latour's philosophical observations can apply in practice. In agreement with Mol (2002), they explain how this involves rethinking ontology as performative:

> "When ontology becomes the effect rather than the ground of knowledge, we lose the comfort and safety of a subordinate relation to 'reality' and can no longer seek to capture accurately what already exists; interdependence and creativity are thrust upon us as we become implicated in the very existence of the worlds that we research. Every question about what to study and how to study it becomes an ethical opening; every decision entails profound responsibility. The whole notion of academic ethics is simultaneously enlarged and transformed" (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 620).

By practicing 'weak theory' which acknowledges the consequences of this implication of the researcher in the social world, the academic ideal of "masterful knowing or moralistic detachment" falls away and leaves "greater scope for invention and playfulness, enchantment and exuberance" (ibid, p. 619). 'Weak theory' or 'doing thinking' involves ontological reframing of one's research to produce ground for new possibilities, re-reading data to uncover the possible, and creatively generating possibilities where none used to exist. This clearly resonates with the narrative and ethnographic approaches outlined above which refrain from providing finalised interpretations and leave the story to be partly completed in the reader.

Another source of inspiration for this study is the Autonomous Geographies research project which examined the practices of different activist groups and "how they challenge, deal with and imagine alternatives to life under capitalism in the everyday" (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010, p. 475) through participatory action research in social centres, housing projects, and novel forms of eco-building. Seeing activist practices not just as expressions of resistance but complex forms of interweaving *anti-*, *post-* and *despite-* capitalisms into lived realities (ibid., p. 476), the project undertook research "alongside everyday struggles of a number of anti-capitalist or 'autonomous' political groups, networks and spaces in the UK" (Chatterton *et al.*, 2010, p. 246). Reflecting on the complex, messy and challenging nature of doing this kind of participatory research – which did not always succeed or progress as expected – the Autonomous Geographies Collective was able to identify a number of valuable principles for doing participatory action research. While many of these pertain in particular to "the problems of attempting to work collectively in an institutional setting which thrives from individualising our efforts" (ibid., p. 265), a number of these insights are relevant to participatory research into the transformation of onto-epistemologies. They can be summarised under two headings:

1. **Ethical and political considerations as academic subjects:** Crucial issues around the nature, focus and approach of a research project need to be clarified as early as possible in the research process. It is necessary to consider how the research –

and academe more widely – is part of those modes of knowledge production which participants in the research aim to subvert. This means acknowledging how the ‘out there’ of the real world is shaped by the ‘in here’ of academia, recognising the emancipatory potentials of researching as an activity and building networks of mutual support and understanding. Being prefigurative by practicing the change one wants to see and enabling knowledge investment back to the grassroots is key.

2. **Strategic and practical measures:** It is important to become aware of the ‘footprint’ of a research project. How are issues around inequality of resources, capacities, experience, ownership and power dealt with to avoid the role of the academic who imposes an outside agenda? Finding ways to avoid speaking for others while still communicating their ideas and reflecting on the ways value is derived from the experience of others are central concerns, as is acting strategically to ensure accountability and enabling input from participants in the research process. Questions should be raised about how to align the research agenda with relevant issues and needs of participants. This involves longer-term practical commitment to the relationships that form during a research project.

A key insight from participatory approaches is that our identities as academics "overlap and intertwine with our research" while they are "dynamic and fluid and thus often co-evolve with our research" (Gillan and Pickerill, 2012, p. 139). Rather than trying to erase this fact from the research process the challenge is to acknowledge it in ways that strengthen an understanding of the procedures involved and affirms the complexity of academic positionalities. This "moves the ethical debates beyond simply a question of what form of reciprocation is appropriate" (ibid., p. 139) and brings questions about our self-understanding and role in social change to the fore.

The methodological issues and considerations described here, surfaced at different points in the research and brought new perspectives and challenges to my research practice. The gradual inclusion of my own self (or selves) as a resource and a source of data, reinforced the need for establishing ‘traceable links’ – which in turn called for openness and honesty. Situated as ‘at once both subject and object’ (Abram, 1997), I found that many facets of the questions I was asking about viewing sustainability as a relationship were immediately visible in my own relations, thoughts, conversations and modes of participating in the research and beyond. This was both troubling and exciting, and it called for developing ways to capture these aspects of the research project by introducing layers of documentation that could capture how my participation and thinking developed over time. In the next section, I describe in more detail how the research was set up and developed in an ‘emergent developmental form’ to address the issues of transparency, reflexivity, ethics and documentation raised here.

3.2 Developing the case study

Having identified a need to examine worldviews and sustainability narratives in grassroots innovations, and decided on the appropriate methodological approaches for doing the empirical research, the key question became which grassroots groups to look at. At this stage I benefited from invaluable discussions with members of my research group – in preparation for the empirical work I invited various faculty members to discuss a draft research plan[4]. Based on this initial literature review, I had established two main dimensions that characterise differences across grassroots sustainability narratives and visions: 1) whether the focus of an innovation is agency- or artefact-based; and, 2) whether sustainability visions are synergistic or antagonistic in relation to existing socio-technical regimes. By in this way charting the various grassroots innovations I had started following during the initial phase of the research (see Table 3.1 for an overview of these projects) I could collate differences and similarities between them, which helped me to start thinking about different aspects of the sustainability narratives in those groups I was most interested in. Having provisionally chosen the Dark Mountain Project, Transition Towns and Open Source Ecology, I could then contrast differences in visions and approaches to sustainability, social change and narrative positioning (see Figures 3.3 and 3.4).

Open Source Ecology; The voluntary simplicity movement; Slowfood movement; Ecovillage movement; Permaculture; Global Justice Movements (e.g. Pachamama Alliance, Earth First!, People's World Movement for Mother Earth, Indigenous Rights); The Long Now Foundation; Low carbon lifestyles (e.g. Carbon Reduction Action Groups, Low Carbon Communities Network, Forward the Revolution); Transition Towns; Contemporary spirituality (e.g. Integral Life, mindfulness); Cultural Creatives; The Great Transition Initiative; Dark Mountain Project; Earth Stewards Network; The Earth Charter Initiative; avaaz.org; tactical media (e.g. Creative Climate, culture jammers, the Church of Stop Shopping); sustainability art (e.g. Cape Farewell, 2020 – Arts and Climate Change Network, RSA Arts and Ecology Centre, Centre for Sustainable Practice in the Arts, Red Latinoamerica); education initiatives (e.g. Question Based Learning, Integral Science, Eco-literacy, popular education); 'sustainability knowledge hubs' (e.g. The Well, Whole Earth Catalog, World Changing, Labforculture.org).

Table 3.1: Types of projects initially considered

Through discussions with, and guidance from, fellow academics, I decided to do a single case study of the Dark Mountain Project. At the point of formally deciding on my case study I had already been engaging with the Dark Mountain Project through participation in the 2011 Uncivilisation festival and conducted a few pilot interviews. So, based on my feeling for and access to the group, I decided to proceed with an in-depth, qualitative case study of this project. The Dark Mountain Project describes itself as:

> "... a network of writers, artists and thinkers who have stopped believing the stories our civilisation tells itself. We see that the world is entering an age of ecological

[4]This is available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/phd/academic_writing.html.

> collapse, material contraction and social and political unravelling, and we want our cultural responses to reflect this reality rather than denying it. The Project grew out of a feeling that contemporary literature and art were failing to respond honestly or adequately to the scale of our entwined ecological, economic and social crises. We believe that writing and art have a crucial role to play in coming to terms with this reality, and in questioning the foundations of the world in which we find ourselves"[5].

As a network which is specifically interested in exploring creatively how to respond to social-ecological crisis, and which engages with the cultural foundations of how such crises are perceived, the Dark Mountain Project seemed like a good starting point for examining onto-epistemological change. The Dark Mountain manifesto states:

> We believe that the roots of these crises lie in the stories we have been telling ourselves. We intend to challenge the stories which underpin our civilisation: the myth of progress, the myth of human centrality, and the myth of our separation from 'nature'. These myths are more dangerous for the fact that we have forgotten they are myths (Kingsnorth and Hine MA, p. 19).

The direct engagement with the relation between the meta-narrative of progress and personal or collective action in the Dark Mountain Project also appeared to be a good fit with the key concerns of this thesis. The next sections describe the strategic measures and specific methods I developed to for the study.

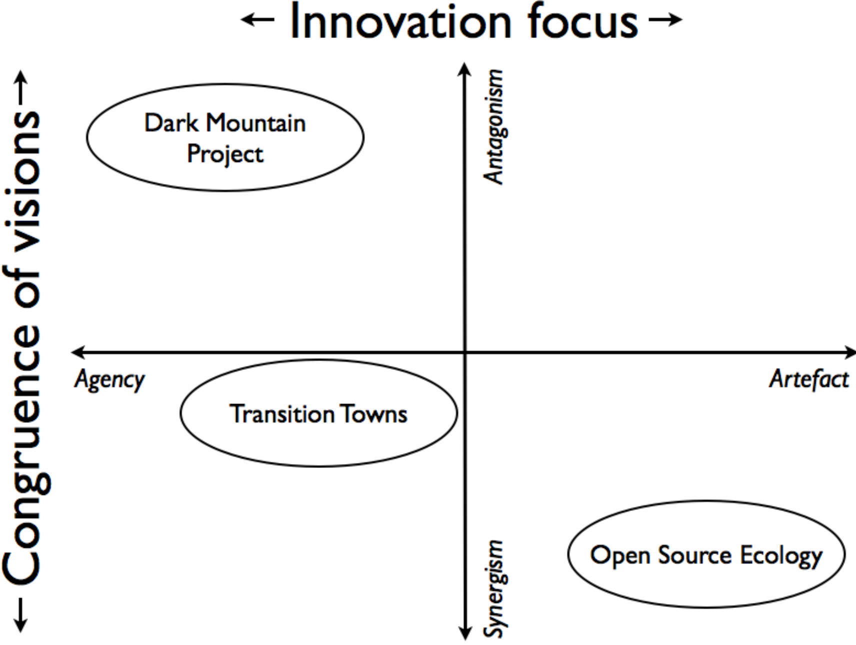


Figure 3.3: Initial case selections mapped according to sustainability visions and innovation focus.

[5] See: http://dark-mountain.net/about/the-dark-mountain-project/.

VISION / G.I.	Sustainability	Process of change	Role of the group
Open Source Ecology (a) *Sustainable civilisation with modern comforts*	"harmonious coexistence between natural and human ecosystems" based on "land stewardship, resilience, and improvement of the human condition"	'development of a replicable village infrastructure by advanced self-sufficiency at unprecedentedly small scales'	"to promote harmony between humans and their natural life support systems" through "open access to the best practices of economic production"
Transition Towns (b) *Energy descent*	"living with less energy is imperative because of climate change and inevitable because of fossil fuel depletion"	"Without vast amounts of energy, we all lived a much more local life. As we go through the energy descent, that'll happen again"	"unleash the genius of the local community to design their pathways through the energy descent that we're facing"
Dark Mountain Project (c) *Uncivilisation*	"There is a fall coming. We live in an age in which familiar restraints are being kicked away, and foundations snatched from under us"	"The shifting of emphasis from man to notman: this is the aim of Uncivilised writing. To 'unhumanise our views a little'"	"Uncivilisation ... which sees unflinchingly and bites down hard as it records ... This is what we are here for"

Figure 3.4: Different visions and approaches to sustainability across the initial case selections. Sources: (a) www.opensourceecology.org; (b) www.transitionnetwork.org; and, (c) www.dark-mountain.net.

3.2.1 Following the narrative

Given the considerations outlined in the previous section, I became interested in finding a way of 'doing thinking' in the process of the empirical research and two insights in particular seemed appropriate to the case study I was doing. One was from actor-network theory based on the sentiment that "it is no longer enough to limit actors to the role of informers offering cases of some well-known types. You have to grant them back the ability to make up their own theories of what the social is made of" (Latour, 2005, p. 11). In light of my ambition to "maintain an open frame of mind regarding causes and effects", the idea of 'following the actors' rather than imposing definitions and theories on them resonated with me: "to catch up with their often wild innovations in order to learn from them what the collective existence has become in their hands, which methods they have elaborated to make it fit together, which accounts could best establish the new associations that they have been forced to establish" (ibid., p. 12). The other approach I adopted was an attitude from narrative sociology which embraces the uncertainty and uncontrollable nature of doing social research. As Kohler Riessman (2008) states:

> "Creating possibilities in research interviews for extended narration requires investigators to give up control, which can generate anxiety. Although we have particular paths we want to cover related to the substantive and theoretical foci of our studies, narrative interviewing necessitates following participants down their trails. Giving up control of a fixed interview format – "methods" designed for "efficiency" – encourages greater equality (and uncertainty) in the conversation" (p. 24).

Borrowing the metaphor of "following actors/participants along their narrative trails", this became an approach which I began to think of as *following the narrative*. To me, this meant a preparedness to go wherever the narratives I encountered took me while carefully documenting the 'trails' in order to identify from where the narratives emerged, how narrators situated themselves and if there are certain points of contradiction or transformation. It also meant that I had to log the development of my personal narrative and find ways to navigate the different levels at which the narrative operated (see section 3.1.2).

This proved to be a simple but highly structured way of deciding where to inquire further, gradually drawing out common themes and building a broader 'map' of the narrative trails I was following. In practice it first of all meant reading and following the material that had circulated online about the Dark Mountain Project, inquiring whether participants would speak with me and beginning to participate by contributing to the conversations. Early on I identified six 'narrative sites' which I needed to examine in more detail (see Figure 3.5). This helped me specify the narrators and materials I needed to engage with as well as the appropriate methods for doing this. 'Following the narrative' also introduced a straightforward and flexible – but non-random – sampling strategy: it meant that decisions about who to interview were based on which site I was inquiring about and how far into it I had gone – much like 'snow-balling' but based on a relatively large pool of potential sources of narrative data. Sampling gradually became more pointed and easier and, as I became more familiar with each of the sites, Figure 3.5 became helpful for deciding how far I still had to travel to be satisfied that I had reached a point of relative saturation.

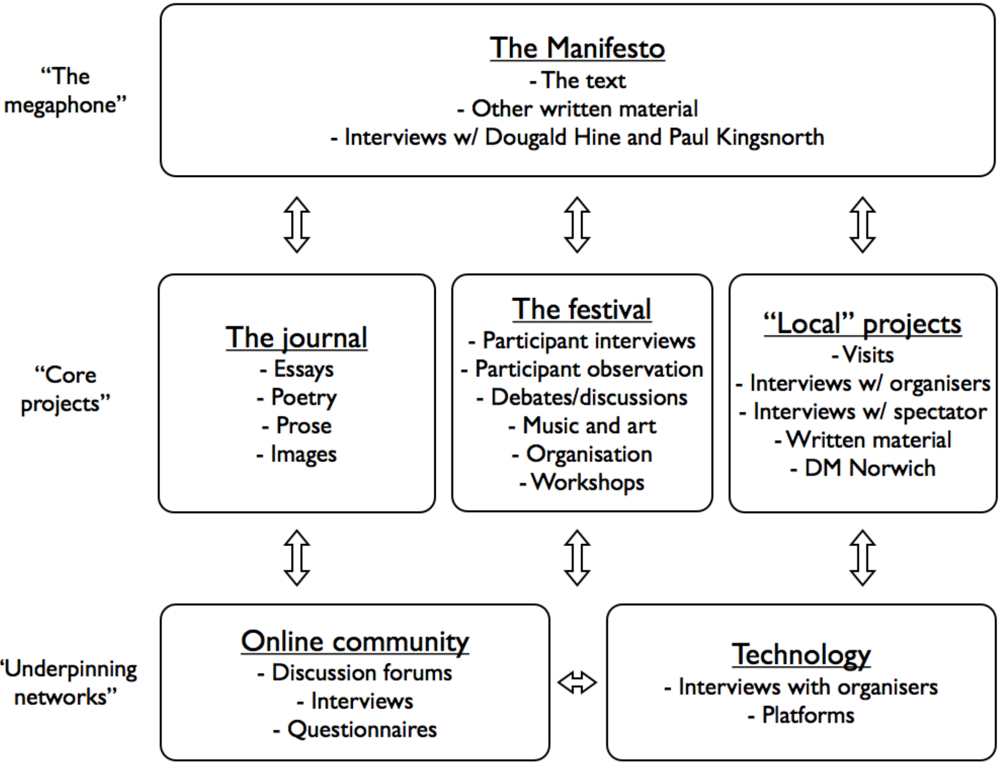


Figure 3.5: Different 'narrative sites' in the case study.

Through a recursive and open-ended process which involved continually moving between engaging with the personal and collective narratives I encountered, reflecting on these and connecting them up, writing about the process and drawing in theory, I was able to incorporate new findings fairly readily and easily into the research process. This approach helped me to deal with uncertainties and the surprises that occurred along the way and it turned out to be a good way to connect my theoretical understanding, research questions and tentative findings in an iterative process of reflection, refinement and query. But it also presented me with a number of challenges. I had to find ways to ensure sufficient documentation of the different types of data in the different sites. This meant that I had to engage with different media and forms of note-taking which came to include audio recordings, various diaries and blogs, emails, photography and a large set of notes detailing my ongoing reading and thinking about findings, research questions, methods, themes, meetings and events (see section 3.3). As the sprawl of data grew, I had to develop a structured way of archiving and keeping track of the various types of data. And later on I had to balance the depth of my analysis and the scope of the data. So this also became an issue of incorporating the insights and findings of the data that I had to leave out, which in turn meant I produced more conceptual notes and documentation. That made me realise that there was a seventh site of narrative about the Dark Mountain Project: my own thesis.

When I found that the conversations I was having through my research was directly related to other circles of conversation within the Dark Mountain Project, I decided to make some of my data available online. I had already created a webpage for my research[6] and through my blog I began to publish some of my reflections and interviews (see Figure 3.6). With this decision, a whole other layer of data emerged in the responses, ping backs and comments to these documents. So as the research progressed I had to make strategic decisions about which sites and what data were more interesting and relevant to particular questions. However, I had learnt from David Maines not to discriminate data until after it is collected, so I had to accept the impossibility of including everything and try to gauge when was the right time to stop finding and producing more data. As Maines (1993) describes, "[t]he virtue of this approach is that the researcher has access to the contradictions and thereby is on firmer empirical grounds than without them, but it increases difficulties in drawing conclusions across cases" (p. 129). This points to what I see as the central challenge for this kind of approach: being honest and open about how things get done and introducing a radical kind of transparency into the research process.

3.2.2 Ensuring transparency

As I came to identify my own thesis as a narrative site for what I was researching the need to "introduce a high level of transparency into the research process" became obvious if I wanted to create traceable links between the empirical research and my conclusions about it. At the same time, I had to clarify how I translate certain data and findings

[6] See: http://patternwhichconnects.com/phd/main.html

Figure 3.6: Screenshot of the webpage I maintained for the research project.

into particular understandings and framings, or how "the possibility that one thing (for example, an actor) may stand for another (for instance a network)" (Law, 1992, p. 386) in the course of the research. This is similar to, but broader than, Maine's point about avoiding early closure of data in that it includes the "modes of thought, habits, forces and objects" (Callon and Latour, 1981, p. 285) which are involved in the research. This meant that, as far as possible, I had to postpone strategic decisions about re-narrating the narratives I encountered until after they had been recorded and that these choices should be made public. At the same time, I had to refrain from engaging in theoretical analysis too early because theory can get in the way, as Bent Flyvbjerg (2006) posits:

> "Narrative inquiries do not—indeed, cannot—start from explicit theoretical assumptions. Instead, they begin with an interest in a particular phenomenon that is best understood narratively. Narrative inquiries then develop descriptions and interpretations of the phenomenon from the perspective of participants, researchers, and others" (p. 240).

Having engaged extensively with electronic media I decided to take Flyvbjerg's notion of developing case study research as a 'virtual reality' literally in order to increase possibilities for the reader to be able "to enter this reality and explore it inside and out" (ibid, p. 238). To me, this has meant making part of the research material available (through references and hyperlinks) so the reader can access narrative levels beyond the interpretations I make in this thesis (see section 3.3).

Here, Kohler Riessman's (2008) distinction of narrative interpretations taking place at the levels of the research participant, researcher and reader became useful for introducing transparency to the research. At the level of research participants there was already a high degree of transparency because the publications, events and meetings of the Dark Mountain Project are in the public realm. Much of the content of the journals, blogs, debates, talks and performances has thus already been through a process of reflection and articulation in which the narrators have positioned themselves. Even live events are deliberated and could be recorded with permission by, and courtesy for, the participants. The most difficult aspect of introducing transparency at this level was the in-depth interviews which would go into the – possibly sensitive – details of personal worldviews. For this reason I decided to give the interviewees co-ownership over our conversations by letting them read through and adjust the transcripts I had produced from the recorded interviews. This proved to be a really fruitful decision. When an interviewee was willing, we passed the transcripts back and forth between us, sometimes several times, in a process of both clarifying and uncovering new meanings. This created a multi-layered conversation where we were able to delve deeper into particular aspects which had previously been vague. In this way, I was able to pinpoint and learn more about certain concepts, terms or ways of speaking which were relevant to particular themes or other data. As an example of how this process proceeded, compare the following two extracts of my conversation with Catherine Lupton. The original, literal transcript is visible in the first excerpt as the text in black. The interviewee's reflections, adjustments and additions are then visible in the layer indicated by the strikethrough and red text. The second excerpt is the final version of the same text (see Appendix H for the full interview).

> But I think the strongest thing is that desire to have conversations differently, to carry out enquiry differently. To ~~kind of~~ open up space for saying let's not just bring our received ideas to the table and keep repeating them, and keep cutting out these words, and these stories and these expressions of who we are: "oh, my goodness that's so terrible", or "why don't they do that" and those kinds of voices speaking. What I mean is the kind of speech that sounds pre-scripted [I like Andrew Taggart's distinction, which I came across more recently, between reciting and improvising], and depersonalised, this unspecified 'we' or 'they' as the object of speech. And to actually crack that open. And I think that was the thing that really ~~kind of~~ fired me, that I went on to write about. It obviously struck some kind of chord in me that somebody was creating that kind of possibility.

> But I think the strongest thing is the expressed desire to have conversations differently, to carry out enquiry differently. To open up space for saying let's not just bring our received ideas and ways of speaking, of engaging with each other, to the table and keep repeating them. What I mean is the kind of speaking that sounds pre-scripted and depersonalised – say, the habit any of us can fall into of saying things like 'we really must do something!', when it's not at all clear to whom that 'we' is referring. I recently came across Andrew Taggart's distinction between reciting and improvising, and I found that helpful for thinking further about this [hyperlink]. I connected with people in the project who seemed to share this sense of openness. So that's probably the touchstone for me.

This method addressed the issue of translation directly: by checking and engaging with the content of the interview the research participants could be sure that I would (re)present the conversation in their vocabulary and from their perspective. On a practical level it helped me better understand the core themes and clarify those parts of the transcript which were unclear. But it was also a way to handle my strategic and ethical concerns about doing participatory research (see section 3.1.3) by building understanding and trust. Opening up the interview process in this fashion introduced accountability while it produced rich and multi-layered data set. Treating the interview as an *ongoing process* rather than a one-off event in which meanings are immutable, really generated a depth to the conversations which was unexpected and let me become familiar with the ways both I and the participant were positioning ourselves in relation to each other and to a wider audience (other participants in the Dark Mountain Project). Often I was being actively drawn into the interviews and asked about my perspective and for this reason I prefer to think of them as 'interview-conversations'. When a participant agreed, I would publish our conversation online on my personal blog (see Figure 3.7)[7].

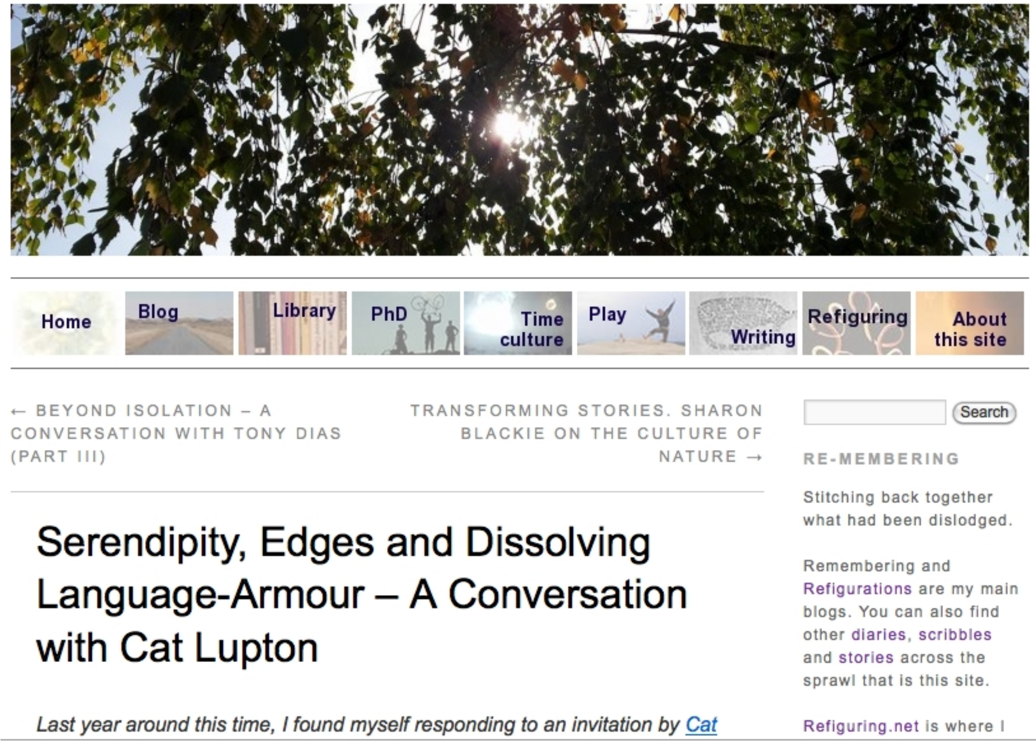


Figure 3.7: Screenshot of my blog *Remembering*.

In this way, the conversations contributed to and became part of the wider dialogue going on between participants in the Dark Mountain Project (see section 3.3). I was lucky that the participants I interviewed were all creative, reflective and insightful people who

[7]The conversation containing the two excerpts were published under the title 'Serendipity, Edges and Dissolving Language-Armour – A Conversation with Cat Lupton', see: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/serendipity-edges-and-dissolving-language-armour-a-conversation-with-cat-lupton/. See also Appendix H.

had a lot to say to my questions. All of them already wrote blogs and engaged with all sorts of artistic expression so I had a lot to go by. First, I would read as much as I could from their public materials and then I would sit with that and draw out themes or particular questions. I would then bring three to six comments or questions with me to the interview-conversation and let the interviewee talk around those. At times this method led us to unexpected topics but it always yielded very interesting conversations. Some of these continued afterwards around the transcripts I had produced and with some people I had several conversations. I found that the key to developing the transcripts was to engage with them as if they were a continuation of the conversation: to compare with previous versions, to try and delve into certain ways of speaking to see what they revealed, sometimes to insist on particular interpretations of phrasings and to ask questions like "when you say this...?", "what do you mean by...?" and "so does this mean...?"

At the level of my personal 'narrative of the narrative' (cf. Kohler Riessman, 2008) being transparent about the research meant writing as much as I could about my own development and, where appropriate, to make this public. I was fortunate that my supervisors urged me to continually write about my process and I produced a series of discussion notes on the progression of my empirical research, reading and theory, the development of my research questions, my approach to methods, conceptual notes, research statements, pilot thematic analyses, and presentations. I also participated in several seminars and workshops, gave poster presentations and, towards the end of the research, I was invited to speak at different events, including some hosted by the Dark Mountain Project. I attended various meetings, events and festivals of the Dark Mountain Project and I helped to set up a local group in Norwich. I kept four different research diaries and wrote a large number of blog posts during the research for myself and others. My personal website[8] became both a way to communicate about my research process, a resource for structuring my methods and thinking, and a tool for reflection on various aspects of the themes and methods I was developing (see also section 3.3). I also decided to publish some of the notes on my methods, theory and approach in order that people could find out what I was doing should they wish to know. While I do not know exactly what the wider impact of this approach has been, it helped ensure that I had ways to produce links between the empirical findings and data, the development of my own thinking, and the process of creating a coherent narrative about sustainability narratives and worldviews in relation to the Dark Mountain Project.

As for the third narrative level of this thesis, I hope the measures I have introduced aid the reader to enter and explore the realities that this research have generated and performed (cf. Gibson-Graham, 2008; Mol, 2002) in order to create a 'narrative of the narrative of the narrative' (cf. Riessman, 2008). My aim has been to leave enough room and trails open for readers to 'complete the story' (cf. Squire, 2008) and discover 'their own path and truth' in the virtual reality of this research (cf. Flyvbjerg, 2006). The thesis spills over into the various materials, participants and narratives that I have enlisted. The traceable links

[8] See: http://patternwhichconnects.com.

(cf. Mol, 2002) this research has created are intended to open up for these connections and show how I 'mobilise and hold together the bits and pieces' (cf. Law, 1992). I have aimed to be as clear as possible about whose perspective is expressed when and where. To do this I provide links to the different data points wherever possible (see section 3.3.4) and introduce an alternative font which I use whenever I am quoting empirical data (as opposed to quotes from academic literatures). Where I myself have co-created data, or where I bring in my own reflections during the empirical research, my voice also appears in this font. I do this to show that I became, as I discovered in the diary reflection below, a co-creator of the narratives about the Dark Mountain Project:

> Over the course of these conversations I gradually became more confident of my own narrative and I noticed a slight shift in my own attitude as I began to 'feed back' some of the insights and concepts that had emerged during earlier conversations. Sometimes previous co-narrated terms would fit the meaning discussed in a present conversation, or a particular figure of speech I had talked about earlier would present a topic or a concept in a new light. This would often be very useful for making sense of different ideas and brought a quality or depth to the discussions that I think would have been absent if the conversations had occurred in isolation. In this way, the meanings of different concepts was co-produced not only between an individual narrator and myself, but by all the narrators (including me) together. My role in this context was also one of a 'seeder' or someone who takes meanings and concepts across different perspectives.[9]

As I progressed in the research and began understanding my own role, and how this process worked, better, my focus and structure began to revolve around a set of core principles: openness to the unexpected, detachment from outcomes, attention to means, perceptiveness, honesty and patience. The following section explains this in more detail.

3.2.3 Ethics, emergence and co-producing realities

Mediating narratives about aspects of something as personal and emotive as transformation in onto-epistemological assumptions about the world meant that I had to clarify the ethical dimensions of the research early on. In grassroots participatory research ethical concerns are "about much more than bureaucratic checklists of practical elements we must include in our research, they become (and always were) about how we understand ourselves, our role in social change and our very identities" (Gillan and Pickerill, 2012, p. 139). There was clearly a potential for conflict both between my 'academic' and 'personal' selves and between my identity as 'researcher' and 'participant'. This could lead to a questioning of my motives, actions and interpretations from a variety of perspectives. If I was unable to bridge these identities, there was a danger that I could be seen to simply

[9] See: online research diary, 18.03.12, 'Reflections: Co-creating the Dark Mountain narrative', http://patternwhichconnects.com/phd/diary_2/Entries/2012/3/18_Reflections__A_stones_throw_2_3_3.html.

"use what other people know to become something [I was] not before, personally and materially" in order to "translate this knowledge into the language of power and publishing, regardless of the novelty or readability of the final product" (D'Amico-Samuels, 1991, p. 79). On the other hand, the inclusion of my own self in the research process could be interpreted as 'going native' and thereby as undermining my voice as academic researcher (cf. Fuller, 1999). While I tried to address these issues by being open and transparent about everything I did, they kept resurfacing until very late in the research process when I had gained confidence in my role and identity as researcher-participant. As both D'Amico-Samuels (1991) and Fuller (1999) affirm, antidotes for these kinds of conflicts are found in developing an attitude or approach which brings awareness and humility into the research process.

Clarifying my own intentions and ambitions also helped me to be more comfortable and confident when I had to make spontaneous or intuitive decisions regarding *where* to follow the narrative during the empirical research. And as I gradually began to embrace the 'unruly' nature of this research, I discovered that my ethical concerns indirectly shaped the outcomes of the research: knowing that I did not have to worry about my own motives made me more comfortable in the face of uncertainties and I could begin exploring emergent aspects of the research process. This turned out to be invaluable for understanding some of the subtler connections in the 'discursive terrain' of the metaphors, ideas and emotions that comprised the narratives I encountered (cf. Williams, 2012). I came to understand emergence as a process of sidestepping intentions and freeing up attention in order to be able to notice connections in the discursive terrain – "[c]onnections which hold the potential to widen our perspective by offering the data we were not looking for and which will turn our understanding on its head" as I later reflected[10]. The somewhat unexpected implication of this experience was that *ethics and attitude matter* beyond being procedural or psychological concerns – they shape actions and outcomes in significant and consequential ways.

I later came to see this as a practical expression of Law and Urry's (2004) insight that "[i]f methods are not innocent then they are also political. They help to make realities. But the question is: which realities? Which do we want to help to make more real, and which less real?" (p. 404). In terms of the personal narratives I encountered this was relatively straightforward: I wanted to empower them by being an attentive listener and a decent conversation partner. But within the multitude of wider narratives about the Dark Mountain Project as a group this was more complicated because there were sometimes conflicting views, opinions and beliefs. Here, my identity as researcher was really helpful in claiming a nonpartisan stand – in this regard my methods were invaluable because creating 'traceable links' works both outwards and inwards: it is a way to elucidate the research process to fellow academics but it is also a means of practicing accountability

[10] See: online research diary, 14.09.12, 'Reflections: Emergence and submergence', http://patternwhichconnects.com/phd/diary_2/Entries/2012/9/14_Reflections__Emergence_and_submergence.html.

and sincerity in relation to research participants. And establishing co-ownership over the transcripts I produced also ensured that research participants were clear about my understandings and interpretations. But there is a finer point to Law and Urry's question: simply making a series of statements about intentions or designing the research around principles like co-ownership and participation does not in itself establish what kind of reality is co-produced. As Kohler Riessman (2008) observes, the disposition and sensibilities of an interviewer directly affects the outcomes of a conversation: "[t]he specific wording of a question is less important than the interviewer's emotional attentiveness and engagement and the degree of reciprocity in the conversation" (p. 24). This statement resonates with my experience of the various conversations I engaged in during this research. Because narration depends on expectations (ibid.) the kind of manner and spirit in which an inquiry is undertaken affects the type of accounts or answers one receives. Therefore, a subtle – but critical – element of my interview practice became developing presence and an attitude of openness and attentiveness.

In these ways, ethics became a key component of my methods. I slowly came to rely more on ethical and practical understandings and less on the standard research techniques I had been trained in as I developed my own research 'craft skill' (cf. Seale, 1999, 2002; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005) and became clearer about my role in the relations and processes I was examining (cf. Gillan and Pickerill, 2012). The next and final section explains the data collection and production, how I have patterned the data and provides a guide to how my own trails can be (re)traced and examined.

3.3 Connecting the trails

As explained in section 3.2.1 the guiding principle for the empirical research in this thesis, has been to follow the narrative through the different sites I had identified (see Figure 3.5 above). This section will clarify what this meant in practice, describe how I collected and generated data in the different narrative sites and provide an inventory for the various data sources I have worked with. But first it is necessary to briefly summarise how I have approached the process of interpretation, theorising and story building that has gone into creating my own 'narrative of the narrative'.

3.3.1 What am I listening and looking for?

While the iterative-inductive approach to doing an ethnographic case study outlined above implies a continual movement between observation, reflection, analysis and theory (cf. O'Reilly, 2012), it is important to explicate what has guided my strategic and editorial decisions in the co-production and patterning of the data. As explained in Chapter 2, the overarching question that guides this research is *how sustainability narratives affect life-worlds within grassroots innovations?* This means that I have been looking for aspects of the activities, conversations and outputs of the Dark Mountain Project which in some

way could tell me more about the ways in which participants begin to narrate their life-world with the help of some of the concepts and practices that circulate within the wider network – as well as how this relates to personal outlook and actions. I have done this on the basis of the theoretical understanding – developed in the previous chapter – that conceptual structures, webs of metaphors and narrative positioning provide clues to the structuring and meaning of particular sustainabilities. However, based on the methodological framework outlined in this chapter, I have tried to avoid building too much theory into the empirical chapters: instead, the theory has provided a focus for 'where to look' for signs of onto-epistemological change.

To find out about this in practice, I built a large pool of secondary data (referring to the material about the Dark Mountain Project written by others, e.g., the manifesto, journals, blogs, etc.) and a smaller pool of qualitative primary data (referring to interview-conversations, participant observation, notes and reflections). Collecting and analysing the secondary data has been relatively straightforward insofar as this has followed a simple approach to thematic analysis (cf. Riessman, 2008) which focuses on the content and context of the material – although my understanding of this data has also benefitted from discussions with authors and participants. The primary data has gone through more varied processes of patterning. Thematic analyses of interview-conversations have been critical for drawing out different aspects of participants' understanding and interaction with the Dark Mountain Project. And the process of working through the conversations with the interviewees has furthered an understanding of how each individual narrative was constructed dialogically – as did follow up interviews and online communication. For live talks, meetings and events the use of audio recordings, note taking and diaries were important for the initial ordering of data. This was then subsequently revisited and developed in discussion notes and draft expositions. To capture my emerging understanding it was imperative to continually document my own narrative trails in notes, diaries, blog posts and reflections. These could then later be compared with other types of data and integrated into the process of patterning the entire data set. Figure 3.8 illustrates how this has been done for different types of data.

Sections 3.3.2 and 3.3.3 will say a little more about this process while section 3.3.4 provides a key to the data. There is one aspect of patterning the data which is difficult to capture in a diagram like Figure 3.8 and that is the *emergent developmental form* which this process necessarily takes (cf. Figure 3.2). That means that while I considered different qualitative techniques and methods that could be employed in this study beforehand, they gradually developed as the research progressed and also began to inform each other. So while the different types of data and methods that are shown in Figure 3.8 are situated within separate circles, they also speak to each other and corroborate understandings that emerge across different data sets. Figure 3.9 contrasts the emergent developmental form of participatory research with the 'doubly disengaged' or linear view of the research as distinct phases of formulating hypotheses, empirical testing and analysis.

Each dot in Figure 3.9 marks a data point and the lines illustrate trails between these points. By situating all the aspects of the research – from creating research questions

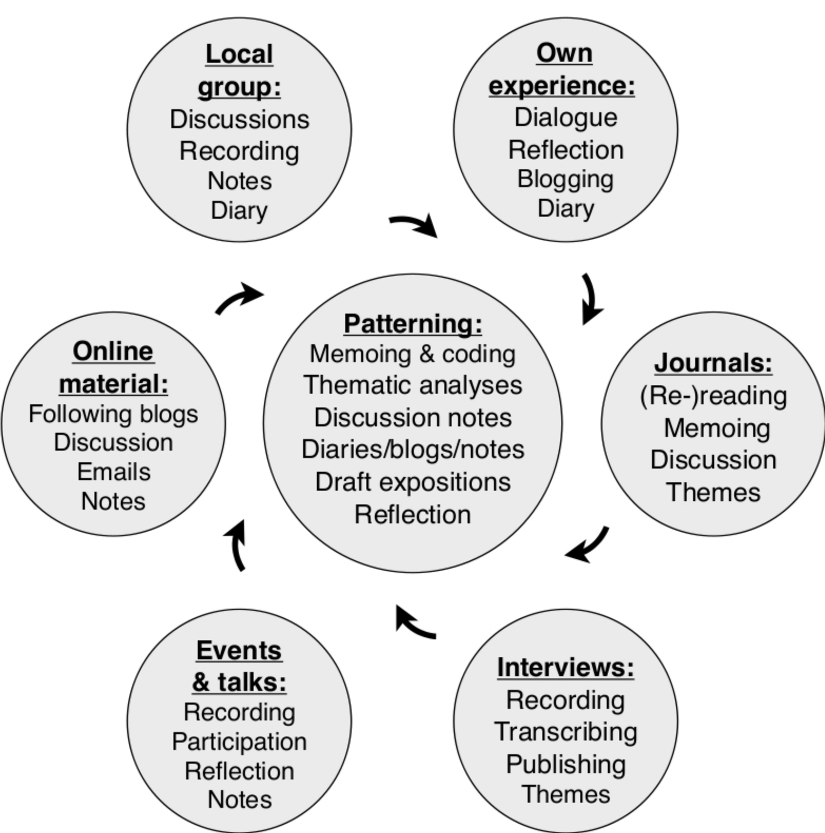
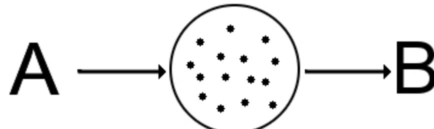
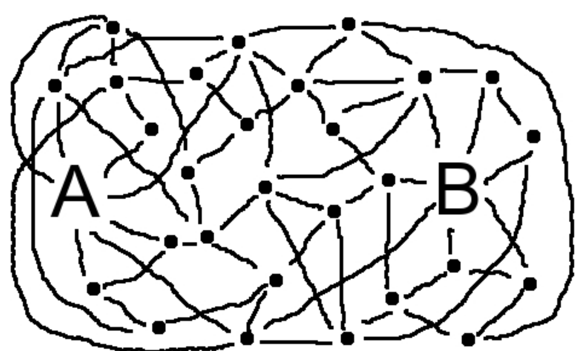


Figure 3.8: Patterning of the different types of data.



Linear view of research process



Research as an emergent process

Figure 3.9: The emergent form of participatory research.

to answering them – within the same plane, the emergent form becomes apparent. This also illustrates how I approached re-constructing the data that had been produced in the course of the research: the structures and themes that emerged in the production of the data provided a framework to write around while I could also re-examine this pattern by following the various data 'backwards' through the questions they emerged from. But there was also a material aspect to this emergence as the online platforms I was building became more than simply a way of communicating: in some ways they came to frame how I was doing things by providing both a searchable repository and a structure for aspects of the empirical research. The online diary is a good example of this development: it was at the same time a methodological 'experiment', a 'testing ground' for particular observations, a means of 'widening the audience' of my narrative, and a 'way of introducing transparency' into the research (see Table C.1 in Appendix C). This materiality in turn informed my theoretical understanding of the research process. An overview of the different types of data I collected is provided in the following section.

3.3.2 Data collection and construction

In the course of the empirical research I collected and co-produced the following types of data across the different narrative sites:

(a) Publications by the Dark Mountain Project (manifesto, 4 journal issues).

(b) The Dark Mountain blog (participant contributions).

(c) The Dark Mountain Ning platform (participant blogs and message boards).

(d) Participant blogs (see Table E.1 in Appendix E).

(e) Talks or debates about the Dark Mountain Project available online (see examples in Table B.1 in Appendix B).

(f) News and journal articles about the Dark Mountain Project (see examples in Table B.1 in Appendix B).

(g) Participant observation at live events (notes, audio recordings, photography).

(h) Own interview-conversations (see Table 3.2).

(i) Published interviews (see Table 3.3).

(j) Own blog posts (see Table C.2 in Appendix C).

(k) Online research diary (see Table C.1 in Appendix C).

(l) Field diary.

(m) Dark Mountain Norwich diary.

(n) Audio diary.

(o) Graphic material.

(p) Email exchanges.

(q) Conceptual notes including research proposal, methodological considerations, research design, pilot analysis, discussion notes on research questions, thematic analysis (see examples in Table C.3 in Appendix C).

In addition to this there is another type of data which I unintentionally co-constructed but only have limited insight into: the comments and responses to some of the above data which occurred in other online conversations and blog posts. To generate and collect the data I relied on digital recording equipment, VoIP software (Skype) and online social networks and platforms (Ning, Twitter, Tumblr and Facebook). I used iWeb and WordPress to create and maintain my own websites and blogs.

I provide an overview of all the data sources I reference in this research below and in Appendices A-E. Due to the size of these indices most have been relegated to the Appendix – the two tables included in this section serve to illustrate my system of referencing as well as how the online data can be retrieved. Table 3.2 lists the participants to the interview-conversations alphabetically and shows the date of the interview:

Interview-conversation, date	Marker
Roger Barnes, 20.11.11	RB I-C, 20.08.11
Anna Boyle, 21.08.11	AB I-C, 21.08.11
Tony Dias, 29.02.12	TD I-C, 29.02.12
Tony Dias, 18.04.12	TD I-C, 18.04.12
Tony Dias, 28.08.12	TD I-C, 28.08.12
Charlotte Du Cann, 16.03.13	CDC I-C, 16.03.13
Alex Fradera, 19.09.12	AF I-C, 19.09.12
Jay Griffiths, 19.08.12	JG I-C, 19.08.12
Vinay Gupta, 09.09.12	VG I-C, 09.09.12
Dougald Hine, 08.09.11	DH I-C, 07.09.11
Dougald Hine, 24.01.13	DH I-C, 24.01.13
Paul Kingsnorth, 20.02.12	PK I-C, 20.02.12
Paul Kingsnorth, 28.01.13	PK I-C, 28.01.13
Andy Letcher, 19.08.12	AL I-C, 19.08.12
Cat Lupton, 23.05.12	AL I-C, 23.05.12
Daniela Othieno, 17.02.12	DO I-C, 17.02.12
Daniela Othieno, 23.06.12	DO I-C, 23.06.12
Laura Sorvala, 16.08.12	LS I-C, 16.08.12
Dougie Strang, 17.08.12	DS I-C, 18.08.12
Em Strang, 18.08.12	ES I-C, 18.08.12
Andrew Taggart, 06.02.12	AT I-C, 06.02.12
Andrew Taggart, 13.07.13	AT I-C, 13.07.13
Steve Thorp, 05.03.12	ST I-C, 05.03.12
Steve Wheeler, 18.08.12	SW I-C, 18.08.12
Camilla Wimberley, 17.08.12	CW I-C, 18.08.12

Table 3.2: Index of interview-conversations

Each participant was approached on the basis of where I 'followed the narrative' as described in section 3.2.1. The online aspect of this research also meant that I was faced with finding ways of adjusting my methods to include 'netnographic' approaches (Kozinets, 2010); it required that I got familiar with the conventions and practices of the online culture that the Dark Mountain Project is part of. It also became a key way of encountering interview participants, expanding my understanding of certain themes and receiving feedback on my observations. And once I had met someone online, their 'trails' would lead me to other participants or themes. Typically, I would come across participants as I was following certain themes in the different narrative sites or through mention in the conversations that I took part in. For example, through inquiring about the theme of 'improvisation', which became a topic early on in the research, I eventually met Alex Fradera, an improvisation performer and main contributor to this topic. Based on my transcript of our recorded conversation, we then proceeded to co-create the published interview conversation 'Looking backwards to see what happens next' on the basis of the principles of co-ownership and co-production described in section 3.2.2. Table 3.3 lists the interview conversations that were published on my blog *Remembering* chronologically:

Published interview, date, address	**Marker**
Dougald Hine: Beyond the parameters of the game, 18.11.11, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/beyond-the-parameters-of-the-game-a-conversation-with-dougald-hine/.	DH P-I, 18.11.11
Andrew Taggart: Uncivilisation, settlerism, metaphorising and jazz, 31.03.12, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/uncivilisation-settlerism-metaphorising-and-jazz-a-conversation-with-andrew-taggart/.	AT P-I, 31.03.21
Paul Kingsnorth: Getting to month one hundred, 11.05.12, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/getting-to-month-one-hundred-a-conversation-with-paul-kingsnorth/.	PK P-I, 11.05.12
Steve Thorp: Soul-making, wildness and the psychology of collapse, 16.07.12, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/soul-making-wildness-and-the-psychology-of-collapse-a-conversation-with-steve-thorp/.	ST P-I, 16.07.12
Jay Griffiths: The otherness of time, 14.09.12, *Time culture*. Available at: http://time-culture.net/the-otherness-of-time-a-conversation-with-jay-griffiths/.	JG P-I, 14.09.12
Tony Dias: Finding community, 25.10.12, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/finding-community-a-conversation-with-tony-dias-part-i/.	TD P-I, 25.10.12
Tony Dias: Suspending choice, 20.11.12, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/suspending-choice-a-conversation-with-tony-dias-part-ii/.	TD P-I, 20.11.12
Tony Dias: Beyond isolation, 11.12.12, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/beyond-isolation-a-conversation-with-tony-dias-part-iii/.	TD P-I, 11.12.12

Published interview, date, address	Marker
Cat Lupton: Serendipity, Edges and Dissolving Language-Armour, 20.12.12, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/serendipity-edges-and-dissolving-language-armour-a-conversation-with-cat-lupton/.	CL P-I, 20.12.12
Sharon Blackie: Transforming stories, 27.12.12, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/transforming-stories-sharon-blackie-on-the-culture-of-nature/.	SB P-I, 27.12.12
Alex Fradera: Looking backwards to see what happens next, 31.01.13, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/looking-backwards-to-see-what-happens-next-a-conversation-with-alex-fradera/.	AF P-I, 31.01.13
Dougie Strang: Caught out of the corner of the eye, 27.02.13, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/caught-out-of-the-corner-of-the-eye-a-conversation-with-dougie-strang/.	DS P-I, 27.02.13
Steve Wheeler: Unprogramming the apocalypse, 14.03.13, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/unprogramming-the-apocalypse-a-conversation-with-steve-wheeler/.	SW P-I, 14.03.13
Vinay Gupta: Subverting the war of stories, 26.03.13, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/subverting-the-war-of-stories-a-conversation-with-vinay-gupta/.	VG P-I, 26.03.13
Charlotte Du Cann: Medicine stories, liberation and shifting allegiance, 23.04.13, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/medicine-stories-liberation-and-shifting-allegiance-a-conversation-with-charlotte-du-cann/.	CDC P-I, 23.04.13

Table 3.3: Index of published interviews

I reference data according to the 'markers' indicated in the right column of Tables 3.2 and 3.3. These markers can then be followed back to the relevant index which gives the full details of the source. In the electronic version of this text, the markers are active hyperlinks which lead the reader to the index, or, where the data source is publicly available, directly to the relevant location online. For example, by clicking the marker for the published interview with Alex Fradera: AF P-I, 31.01.13, this source will open in a web browser. For the print version, all data sources referenced in the text are available on the accompanying compact disc (which also contains an electronic version of this text). Appendix A contains a list of all the material from Dark Mountain publications referenced in this research (data source a), Appendix B lists the articles, blog posts and talks cited (data sources e and f), Appendix C provides an overview of my own diary entries, blog posts and documents which are available online (data sources g, j, k and q), Appendix D shows the events and talks I recorded on audio (data source g), and Appendix E provides a list of the different blogs I followed in the course of the research (data sources b, c, d).

So while the nature of qualitative research necessarily foregrounds my role as mediator (cf. Mol, 2002) I have attempted to counterbalance this 'narrative inequality' by introducing traceable links to each data point. When I refer to discrete data points in the

following chapters, I do this because they reflect a particular question well – e.g., an individual quote can convey findings beyond the particular site where it was recorded insofar as it expresses something that I also found in other sites. My approach to the inclusion of data in this thesis has invariably been its relevance to the activity or event in question – providing a link to the data source enables the reader to revisit the original context. Section 3.3.4 describes how the various links can be (re)traced in more detail but first I will outline how I engaged with the different kinds of data that was produced during the research.

3.3.3 Interpretation and story building

In drawing together the data into the findings presented by the narrative of this thesis, I engaged with the data at various levels and through different approaches:

- Written material

  (a): on the basis of a first reading, a selection of material was chosen for further study. Through notes, memoing, and cross comparison, individual passages and quotes were then typed into word processing software. This served as the basis for thematic analysis in which particular topics where identified for further inquiry (see Figure 3.10 below for an example).

  (b,c,d,f): based on the approach of 'following the narrative' a list of individual blog posts, essays and articles was compiled and archived according to their topic and context. During this process individual quotes and notes served as a basis for comparison and future referencing (see Appendices B and E for indices of the articles and blogs referenced in this research).

  (i,j,k,l,m,p,q): the material I (co-)produced in the research process served as a record of 'where' I had travelled. This was helpful for further development of research questions, themes and provisional findings (see Table 3.3 and Appendix C for indices of material available online).

- Interviews (h): all interviews were recorded and most were transcribed. All transcriptions were coded in order to create a list of themes (see example in Appendix F) and 'pilot' analyses were undertaken at different stages of the research (see example in Appendix I). Some transcripts were further developed together with the participant and published online as described above (see example in Appendix H).
- Live events (g): notes and reflections of events were recorded during and after different events, some events were also photographed or recorded using digital audio equipment.
- Audio recordings (e,g,n): individual recordings where listened through in a process of memoing and note-taking. Some parts were transcribed (see Appendix D for a list of events and talks recorded on audio).

- Graphic material (o): Photographs were archived and some later used in reflections and photo essays. Some images from the journals were also obtained from the artists for use in the thesis. Sometimes this would lead to a further conversation about the images. A simple visual analysis was undertaken in a few cases (see example in Appendix G).

As shown in Figure 3.8 the various sources of data were gradually integrated in a recursive process which drew together documents across the various types of data. The production of further conceptual and reflective notes, draft expositions and pilot analyses also relied on the structures and themes which gradually emerged during the research as illustrated in Figure 3.9.

To begin patterning the data as a whole, I would go through an initial process of memoing in which I drew together observations from the different narrative sites on the basis of notes, codes and highlights (see Figure 3.10 for an example of this rough coding of the Dark Mountain manifesto). This would suggest broader ‘motifs’, which I would at this stage leave open but which were helpful for comparing the data. In this way, key themes would gradually build around particular topics or narrative sites and suggest further lines of inquiry. Eventually, I would group the data around key themes (see Figure 3.11 or full example in Appendix F). I piloted different forms of thematic analyses throughout the research and discussed emerging themes and questions both with my supervisors and participants in the Dark Mountain Project (see example in Appendix I). In this way, I gradually created new degrees of interpretation all the while being able to follow higher level themes back to their root in the data. Thus, in a recursive fashion, my interpretation would evolve in phases of initial readings (e.g. material produced by interviewees, journal articles/essays, online discussions), direct inquiry (e.g. interview-conversations, query of texts), reflection (e.g. transcription, note-taking, diaries), second reading (e.g. revisiting texts with more specific questions in mind), open coding (e.g. generating ‘motifs’ and pilot themes as explained above, cataloguing quotes and excerpts), drawing out themes (e.g. comparing various data sets and fields), exploring texts thematically (e.g. revisiting and rereading original texts), and producing draft expositions (e.g. discussion notes and draft chapters).

Imagery	Language of civilisation	Analysis	Moving forward
The present: Walking on lava Civilisation: The machine Impossibility of continued growth/progress (either we change course or destroy life on Earth) Collapse (loss of meaning, despair, social	Progress Development Growth Nature Environment Sustainability	Myth of progress at the heart of the machine Climate change + is showing the utter failure of this narrative A generation is growing up that is no longer better off Cultural illusion/delusion prevents us from seeing how deep 'crisis' goes – denial	Uncivilised writing needed to include non-human perspective in our stories (ecocentrism) Shifting worldviews - inhumanism Taking on a certain attitude Opening paths by asking

Figure 3.10: Initial motifs found in the Dark Mountain manifesto (redacted).

What's DM reacting against?	**Way to DM**	**What's DM about?**	**Attitude**	**Tools**
Linear narrative (DH) Seeing the promises of progress break (PK) Cultural nihilism/decline (SW) Isolation following from interest in decline (SW) Stuttering as the	Despair (ST) Despair (DS) Carrying the weight of ecocide (DS) Heart ache (DO) Recovering from trauma (TD) Acceptance (PK) Being ready for the conversation (PK) Finding each other: contingency and	Conversation (DH) Conversation (DO) Way of being/seeing (DH) Innovation as theology (DH) DM as a philosophical experiment (DH) Doing the same thing but in different domains (AF)	Openness to the unexpected (DH) Reality as playing field (DH) Ambiguity as a means of coming into awareness of the arbitrariness of the game rules (DH) Wildness (AF) Wildness (ST) Presence (AF)	Deliberately opening up a space (not top-down) (SW) Holding the space space as a way of improvising conversation (SW) Language as emergent and improvised (AF) The role of language and metaphor (AT)
Principles	**Pitfalls**	**What's DM saying?**	**What happens/emerges?**	**DM evolution**
Improvisation (DH) Improvisation (PK) Improvisation at the root of what DM is doing (SW) Making do with less (AF) Finding solutions by looking backwards (AF)	Movements (TD) Signposts and labels (TD) Ends and means (TD) Ego and short-circuiting (TD) Negotiation (TD) The white, male intellectual (DS)	The game is almost over (DH) What we have is enough (AF) Catabolic collapse (PK) Environmentalism: all or nothing (PK) Psychological collapse (ST)	Five stages of coming to terms with death (DS) Opening up for creativity and writing (DO) Connecting with likeminded people (DO) Shifting worldview	Manifesto 'hit a nerve' (PK) Conversation (following from manifesto) (SW) Keeping DM open, avoiding definitions (PK) Wide range of opinions within DM

Figure 3.11: Pilot thematic groupings for interview-conversations (redacted). See Appendix F for full example.

As described in section 3.3.1, my research questions focussed my inquiry on the meaning and circulation of particular concepts and practices as well as the ways in which they relate to individual worldviews and actions. But the specific questions also varied. Starting from my broader research question about the relations between sustainability narratives and personal lifeworlds, I first began to refine the overarching question into more specific queries based on my reading as articulated in the previous chapters. During the empirical work these research questions went through further stages of articulation and refinement in accordance with the progress of the empirical research, my reading and theory building. At different stages I identified sub-questions that I needed to explore and even broke these further down in order to find out about specific aspects of my core questions (an outline of these sub-questions is given in the next section). Towards the end of the research I refined and abridged all my questions which then guided my thinking and writing during the production of the final version of this study. The next section explains how the following chapters are structured.

3.3.4 The nuts, bolts and cracks of this thesis

This section provides a guide to the construction of the three following chapters and shows how they can be traced back to the empirical data in order for the reader to open up meanings where I have closed them down. During the process of interpretation described above, I began to see participants' interaction with the Dark Mountain Project as occurring in roughly three distinct but overlapping phases depending on both personal circumstances and perspectives on the Dark Mountain narrative. These are:

1. Positioning oneself within the wider Dark Mountain narrative (this typically involved identifying with and adopting part of the narrative, finding and relating to other participants, articulating one's personal understanding and interpretation);
2. Exploring new ways of speaking and interacting (e.g. engaging in alternative modes of conversation, experimenting with creative forms of expression, artistic participation and collaboration); and,
3. Integrating new experiences along a path of life (this often meant bringing parts of the personalised Dark Mountain narrative to bear on individual circumstances).

This pattern is reflected in the three following chapters which can be read as an exposition of: 1) becoming a participant in the Dark Mountain Project; 2) exploring new viewpoints, practices, and ways of being; and, 3) embodying new ways of life. However, each chapter has to do a little more work in order to create a coherent narrative which addresses the different aspects of my research questions. Therefore, Chapter 4 also includes sections about the emergence and wider significance of the narrative of the Dark Mountain Project, Chapter 5 explores the implications of collapse for thinking about sustainability and Chapter 6 discusses implications for understanding innovation as a social practice.

The individual sections in the next chapters address different aspects of my research questions or particular themes which emerged during the patterning of the data. As described in section 3.3.3, I developed sets of (sub-)questions that could help answering specific lines of inquiry in the course of the research. Each of these questions arose out of theoretical or practical considerations about the connection between narratives and the lifeworld, and they connect back to one of the four research questions which guide the overall inquiry:

How do sustainability narratives inform what kinds of knowledge and action participants engage with in grassroots innovations?

- What kinds of knowledge are invoked by the Dark Mountain Project and how do they express alternative modes of perception and action?
- How does the Dark Mountain narrative frame the future and how does this position individuals narratively?
- How does active re-narration of the lifeworld enable the 'constellation of an alternate reality'?
- How are alternative conceptions of reality enacted?
- How can new ways of seeing and speaking emerge without being enclosed by those conceptual frames and webs of metaphors they seek to undermine?

How are transformations in individual and collective cultural narratives expressed in participants' worldviews and actions?

- How are new stories integrated into the lifeworld within the narrative framing of 'uncivilising' and how do they affect personal identities?

- What is the experiential and psychological significance of the Dark Mountain Project's narrative of the 'collapse of civilisation'?
- How is it possible to avoid reproducing the worldviews and relationships of modernity in the development of new ways of speaking?
- What characterises the transformation of individual identities and life narratives within the Dark Mountain Project and what kind of relations to the surrounding world do they express?
- How does a transformation away from linear understandings of time shape personal identities and worldviews?

How do sustainability narratives affect the organisation and diffusion of grassroots innovations?

- What is the Dark Mountain Project and how did it emerge as a 'cultural movement'?
- How does the Dark Mountain Project define itself in relation to the meta-narrative of progress and what is the outlook of the *Uncivilisation* narrative?
- How do people find the Dark Mountain Project and enter into conversation with other participants?
- What characterises the Dark Mountain Project as a community of inquiry and why do people join the conversations?
- How is the underlying vision and narrative of the Dark Mountain Project expressed in its organisation and development?

What is the role of stories in enabling emerging practices and tools for social change?

- How does the Dark Mountain Project approach re-storing the lifeworld and creating new social institutions?
- How can new forms of interaction be enabled and encouraged between participants?
- How do participants in the Dark Mountain Project approach the deep uncertainties that arise from accepting the 'topography of collapse'?
- What forms of life are implied by the transformation in worldviews and life narratives within the Dark Mountain Project?
- How do new social institutions emerge from the mutual inquiries that take place within the Dark Mountain Project?

In the next three chapters, I have inserted the specific question I am addressing in each section directly after the section title as a 'guiding question' which helps bring the broader issue or theme into focus (labelled *GQ*). At the end of each chapter, I provide a short chapter summary which outlines my understanding of what I have found in relation to these questions.

It is my hope that providing links which connect the data and my interpretations will create a space for the reader to find her own meaning in my ‘virtual reality’ and ‘complete’ the storyline I trace. The thesis ‘spills over’ into the different materials, participants and narratives which I have enlisted and many of these are publicly available. Along with tables 3.2 and 3.3, appendices A, B, C, D, and E list all other empirical material referenced in the following chapters (tables 3.3, C.1, C.2 and C.3 present a key to the material I have (co-)produced during this research). This provides an entry point to the different layers of the data, should the reader want to follow my trails. Where the data is available online each reference is an active hyperlink which will open the data source in a web browser (for the print version this data is included on the accompanying compact disc). All urls, references, chapter and section numbers in this text are also hyperlinked in the e-version. By clicking these links the reader will be taken to the relevant place in the text or to the online source. Appendices F, G, H and I provide examples of my working. As explained in section 3.2.2, I have found it useful to introduce an alternative font which I use to distinguish quotes from the empirical material from other quotes or references which appear in the same font as the rest of this text. I hope this will introduce a helpful signpost for the reader to distinguish between the different levels of this narrative outlined in section 3.1.2.

3.3.5 Originality and limitations of the methodology

Before turning to the empirical chapters, I would like to make a few last comments about the nature of this text. My determination to practice ‘weak theory’ where "ontology becomes the effect rather than the ground of knowledge" (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 620) means that I have constructed my methods in ways that seek to produce spaces for participants to create their own narratives, individually and collectively, without subordinating these to assumptions about ‘objective reality’ which serve to disengage me as a researcher from the phenomena I research (cf. Ingold, 2000). What has been my primary interest and what I seek to convey here is how the phenomena I engage with have come into being, i.e. how these particular worlds and processes are enacted. This means that the findings produced by my methodology point to *possibilities* rather than ‘hard answers’ about onto-epistemological transformation. In the course of the study I became increasingly aware of the limits my methodology set on the answers I produced to my research questions: the methods I have engaged with positioned me within the community of respondents to the questions I pose and my findings are particular to the experiences that the participants I got to know have had. I do not see it as my role to ‘judge’ the nature or value of the answers or processes I have researched – I have felt that would reinforce the form of social criticism which divides the researcher as a subject (cf. D’Amico-Samuels, 1991) and take me away from the attitude of ‘doing thinking’ which I have sought to nurture (cf. Gibson-Graham, 2008). This circumstance has been a continued source of tension in my strategic and editorial decisions. And in this way, my critical engagement with the Dark Mountain Project has focussed on aspects related to onto-epistemological change – not on a general

critiquing of its wider aims and objectives. Accepting its *raison d'être* is a premise for engaging in the kind of activities Dark Mountain curates. I do, however, see it as my task to enable the reader to engage critically with my findings: that is why, in order to make this research open to scrutiny, my methods have been based on principles of transparency and accountability. While I acknowledge the inevitability that certain editorial decisions have become obscured or erased, the reader should be able to establish the reliability of this text on the basis of 'traceable links' introduced throughout.

I believe that creating these methods for answering my questions about the role of sustainability narratives in grassroots innovations have pointed to new ways of doing narrative inquiry (cf. Riessman, 2008) and online ethnographic research (cf. Kozinets, 2010) which broadens the toolkit of narrative and 'netnographic' work. Situated at the crossroads of ethnographic, narrative and participatory methodologies, it can be seen as an extension of people-based approaches seeking new ways of establishing authoritative and credible accounts of social phenomena. Here, I agree with David Maines (1993) that "whether an account is regarded as valid is a function of the social contexts and conventions that the members of those contexts use to construct validity as a criterion for truth claims" (p. 133). This methodological disposition, in combination with a theoretical framework which views social life as a *field of relations* (cf. section 2.2.4), emphasises the need to enable research participants to express their lived experience as (truth)fully as possible. It is a premise for the possibility of this kind of research. However, this places the researcher-as-critic in a position of "offer[ing] the participants arenas in which to gather" (Latour, 2004, p. 246) rather than in the role of detached analyst. It also means that it can be hard to summarise or draw neat generalisations from the research which can be readily transferred to other contexts. But here I agree with Flyvbjerg (2006) that 'distillation' of theory may not always be desirable because it risks losing something fundamental and that, rather, "[g]ood [case] studies should be read as narratives in their entirety" (p. 241).

So while the final version of this thesis is in many ways 'unalterable', I am not claiming to have discovered any 'facts' about the processes I inquire about. What I am showing in this chapter is how my findings can be retraced and re-constructed, not that these findings are immutable. As narrative scholar Molly Andrews (2008) reflects: "[m]eaning is not something that, once extracted, can be contained in a pure, undiluted form, bottled as it were" (p. 93). What I have bottled here is only a representation of the real thing and that is a brew which only exists 'out there' beyond this text. After all, the data points that I provide are only markers along the road traveled. The experience of *doing* this research has also been a source of data in itself and that cannot be captured in its fullness no matter how many field notes, reflective blog posts, and conceptual commentaries are written. That is where research slips into so-called real life – I hope to have covered enough of these cracks for the reader to follow. This research has been a huge learning process where I have also taken wrong turns. Many of the trails I have left bear witness to this. Things that at one point appeared obvious later turned out to be complex and I went through many detours and doubts on this journey. As my last entry in the online research diary sanguinely claims:

> Looking back across the path I have walked these last months and years, the landscape is littered with moulted skins. These inside-out discarded skins are artefacts of my past selves' relation to the universe. And I see that I will probably never finish this continual process of shedding skins, there are always more skins to shed. The directions of growth are endless. Slowly the landscape beyond binaries that I've sense [sic] for some time is beginning to take shape (O-D, 06.12.12).

This is a landscape which I am still exploring and I invite the reader to advise me on my folly: how are my questions answered from the reader's own perspective and narrative?

Today, humanity is up to its neck in denial about what it has built, what it has become — and what it is in for. Ecological and economic collapse unfold before us and, if we acknowledge them at all, we act as if this were a temporary problem, a technical glitch. Centuries of hubris block our ears like wax plugs; we cannot hear the message which reality is screaming at us. For all our doubts and discontents, we are still wired to an idea of history in which the future will be an upgraded version of the present. The assumption remains that things must continue in their current direction: the sense of crisis only smudges the meaning of that 'must'. No longer a natural inevitability, it becomes an urgent necessity: we must find a way to go on having supermarkets and superhighways. We cannot contemplate the alternative.

And so we find ourselves, all of us together, poised trembling on the edge of a change so massive that we have no way of gauging it. None of us knows where to look, but all of us know not to look down. Secretly, we all think we are doomed: even the politicians think this; even the environmentalists. Some of us deal with it by going shopping. Some deal with it by hoping it is true. Some give up in despair. Some work frantically to try and fend off the coming storm.

Our question is: what would happen if we looked down? Would it be as bad as we imagine? What might we see? Could it even be good for us?

We believe it is time to look down.

Uncivilisation – The Dark Mountain manifesto, p. 9

Chapter 4

Beyond civilisation

> There's something wrong with the way we talk, or don't talk, about Earth. I don't mean wrong in the moral sense, although that case could be made, but wrong in the not-right sense, as in a bicycle without handlebars, or a staircase ending in air. Our words and Reality no longer meet. The scale and depth of ongoing destruction finds no corresponding expression in the scale and depth of our language, which is coolly technical, bureaucratic and quantitative.
>
> *Rob Lewis in* Dark Mountain, issue 2, p. 223

In his investigation of the social foundations of climate change denial, *Requiem for a Species*, Professor Clive Hamilton (2010) asserts that it is now too late to "prevent global warming that will this century bring about a radically transformed world that is much more hostile to the survival and flourishing of life" (pp. x-xi). This prospect leads him to investigate the complex psychological, cultural and socio-economic reasons why the signs of comprehensive environmental change are trivialised and how one might contend with the attending problematics. He concludes that in the face of protracted social crises "a long period of psychological disruption" (ibid., p. 219) is likely to ensue and that eventually "the foundational beliefs of modernity [...] will collapse" (p. 210). While Hamilton's assumptions about the 'truthfulness' of scientific claims concerning future risks of climate change may have led him to a 'pessimistic reading' of humanity's future (Hulme, 2010a), his conclusion that unfolding social-ecological crises are undermining the foundational assumption of modernity – namely human progress – is perhaps less controversial. If indeed "each decade will be marked by greater disruption to everyday lives" (Hamilton, 2010, p. 217) due to social-ecological change, this brings modernity's assumptions and promises of material progress and control over nature into question (cf. Norgaard, 1994). Hamilton describes how this predicament involves recognising and confronting a gap between our inner lives (which includes self-conceptions, habits and beliefs about the future) and a divergent social reality – a process which is likely to be difficult, painful and strung out. In the last chapter of his book, he asks: "[w]hat are the likely elements of this mourning for a lost future?"

This question, and aspects of the sustainability narrative it expresses, sit at the heart of the literary and artistic explorations, conversations and events curated by the Dark Mountain Project. What happens when the future we grew up believing in 'breaks down'? It points to a key aspect of the process of finding and engaging with Dark Mountain: it is often initiated by disillusionment with the deeper cultural narratives of modernity and the answers or strategies it offers in response to social-ecological crises. In this sense, many of the questions the Dark Mountain Project poses begin where established modern narratives end as it explicitly rejects the core assumptions, beliefs and ideas of progress as a meta-narrative and asks what the lifeworld might be like without them. In this chapter, I explore what abandoning progress as a meta-narrative might mean by situating the Dark Mountain Project's critique of civilisation within the broader debate on social-ecological crisis and through engaging with some of the key perspectives expressed in the literature, conversations, and events inspired by Dark Mountain. I examine some of the questions that arise once the meta-narrative underpinning civilisation is rejected and what this implies in terms of moving beyond progress as a structuring meta-narrative. The chapter engages with different aspects of my research questions about the emergence of the Dark Mountain Project as a cultural movement and provides a starting point for examining the role of stories in enabling emerging practices and tools for social change. It also substantiates the key principles and outlook of the Dark Mountain Project in order to set the ground for exploring how this affects new forms of environment-making in the following chapters.

4.1 What do you do, after you stop pretending?

GQ: What is the Dark Mountain Project and how did it emerge as a 'cultural movement'?

The Dark Mountain Project began as a conversation between the British writers Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine (see Figure 4.1) who decided to set up their own journal in reaction to a perceived lack of literary and artistic expressions that grapple with the realities of interweaving ecological, social and economic crises. The project was launched with the publication of *Uncivilisation – The Dark Mountain Manifesto* in the summer of 2009 and quickly attracted a growing number of participants. The manifesto initiated various public debates about environmentalism, social-ecological collapse and cultural narratives as it drew the attention of green campaigners like George Monbiot[1], cultural critics like John Gray (cf. Gray 10.09.09) and became a cultural reference point for debates about topics ranging from 'apocalypse' (cf. Forrest 26.03.12) to 'creativity and politics' (cf. Newton 06.10.11) in print and digital media. The first issue of the Dark Mountain journal followed in the summer of 2010 showcasing a range of 'uncivilised' essays, short stories, poems, interviews and images authored by 'mountaineers' from across the globe.

[1]Dougald Hine has catalogued some of the articles that chronicle the debate between Monbiot and Kingsnorth/Hine here: http://dougald.co.uk/articles_dmgdn.htm.

The Dark Mountain website and associated Ning platform became fora for online discussions that spilled over into the blogosphere and other virtual social networks while a series of festivals, book launches, public debates, local meetings and artistic events became the basis for offline interactions around the ideas of Dark Mountain. The 'Uncivilisation festival' ran for four consecutive years between 2010-2013 (see Figure 4.2). The smaller Dark Mountain-inspired festival 'Carrying the Fire' has been running in Scotland since 2010[2], an 'Ociviliserat' festival was held in Stockholm in the spring of 2012[3] and a number of local performance and story-telling events have taken root[4]. Local groups have sprung up across Britain, America, Australia, Sweden and a number of other countries (but it is difficult to assess the extent of these). At the time of writing, five Dark Mountain books have been published and there are upwards of 2,000 members on the Uncivilisation Ning platform which hosts 42 local groups and a blog interface comprising several hundred blog posts[5].

Figure 4.1: Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine. Own photo.

The extensive reactions to the manifesto were unexpected and changed the direction of the project from being an ambition to create a literary journal to becoming a much wider

[2]See Carrying the Fire's homepage: https://sites.google.com/a/carryingthefire.co.uk/carrying-the-fire/home.

[3]See Dark Mountain Sweden's homepage: http://www.darkmountain.se/.

[4]Such as 'The Telling' which started in Doncaster in 2012, see: http://forthetelling.wordpress.com.

[5]July 2014. See the Dark Mountain Ning platform: http://uncivilisation.ning.com/. The uncivilisation discussion forum was closed and archived in the autumn 2012.

conversation about cultural responses to social-ecological crises. In this way, the various manifestations of the Dark Mountain Project that grew from publishing *Uncivilisation* were unplanned and spontaneous, as Paul Kingsnorth recounts:

> It started off as a vague idea of a publication and a writers' movement and that was what the manifesto was about really. Or, at least that was what was supposed to come out of it. And that did come out of it. But lots of other stuff happened as well because lots of people got interested who were not writers. [...] It just hit that nerve because we were saying all this stuff about getting real and accepting what we can and can't do, and clearly there were lots of other people who'd been exactly... who were coming to the same conclusions independently. It's not that we persuaded them, it was just that they read what we'd said, and said "yea, great that's what I think" (PK P-I, 11.05.12).

The 'nerve' and the novelty of the manifesto was to establish an alternative narrative framing of current social-ecological crises and thereby creating a space for conversations based on fundamentally different premises to those of mainstream debates about sustainability, environmentalism and 'green' growth (the following section discusses this in more detail). This was recognised by a wide range of people: the collection of individuals that has coalesced around the ideas of *Uncivilisation* comprises people from fields and vocations spanning writers, poets, storytellers, artists, performers, journalists, hackers, activists, smallholders, craftspeople, scientists, philosophers, musicians, teachers, mechanics and medical practitioners. As such, the Dark Mountain network is best described as a loose affiliation of individuals who are exploring alternative narrative framings of, and cultural responses to, the problematics arising from the social-ecological crises of the 21st century.

A starting point for the narrative that *Uncivilisation* represents is that – given the scale and depth of ecological, social and economic crises – it is no longer possible to uphold a belief that the future is going to follow evenly or steadily from the present. The ostensible stability of the everyday, and the infrastructures and beliefs that support 'normality', hide a much more fragile social fabric which is prone to disruption once the patterns of ordinary life are broken. The perceived solidity of the world covers an otherness which is much more tenuous, delicate and unpredictable than it appears when seen through the meta-narrative of progress and its assumptions of human control, advance and salvation (Kingsnorth and Hine MA). This illusion has brought global civilisation with its huge demand on resources and externalisation of the negative consequences of industrialisation to a point where it can no longer sustain itself and is liable to disintegrate. The manifesto thus presents a radically different sustainability narrative, one which asks questions about the extent to which present lifestyles can be maintained:

> ... Hubris has been introduced to Nemesis. Now a familiar human story is being played out. It is the story of an empire corroding from within. It is the story of a people who believed, for a long time, that their actions did not have consequences. It is the story of how that people will cope with the crumbling of their own myth. It is our story. (Kingsnorth and Hine MA, p. 3)

By establishing *myth* (or (meta-)narratives and stories which are often used interchangeably in the manifesto) as a foundation for ways of being and seeing the world, Kingsnorth and Hine argue that social-ecological crises are the result of collective 'imaginative errors' insofar as they are rooted in fallacious cultural assumptions about human actions taking place in isolation from their environment (ibid., p. 6). Their retort is a call for shedding the foundational narratives of progress and creating 'uncivilised' writing, art and stories which offer "an unblinking look at the forces among which we find ourselves" and provide "a perspective which sees us as one strand of a web rather than as the first palanquin in a glorious procession" (ibid., p. 13). In this way, the sustainability challenge is framed as one of "questioning the intrinsic values of civilisation" (ibid., p. 9) and imagining a different kind of reality rather than findings ways of upholding a world whose existence depends on the continued commodification and destruction of its own social-ecological foundations.

While *Uncivilisation* is a direct challenge to the meta-narrative that underpin civilisation as a belief system, Kingsnorth and Hine do not establish a fixed counter-narrative which specifies particular interventions or solutions to the predicament they describe. Instead, the manifesto is an invitation to 'join the expedition' to the "poet's Dark Mountain, to the great, immovable, inhuman heights which were here before us and will be here after"[6] (ibid., pp. 17-8). Although the manifesto contains eight 'principles of uncivilisation' at the end, these insist "not [to] lose our selves in the elaboration of theories or ideologies" (ibid., p. 19). By framing uncivilisation as an open-ended and participative process rather than a predefined framework, the authors leave it open to participants to imagine what uncivilising means experientially. This refusal to provide pre-formulated answers or a programme for action has come to define many of the interactions around Dark Mountain and at the early stage of publicising the manifesto it drew people beyond literary circles into the conversations that ensued. Providing a basic but sapient narrative, a set of questions and a platform for conversation, the Dark Mountain manifesto invited its readers into a space for imagining and exploring what a world beyond civilisation and progress might be like. *Uncivilisation* closes: "The end of the world as we know it is not the end of the world full stop. Together, we will find the hope beyond hope, the paths which lead to the unknown world ahead of us" (ibid., p. 19).

Finding hope beyond hope, write Kingsnorth and Hine, involves "reject[ing] the faith which holds that the converging crises of our times can be reduced to a set of 'problems' in need of technological or political 'solutions'" (ibid., p. 19). This implies a loss of faith in the future painted by governments, corporations and media who depict current institutions as equipped to keep up with a world where the consequences of climate change, biodiversity loss, unemployment, food insecurity, extreme weather events, resource depletion and conflicts are amplified. As Dougald Hine later reflected:

[6] The mountain refers to Robinson Jeffers' poem *Rearmament* (1935): "To change the future ... I should do foolishly. The beauty of modern / Man is not in the persons but in the / Disastrous rhythm, the heavy and mobile masses, the dance of the / Dream-led masses down the dark mountain".

"'Changing the world' has become an anachronism: the world is changing so fast, the best we can do is to become a little more observant, more agile, better able to move with it or to spot the places where a subtle shift may set something on a less-worse course than it was on. And you know, that's OK – because what makes life worth living was never striving for, let alone reaching, utopias" (Hine 31.01.10, na.).

The question the Dark Mountain Project poses is *what do you do, after you stop pretending that 'solutions' are even possible?* (ibid.). How do you begin to approach bridging the old expectations of progress and the gradual realisation – imaginatively and experientially – that the 'normal' world of abundant material wealth is coming to an end?

Figure 4.2: Programme for the 2011 *Uncivilisation* festival.

4.2 Uncivilisation as a space between parallel narratives

GQ: How does the Dark Mountain Project define itself in relation to the meta-narrative of progress and what is the outlook of the Uncivilisation *narrative?*

As outlined above, the Dark Mountain manifesto establishes cultural myths and narratives as a ground for the social-psychological experience of reality. Thus, *stories* – which largely correspond with myths and (meta-)narratives in the manifesto – are productive as well as reflective of reality. In this way, Kingsnorth and Hine state, "the roots of [the converging crises of our times] lie in the stories we have been telling ourselves" (Kingsnorth and Hine MA, p. 19), and therefore the challenge is to counter the 'cultural myth' of progress and its stories of human centrality and separation from nature:

> Words and images can change minds, hearts, even the course of history. Their makers shape the stories people carry through their lives, unearth old ones and breathe them back to life, add new twists, point to unexpected endings. It is time to pick up the threads and make the stories new, as they must always be made new, starting from where we are. (ibid., p. 12)

As such, *Uncivilisation* is foremost a questioning of the deep cultural narratives that shape life within civilisation: progress and the associated view of nature. While this is not a new critique – with antecedents including those of Malthus, Nietzsche and Spengler – Kingsnorth and Hine connect current social-ecological crises directly with the meta-narrative of progress and its implicit idea that humanity stands apart from nature:

> We are the first generations to grow up surrounded by evidence that our attempt to separate ourselves from 'nature' has been a grim failure, proof not of our genius but our hubris. The attempt to sever the hand from the body has endangered the 'progress' we hold so dear, and it has endangered much of 'nature' too. The resulting upheaval underlies the crisis we now face. (ibid., p. 6)

In this way, progress is not just an abstract idea, it is manifest in the realities of social-ecological crises because, say Kingsnorth and Hine, they arise from the 'imaginative errors' of the meta-narrative of progress isolating human actions from their environment.

Progress is here understood as an assemblage of interconnected assumptions, values and metaphors which frame the world in a certain way: where "human effort guided by calculative reason" ensures that "each generation will live a better life than the life of those that went before it" (ibid., p. 4). As a meta-narrative – or "a set of internalised assumptions that order, explain and tend to channel our thoughts, experiences and actions" (MacKinnon, 2012, p. 146) – progress is viewed as a set of fundamental but unspoken premises at the root of collective self-understandings in the Western world (which preface more specific cultural narratives in modern societies). At its broadest, this meta-narrative views history as a movement where "human values and goals converge in parallel with our increasing knowledge" (Gray, 2004, p. 106) and where humanity as a whole improves over

time through moral, technological, and material progress. The Dark Mountain manifesto does not claim that everyone living within civilisation by default believes in progress – on the contrary it frames the present as a moment of confrontation with its limits – but that contemporary dominant institutions and cultural narratives have been shaped within this view of the world, which is predicated rationalism, positivism and reductionism (cf. McIntosh, 2012a)[7]. And as events fail to conform with the expectations of progress this meta-narrative entails frequent failures of meaning: it does not make adequate sense of the world. The task is therefore seen to be examining the ways in which progress has come to shape contemporary cultural norms and ways of living, and finding other ways of understanding personal and collective lifeworlds (section 4.7 examines this further). In the manifesto, progress is in this way equated with the dominant meta-narrative and cultural 'myths' of Western societies. Subsequent references to progress should be understood in this light (sections 5.3 and 6.2 will also discuss this in more detail)[8].

This understanding is what motivates the Dark Mountain Project and the idea of 'uncivilising'. It is a grappling with how progress as a meta-narrative has shaped current ways of thinking and living. 'Uncivilisation' is not a utopia to be strived for or an ideological position to be defended, it is way of approaching the kind of existential 'gap' Hamilton describes above by co-creating new narratives about the lifeworld: "[the] process of uncivilising is the process of unlearning the assumptions, the founding narratives of our civilisation. Once we do this we can begin to walk away from stories that are failing and look for new ones" (Kingsnorth and Hine DM2, p. 3). This means challenging those assumptions that set humans apart from and above nature. The process of unlearning also involves a degree of 'mourning for a lost future', as Hamilton articulates it, as well as a search for a different sense of the future which is not constructed on the basic premise of the meta-narrative of progress which frames history as a continuous movement towards improvement of the human condition. Kingsnorth and Hine contend that the visions of the future held out by the narrative of progress fall into two imaginative spaces, one of a constant upturn (manifest in ideas of growth and development) and another of a complete breakdown (reflected in fantasies of apocalypse and catastrophe). However, these spaces "represent a gap in our cultural imagination; a gap in which the Dark Mountain Project has pitched its camp" (Kingsnorth and Hine DM1, p. 3). As such, the manifesto's call for uncivilised art and writing was an attempt to establish a metaphorical 'base camp' as well as a literal invitation to 'climb' to the Dark Mountain. Dougald Hine later described it as an act of 'raising a flag' by "signalling a place where people can converge, to see where it goes next" (DH P-I, 18.11.11).

[7]The intention here is not to evaluate this claim but to examine what happens in the shift from one world-view to another. Understandings of progress vary between traditions and can be framed differently in terms of historical outlook, material advances and moral development. As a 'practical faith', which believes that changes in the human condition tend to improve overall, progress is a meta-narrative which assumes that material and moral developments go hand in hand (Wright, 2005, p. 4).

[8]As a meta-narrative progress implies different cultural myths, metaphors, and narratives which will be discussed in the course of these three chapters.

Figure 4.3: Jamie Jackson, 'Intertext'. Vinyl print, 2010 ©Jamie Jackson.

In this manner, the language of *Uncivilisation* immediately established a set of related imageries connected to this exploration of the cultural imagination: 'raising a flag', 'joining an expedition', 'pitching camp', 'mountaineering', 'going beyond the pale', 'uncivilising' (see Figure 4.3 for an artistic representation). This can be seen as an attempt to disrupt the 'metaphoric resonance' of the imaginary of progress and establish alternative metaphors that activate alternate meanings and social relations (cf. section 2.3.4). And as a metaphor for such an exploration, Dark Mountain creates an opening for participants to relate to this journeying in terms of their own lifeworld. Many participants described this as a key attraction. As writer, editor and artist Cat Lupton explains here:

> You are not dealing with a programme, you're dealing with this poetic metaphor which is very powerful. People have the mountaineering metaphor, the image of base camp, or gathering around a fire. It's a sort of place where you gather and a place where you can go off to have your own Dark Mountain experience. The suggestiveness of having a geographical image is very strong (and mountains are already powerful metaphors for difficult inner journeys and spiritual experiences across many cultures). So you kind of know what it means without having to define it (CL P-I, 20.12.12).

A feature of the journey to the Dark Mountain is that, besides the ambition to create the physical object of a journal, "all is currently hidden from view" (Kingsnorth and Hine MA, p. 18) and participants are invited 'draw their own maps'. But, while *Uncivilisation* refrains from defining what the Dark Mountain Project could or should become, it aims

explicitly to "tug our attention away from ourselves and turn it outwards; to uncentre our minds" (ibid., p. 13). There is a strong undercurrent of ecocentrism running through the manifesto; uncivilised writing specifically includes the perspectives of the more-than-human world and sees human culture as sitting within a larger web of life. As an aspiration to find new ways of seeing and writing, the Dark Mountain manifesto draws on the late American poet Robinson Jeffers' poetics of *inhumanism* where "nature takes centre stage, not as a receptacle for human activities, emotions, or narratives, but as itself, on its own inhuman terms" (Greer DM1, p. 7). Jeffers' injunction to "unhumanise our views a little, and become confident / As the rock and ocean that we were made from" (cited in Kingsnorth and Hine MA, p. 15) is a clear starting point for exploring the yet unknown territory of uncivilisation. And it is not only an ethical outlook, it is connected with the view that stories are constitutive of reality – the task of uncivilising is to co-create Jeffers' 'inhuman' realities. This is critical for understanding the claims of the manifesto: its authors do not inhabit a totalising view of reality[9] but one where "reality remains mysterious, as incapable of being approached directly as a hunter's quarry" (ibid., p. 10).

By the time of the publication of *Uncivilisation* – which followed in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008 and preceeded the 'crash' of the Copenhagen Summit in late 2009 (Prins *et al.*, 2010) – few commentators and environmentalists were ready or willing to engage with the Dark Mountain narrative of a social-ecological 'unravelling'. Kingsnorth and Hine were widely criticised for being 'catastrophists' (Gray 10.09.09) and 'collapsitarian doomers' (Evans 05.07.10). Yet, the manifesto was reviewed and discussed in a range of print and digital media, including the *New Statesman*, the *Independent* and the *Guardian*. The first issue of the Dark Mountain journal attracted a large number of submissions and about four hundred people gathered in Llangollen, Wales, for the launch of the journal at the first Uncivilisation festival in May 2010. This momentum can be seen partly as an outcome of Kingsnorth and Hine's poetic framing of the manifesto as an invitation to join an expedition as well as 'hitting a nerve', as Kingsnorth put in the previous section, by opening up for a lacking perspective on the sustainability challenge. In an article about the social organisation of climate change denial, Matthew Adams observes that the narrative of *Uncivilisation* occupies a space between the two dominant narratives about climate change: one about consequences and catastrophic loss, another about solutions and averting crisis (Adams 2014). Drawing on Rosemary Randall's (2009) work on the psychological cost of this 'split' mainstream narrative which "projects all loss into the future making it catastrophic and unmanageable, denies the losses that have to be faced now and prevents us from dealing with them" (p. 127), Adams suggests that the Dark Mountain Project provides a new narrative framing which lies outside both business-as-usual optimism and apocalyptic defeatism. For many who had been engaging with topics

[9]Some critics attribute such a view to *Uncivilisation*, including academic voices like Paul Hoggett who understands Kingsnorth and Hine to claim that "they, unlike the rest of us, are facing reality" (Hogget 2011, p. 266).

around climate change, sustainability, modernity or social change, *Uncivilisation* presented a necessary break with mainstream narratives and, perhaps more importantly, a meaningful countermeasure: creating a different reality by finding new stories about life within civilisation (see e.g. Figure 4.4 for an artistic representation).

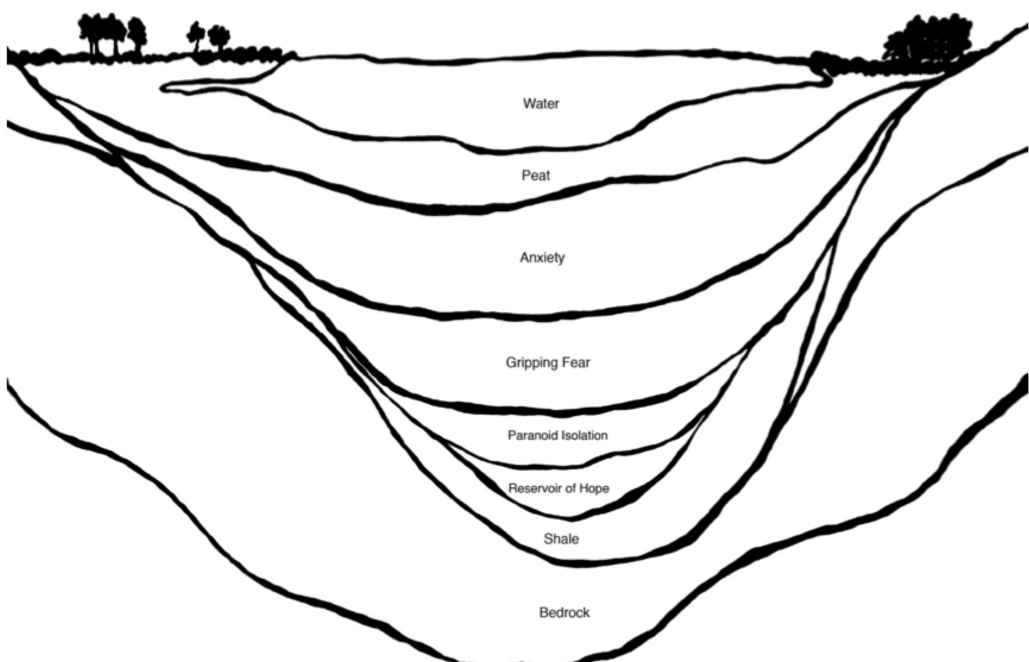


Figure 4.4: Kim Holleman, 'The Layers'. Black ink, 2010.

4.3 Changing the rules of the game

GQ: How does the Dark Mountain Project approach re-storing the lifeworld and creating new social institutions?

As described above, the starting point for the Dark Mountain Project's entwined critique and method of uncivilisation is a rejection of the framing in dominant discourses on climate change and sustainability of social-ecological crises as 'problems in need of solutions' and their failure to support basic psychological responses to loss. The first step in dealing with the incongruence between the parallel narratives of climate change is to accept the loss that is already evident and allow for the process of grief to develop (Randall, 2009). Similarly, *Uncivilisation* suggests that the first step in moving beyond the mindset of progress is to acknowledge the limits of human control and abandon the belief that civilisation is the end product of history. Importantly, "Civilisation is a story. It is a story about where we have come from and where we are going" (Kingsnorth and Hine DM2, p. 2). Uncivilising is thus an intervention in the social imaginary which asks what still makes sense once habitual assumptions of progress and attending beliefs about human society and agency are suspended. In the light of Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine's writing,

activism and social entrepreneurship, the Dark Mountain Project can also be seen as part of their personal sense-making. Paul Kingsnorth's journey from being a road protest activist in the early 1990s – through his work as a campaigner, writer and 'trouble-maker'[10] – to becoming an outspoken critic of the environmental movement, is present in the deep (or 'dark') ecological outlook of the journal. In the same way, Dougald Hine's work as a social entrepreneur, thinker and creative 'radical'[11] is reflected in the approach to, and evolution of, the different kinds of spaces that Dark Mountain curates.

Key to understanding the intent and purpose of the cultural intervention of the Dark Mountain Project is Kingsnorth and Hine's position that "[i]t is through stories that we weave reality" (Kingsnorth and Hine MA, p. 19). And thus they view the 'problem' of social-ecological crisis as being cultural before anything else: the meta-narrative of progress creates a reality in modern societies which remunerates beliefs and behaviours that reinforce the idea that humanity stands apart from nature and is able to control its future. The obstacle to behavioural and social change is that "we are not prepared to even contemplate making the changes necessary, because they would break our stories open and leave them exposed to the wind" (Kingsnorth and Hine DM2, p. 2). In this sense, *Uncivilisation* is an attempt to 'break our stories open'. If, in the phrasing of the manifesto, the end of the world as we know it is not the end of the world full stop, that poses questions about other ways of being in the world together. It involves fundamentally different attitudes and ways of speaking, as Dougald Hine puts it:

> ... the genuinely radical, disruptive kind of "innovation" – for want of a better word – that is coming, includes the disruption and the uprooting of a rather shallowly-rooted discourse and set of models for talking about what we call innovation. I sometimes feel that theologians might have more to tell us about the real kind of innovation that is coming than innovation theorists! (DH P-I, 18.11.11)

This sentiment runs through much of the Dark Mountain Project viewed as an exploration of what alternative ways of being and knowing exist to those of the civilised mindset: what do such ways of speaking and interacting feel and look like? Where can we look for stories and inspiration for such new ways of doing? Where progress frames this search in terms of advance or improvement – i.e. in the future – the Dark Mountain Project tries to avoid this linear historical framing (see section 6.2).

The rhetoric of 'the end of the world', a 'fall' and the 'collapse' of civilisation is best understood from this position. Rather than being an expression of 'catastrophism' or 'survivalism' (cf. Hogget 2011), it is a deliberate intervention in the narrative framing of progress (Chapter 6 explains this in more depth). Foregrounding the storied nature of reality opens up for addressing deeper cultural beliefs while articulating ways of dealing with them. In this way, Dougald Hine frames cultural change as a subversion and expansion of the 'rules' that define individual behaviour and social interactions:

[10]In 2001 Kingsnorth was nominated in the *New Statesman* as one of 'Britain's top 10 trouble-makers'.
[11]Hine was identified as one of 'Britain's 50 New Radicals' by *NESTA* and the *Observer* in 2012.

> The night before the riots started [in London], I was starting work on an essay which I put to one side and will come back to. It started with the proposition: "The game is almost over. It is time to remind ourselves that it was a game, and that we are the players, rather than the pieces with which we have been playing." The game, in a sense, is what we've known as capitalism. It's the way of viewing the world, and the actions that follow from that, where you treat reality as made up of things which can be counted, measured, priced. And once you agree to that rule then certain kinds of behaviour become almost inevitable. And a lot of the stuff we've said about "human nature" is really about the nature of humans when playing that particular game. History and anthropology have a lot of material for us which shows that there are other constellations in which we can be human together than the ones which are normal under the rules of this particular game [as a starting point, see David Graeber, Debt: The First 5000 Years (2011)]. And as this unravels, then ways of thinking are likely to be useful or not useful to the extent that they have an awareness built in that there are other games that humans are capable of playing. Whereas so much of what comes under the heading of "innovation", "sustainability" and many other prevailing discourses – well, it doesn't look beyond the parameters of the game, it takes the game as ultimate reality, rather than just one of the realities that we are capable of socially manifesting (DH P-I, 18.11.11).

As a narrative which frames actors as participants to their own lifeworld rather than subjects to an objective reality, this positions them as co-creators of reality and opens up for wider historical and social contexts to transform and validate the 'rules of the game'. In this way, Hine sees the Dark Mountain Project as a "safe space in which you can begin imagining and practicing other games" (ibid.).

'The end of the world' is thus a moment of realisation that the world is unlikely to continue along the lines of the meta-narrative of progress much longer. It is, indeed, a parallel to Hamilton's 'lost future': a breakdown of the hopes and aspirations that have shaped many individual lives and much of contemporary society. As Rosemary Randall (2009) explains, understanding the irreversibility of loss is both intellectually hard – there is a range of defence mechanisms to avoid acknowledging the full consequences – and emotionally painful. But when acceptance does set in the world is experientially different. As a response to the perceived failure of environmentalism and the dominant sustainability narrative, the Dark Mountain Project is a call to "reconfigure our relationship with what is possible", as Paul Kingsnorth explains:

> ... if you put yourself in the position of saying you've got one shot at stopping something which in order to stop it has to involve re-wiring the whole of global society within ten years then, you know, you put yourself in a position where you're going to just get fucked because it is not going to happen. And then what are you going to do because that is the only option you've given yourself? You know, it is all or nothing (PK P-I, 11.05.12).

As mentioned in the previous section, The Dark Mountain Project also presents a break with the sustainability narrative which sees the world as a place exclusively in human terms: where human needs are pitched against – and over – environmental protection. Kingsnorth describes Dark Mountain as an:

> ... attempt to re-invigorate the thing that inspired me initially about environmentalism which was ecocentrism. Get that back into the debate again but to put it into the context of collapse. What is it like to see the world as something that doesn't belong entirely to us in the context of having built this giant machine and it starting to fall apart? (ibid.)

This question describes the deeper narrative framing that much of the writing and artistic output as well as many of the events, conversations and meetings curated by the Dark Mountain Project explore. It is an explicit rejection of environmental, political and 'nature' writing which reproduce the assumptions of progress. Uncivilised writing, Kingsnorth and Hine declare, "is determined to shift our worldview, not to feed into it. It is writing for outsiders. If you want to be loved, it might be best not to get involved, for the world, at least for a time, will resolutely refuse to listen" (Kingsnorth and Hine MA, p. 14). While they in this way position Dark Mountain outside mainstream environmental and political narratives, they draw on a range of long-standing perspectives in their critique of the onto-epistemological assumptions of progress.

4.4 Shifting worldview: from Logos to Mythos

GQ: What kinds of knowledge are invoked by the Dark Mountain Project and how do they express alternative modes of perception and action?

As a literary and cultural experiment the Dark Mountain Project draws on a variety of authors, influences and concepts. A central inspiration for *Uncivilisation* is Jeffers' poetics of 'inhumanism' and other references include the likes of Alan Garner, John Berger, and Wendell Berry. But, while the first Dark Mountain journal includes a 'primer' mentioning poets and authors who resonate with the project's sentiments (such as Ted Hughes, D. H. Lawrence, Joseph Conrad, Ursula Le Guin, Mary Shelley, Ivan Illich and Subcomandante Marcos), there is no canon of uncivilisation and one has to look across the different threads that run through the various outputs to appreciate the perspectives that motivate the writing, art and conversations of the Dark Mountain Project. It is impossible to summarise these concisely: they include literary pursuits such as Glyn Hughes' (2011) 'protest on behalf of nature' and Cormac McCarthy's (2006) dystopian futures; historical accounts like Karl Polanyi's (1957) 'Great Transformation' and Max Weber's (1946) 'disenchantment of modernity'; technological and social analyses such as Ivan Illich's (1978) ideas on 'counterproductivity' and E. F. Schumacher's (1973) 'human-scale economies'; David Graeber (2011) and Ronald Wright's (2005) anthropological accounts of the institutionalisation of debt and 'progress traps'; social critiques such as Dmitry Orlov (2013) and

Ran Prieur (e.g. Prieur DM1) on the collapse of complex civilisation; and philosophical interventions like David Abram's (1997) exploration of the foundation of language and David Fleming's (2011) 'lean logic'.

A common denominator for these influences is summed up by Dougald Hine's idea of exploring 'other constellations in which we can be human together'. This framing is epitomised in his conversation with David Abram, where he expands on one of the key phrases of the manifesto:

> ... the end of the world as we know it is also the end of a way of knowing the world. Whatever happens, to the extent that we are still going to be here, we're going to live through the end of a lot of the certainties that characterised the ways of knowing the world that have served us for the past few lifetimes (Hine and Abram DM2, p. 70).

Inquiring about what is considered sound knowledge – and *how* we know the world – can be seen as a direct engagement with the underlying assumptions inherent to particular worldviews (cf. section 2.3). By providing a platform for experimenting with such inquiries (see e.g. Figure 4.5), the Dark Mountain Project is a space where the deeper frames and narratives of contemporary society are challenged and subverted by experimenting with other ways of knowing the world. This can be understood in terms of a recurring theme in Dark Mountain writing, talks and conversations: the imbalance between Logos and Mythos as ways of seeing and knowing (see e.g. Kingsnorth 22.03.12).

Figure 4.5: Plant medicine walk with Mark Watson, *Uncivilisation* 2013. Own photo.

Logos (etymologically ‘word’) represents a way of knowing the world through reasoned discourse, which in Greek philosophy was thought to express the greater rational structure inherent in the universe (it is a foundational concept in philosophy, rhetoric, psychology and theology). Reason, derived from ‘ratio’, was for the ancient Greeks a way of understanding the general, qualitative relations between things: the concepts and theories of thought were supposed to relate to each other in a similar way to the things and creatures they describe. The ratio, or measure, established by Logos is thus a way of inquiring into deeper, underlying structures in the world. However, in the course of history, this insight gradually led to the belief that the ratios established in thought are objective renditions of reality in themselves, and mapping of objective reality through rational discourse eventually became the dominant way of knowing in Western societies (cf. Bohm, 1986). This shift from Logos as an insight into the qualitative, harmonious patterns inherent in the universe to a focus on quantitative measurement of material reality, is imperative to the modern understanding of the world which see reality in terms of what can be known through the faculty of reason (cf. McIntosh, 2012a). The rational knowledge of Logos, which works through deduction and abstraction, "belongs to the realm of the intellect whose function it is to discriminate, divide, compare, measure and categorise" (Capra, 2000, p. 27) and is thus necessarily limited. In the terms of *Uncivilisation* the exclusive reliance on this way of knowing supports a worldview which sees reality primarily in terms of the mind’s abstractions: this is how we ‘imagine ourselves to be isolated from the source of our existence’ and this is one of the key ‘myths’ and ‘ways of knowing’ which is now ‘crumbling’ (Kingsnorth and Hine MA). It is in this light that the meta-narrative of progress and the material reality of civilisation can be seen as products of modernity’s emphasis on positivist, reductionist and rationalist epistemologies.

Mythos is a complementary mode of knowing the world, which, to the ancient Greeks, derived from intuitive insight and gave meaning to life but could not be explained in terms of the rational discourse of Logos. Rooted in the unconscious mind, Mythos expresses itself in creativity, intuition and inspiration. C. G. Jung’s work established Mythos as a dimension of reality in its own right in the form of the collective unconscious (see e.g. Jung and von Franz, 1968), and mythologists like Joseph Campbell have explored how myths as a way of knowing are central to the psychology of people across all human cultures (see e.g. Campbell, 1969). Through intuitive and symbolic revelation, Mythos can elucidate aspects of the human experience through allegorical insight (James, 1905). This is the deeper significance of myths: they reveal aspects of experience which cannot be known through the limited discursive intellect. They are "poetic, supernormal image[s], conceived, like all poetry, in depth, but susceptible of interpretation on various levels" (Campbell, 1969, p. 472). As a way of knowing, Mythos resides in a consciousness beyond consensual reality – it engages what McIntosh (2001) refers to as the *mythopoetic* nature of reality in Chapter 2. In the ancient world, Mythos and Logos were equally valid, reciprocal ways of knowing which revealed different aspects of existence. However, in contemporary Western societies, this complementarity has been displaced by the gradual ascendency of abstract reason as the primary way of knowing (cf. Bohm, 1986; Capra,

2000; McGilchrist, 2009). It is this imbalance which the Dark Mountain Project seeks to address in its ambition of shifting worldviews towards less Logos-centric ways of seeing and re-emphasising the importance of Mythos as a way of knowing (see e.g. Figure 4.6 for an artistic expression).

This is key to understanding the cultural intervention of the Dark Mountain Project because it points to the philosophical assumptions underlying the narrative framing of the 'collapse of civilisation'. In his talk 'The Measurable & the Unmeasurable', Hine recounts how, historically, the inherent assumption of the Enlightenment that *the real equates with that which can be known through the discursive intellect* has come to pervade modern thought, and as a result "the possibility that there is stuff which is real, that exists or that matters, that's important in any sense, and which can't be known [by reason] has been sort of ruled out of play" (Hine12.02.12, na.). Hine contends that if this view of reality is primary, the domain of things which cannot be measured is subsumed or instrumentalised in service of the domain of things which can be measured (see also Hine and Brewster 21.05.14). In this way, Kingsnorth and Hine's critique of civilisation can be seen as a rejection of the mindset and attitude which approaches environment-making primarily in terms of measurement, management and optimisation: such lines of thinking are inherently imbalanced because they ignore those fundamental aspects of reality which cannot be measured or known through discursive thinking. And it is in this light that the Dark Mountain Project's dismissal of 'civilisation' and 'progress' should be understood: most of the solutions offered by mainstream discourses on environmentalism, sustainability, technology, politics and economics reproduce the Logos-centric ways of seeing and knowing which gave rise to the problems through their 'imaginative errors'.

Instead, dealing with social-ecological crisis by re-emphasising Mythos in stories, art and writing provides a way of experimenting with other ways of seeing and knowing because, as Kingsnorth says:

> ... to create any successful piece of art, you have to hold open that way of looking at the world where there are multiple ways of seeing. Every character has got a completely different relationship to what is happening. And a different way of seeing it, being, and they've got a different consciousness (PK P-I, 11.05.12).

Whereas reason relies on established cognitive frames and metaphors, art embraces intuitive forms of knowing and makes it possible to imagine other ways of seeing (the next chapter delves into this in more detail). And thus the Dark Mountain Project approaches the collapse it describes by calling for stories which engage with a fundamentally different consciousness and way of knowing. The call was met by a broad range of people who had become disillusioned with the dominant narrative framing of sustainability and climate change, and who were engaging with similar ideas and approaches.

Figure 4.6: Portal at the 2012 *Uncivilisation* festival. Own photo.

4.5 To the foothills of the mountain

GQ: How do people find the Dark Mountain Project and enter into conversation with other participants?

To understand the development of the Dark Mountain Project from being an ambition to create a literary journal to becoming a much broader cultural movement which has attracted a diversity of participants, it is critical to appreciate the value of the manifesto's ambiguity and refusal to provide answers. In the first instance, this allowed people who were engaging with similar problematics and ideas to identify with the perspective of *Uncivilisation* without having to subscribe to a particular theory or plan of action. Readers' initial decision to engage further with the Dark Mountain Project is based simply on agreement with the basic outlook of *Uncivilisation* – 'enrolment' is a self-selective process without active recruitment or express membership. This means that most participants have also actively been seeking the kind of spaces that Dark Mountain curates. A common motif in my interview-conversations was how engaging with other 'mountaineers' in the Dark Mountain Project produced a different kind of interaction and conversation to other social contexts, and this was something I continued to experience throughout the research. Often, it is as simple as finding that *Uncivilisation's* narrative and outlook provide support for certain questions or circumstances that characterise someone's personal life or thinking about the wider world. As the artist, designer and writer Tony Dias says

of this:

> ... when my journey in relation to something called Dark Mountain began I was flailing. I felt a great scarcity. Dark Mountain caught my eye. I lunged for it. It buoyed me up, provided me with a critical moment of transition that gave me time and space to breathe, to get a little bit further along in my own journey (TD P-I, 20.11.12).

For most of the participants I have spoken with the first steps towards Dark Mountain have been part of a personal coming to terms with aspects of social-ecological crises. Many participants were going through a time of change in their outlook or physical circumstances when they encountered the Dark Mountain Project. In such situations, encountering other people who are probing similar issues becomes a vital source of support in finding ways of dealing with deeper changes in the lifeworld.

Although my own encounter with the Dark Mountain Project happened through my research and academic interests, I found that I shared a similar disillusionment about mainstream narratives of, and responses to, climate change with many other participants. Halfway through my Master's degree in Climate Change I had a moment when I could no longer relate narrowly to the global changes I was studying through graphs showing the trajectories of greenhouse gas emissions, ocean acidification, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion – many of them exponential. The implications of these graphs seemed to be that the world will change radically in the next decades and mainly for the worse, ecologically speaking. I went through a brief state of nihilism and a period of mourning into reprioritising what made sense, the kind of experience that is described in the Transition movement as the 'peak oil moment': the realisation that, through the lens of history, fossil fuel-based economies as we know them cannot last much longer and that everyday life will change radically in their absence (see e.g. Hopkins, 2008). So when I came across the Dark Mountain Project it seemed like I had found an outlook I could identify with: it made sense to be looking into the mindset of the culture and institutions which produce (and view pollution as) 'negative externalities' rather than trying to engineer solutions from within the same worldview that created externalities in the first place. What set the Dark Mountain Project apart from many other grassroots innovations was the willingness to work through this difficult process without mobilising participants to 'change the world' through a programme of action.

That is perhaps best understood in terms of the manifesto's framing of uncivilisation as a process of unlearning: it puts the focus on confronting one's own way of seeing before proposing any alternatives. And many of the people whom *Uncilivisation* initially attracted were explicitly seeking a conversation rather than practical solutions: the Dark Mountain Project became a meeting point for people who have "come through the other side of the development process" and "who have seen the promises broken", as Paul Kingsnorth later reflected (PK P-I, 11.05.12). As an inquiry about what makes sense in the absence of the promises of progress, the Dark Mountain Project provided a fundamentally different platform for conversation than a lot of other contemporary literary, environmentalist or political initiatives. Cat Lupton says:

> ... the strongest thing [that drew me towards Dark Mountain] is the expressed desire to have conversations differently, to carry out enquiry differently. To open up space for saying let's not just bring our received ideas and ways of speaking, of engaging with each other, to the table and keep repeating them. What I mean is the kind of speaking that sounds pre-scripted and depersonalised – say, the habit any of us can fall into of saying things like 'we really must do something!', when it's not at all clear to whom that 'we' is referring (CL P-I, 20.12.12).

It is first of all the meeting with people who are probing similar life questions and who share this openness towards a different kind of conversation about them that lead participants to become 'mountaineers' (I use this term not as an expression of membership but simply to indicate sustained participation). Artist and performer Dougie Strang tells of this:

> ... it was the conversations with people around the fire, the meetings and the realisation that there are others who are really engaging with this – not necessarily as activists but certainly as people who are trying to figure out how best to respond and live. It was a realisation that I wasn't alone and that there is a way of being that can somehow cope with this (DS P-I, 27.02.13).

The force of this experience should not be undervalued. For many who have become disillusioned with, and outsiders to, the mainstream 'split' narrative about climate change and sustainability, finding a community that is willing to engage with their uncommon – and often unpopular – view can be like a homecoming. Author, activist and editor Charlotte Du Cann recalls of her first encounters at the Uncivilisation festival:

> ... it was like coming home. I sat around the fire and you could talk to anybody. I didn't feel ever like that in Transition. I'd been in it for three years and it had never been like that. Everyone were really friendly and open. And happy to talk about all sorts of things without having to pretend you were someone else (CDC P-I, 23.04.13).

The ability to have a qualitatively different conversation about some of the questions, uncertainties and insecurities that follow from the disruption of personal assumptions about the world brings a sense of relief and joy. And so the festivals, events and local gatherings quickly became an integral element to the network that emerged around the Dark Mountain Project.

The participants I came to know encountered the Dark Mountain Project in a variety of ways, usually via friends or word of mouth, through newspaper articles or public debates, and by way of online searches or social and professional networks (see Figure 4.7). In describing how they found Dark Mountain terms like 'synchronicity', 'serendipity' and 'calling' often came up. I was unsure how to understand these sentiments until I began experiencing a level of simultaneousness between my own thinking and that of others whose writing I was following and engaging with. At times an article, message or blog post would appear and clarify something I was working through at just the moment I felt

Figure 4.7: 'The Dark Marshes', Dark Mountain Norwich group. Own photo.

at a loss, suggesting that there are common patterns of working through disillusionment and convergence between people's life trajectories when they begin looking for new life narratives. Philosophical counsellor Andrew Taggart describes this 'groping towards each other' as a slow process of finding affinity with new people and ideas:

> It's almost as though you hear a voice somewhere and you go, "oh, that's… I've never heard that before", and then… 'unheimlich', kind of an uncanny experience, you hear that again somewhere else, and you think "right, well, really?" I mean, because it seems to be pretty unlikely that that would occur. And then you keep hearing about these things and it finally reaches that point of going from dimness and vagueness to this moment of clarity, and you think "well, I should… this seems like it's not a bad thing to enquire further about". That's kind of been my ongoing experience, not just with people but with ideas in the last couple of years since I left the academy. A movement from dimness to serendipity and uncanniness to a moment of clarity and a need to ask further about it (AT P-I, 31.03.21).

In this way, the meetings that followed from the publication of *Uncivilisation* and initial online discussions saw the beginnings of new conversations, friendships and collaborations between participants. And, when they worked, these forms of conversation sometimes in themselves drew new people into contact with the Dark Mountain Project through participants' personal networks. But they did not always succeed. Conversations about

disillusionment and collapse require trust, patience and reciprocity, and can be very difficult to have not least because being in personal transition involves insecurity and vulnerability (the next chapters describe this in more detail). A central challenge in the emerging Dark Mountain network became to create 'safe spaces' where the rules of interaction are different and yet support participants who are in the process of a life transition.

4.6 Curating and holding the conversation

GQ: How can new forms of interaction be enabled and encouraged between participants?

As mentioned above, the Dark Mountain manifesto and its 'dark' or 'pessimistic' message that there are no universal solutions to social-ecological crises was also received with a lot of criticism. Dougald Hine likens the manifesto to 'speaking through a megaphone' and describes how the ensuing challenge became to 'return to the conversational quality' of his and Kingsnorth's initial discussions (DH P-I, 18.11.11). Paul Kingsnorth describes this as an effort to

> ... [hold] open this space where you say "we're pretty sure where we stand in terms of what our principles are, and we're pretty sure that everything is falling apart here in some way, but we don't know where it is going to go, and we can't argue any solutions, but what we can do is have a process of working it through" (PK P-I, 11.05.12).

The extent to which they succeeded is more or less commensurate with the quality of the interactions that followed. Where discussions were framed in terms of *Uncivilisation* being a position or idea to be vindicated the conversation would invariably take the form of an argument[12], and in some cases disagreements or misunderstandings within the Dark Mountain network also led to more personal conflicts. 'Holding' the conversation became a key theme in trying to curate spaces where participants can experiment with 'imagining and practicing other games'. Establishing a secure ground for transformative conversations is perhaps one of the most important aspects – and learnings – of the Dark Mountain Project, and it has to a large degree depended on the skills and capacities of its participants: it involves a willingness to 'unlearn' habitual modes of interacting, becoming comfortable with a not constructing answers or solutions, and being prepared to sit with the incompleteness of a broken narrative about the lifeworld.

There are therefore also multiple barriers to participating in the Dark Mountain Project which centre around its underlying outlook and approach. Common criticisms of the Dark Mountain include neglecting action (cf. Monbiot 10.05.10), being defeatist (cf. Stephenson 03.03.12), lacking answers (cf. Towers 31.05.10) and romanticising the past (cf. Bell 30.09.10). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Dark Mountain Project has been contested in particular within environmentalist circles where *Uncivilisation* is often interpreted as a form

[12] E.g., this was the case with George Monbiot's initial interactions with the Dark Mountain Project, see Hine 31.10.12.

of 'embracing regression' (cf. Smith 21.09.11). As described in section 4.3, accepting irreversible social and ecological loss is in itself a difficult process but the openness and ambiguity of the Dark Mountain Project as a space for inquiry also leaves room for misunderstanding even when people agree with the outlook of *Uncivilisation*. Looking across the various conversations that developed from *Uncivilisation*, it took a while for the slowly evolving organisation of the Dark Mountain Project to begin focussing on the spaces it curated rather than justifying its viewpoint and principles. A central issue in this process was understanding how the ambition to 'uncivilise' translated into forms of conversation and inquiry. Dougald Hine describes the importance of developing a common *attitude* or *approach* to the prospect of social-ecological collapse rather than just finding a shared opinion:

> Perhaps I could say that the thing at the heart of Dark Mountain is an attitude... a way of being in the world, a way of being together. Each of these manifestations [of Dark Mountain] feels right, to the extent that it is a manifestation of that attitude [which] at a higher level, has a certain coherence as a philosophy. Not a philosophy in the sense of a complete set of rational propositions, but a philosophy in the sense of an attitude to life and an attitude to reality and to one's situation (DH P-I, 18.11.11).

This attitude to reality includes an awareness of the 'arbitrariness of the existing parameters of the game' and a readiness to explore social rule-making as an open-ended, mutual and creative process (this topic is developed in more detail in Chapter 5).

As an open, but curated, space of inquiry the Dark Mountain Project encourages participants to explore and practice other ways of being together within the narrative framing of 'uncivilisation'. This is directly visible in the contributions to the journal which include essays, poetry, fictions, interviews, graphic art and paintings exploring different aspects of the assumptions behind dominant cultural narratives, alternative framings and new means of expression. The search for ways of expressing and relating to social-ecological collapse involves the intentional creation of new concepts and ways of speaking because, as Rob Lewis writes in 'The Silence of Vanishing Things', many customary ways of speaking about issues like climate change or species extinctions fail to capture the experiential realities they are supposed to describe, and within this predicament "the first job of language is to remember, to help us speak our way back" (Lewis DM2, p. 229). The journal itself can be seen as an exploration of this 'speaking back' and as a reframing of the cultural and historical narratives which underpin modernity as a worldview (see also section 5.5). This is perhaps most immediately visible in the journal's 'Myths of civilisation' essays that examine some of the 'propagandist narratives which underpin civilisation's view of the world'. These include Fairlie's critique of the Tragedy of the Commons (Fairlie DM1), Draper's reappraisal of the Luddite uprising (Draper DM2) and Taggart's investigation of the philosophical ground of anthropocentrism (Taggart DM3).

Similar types of exploration take place in the live events, meetings, conversations, and discussions which are organised under the banner of the Dark Mountain Project (see e.g. Figure 4.8). These spaces of inquiry are usually curated by an individual or a small team

Figure 4.8: Participants at Tom Hirons' workshop 'This is how we make Real People', *Uncivilisation* 2012. Own photo.

of organisers who take responsibility for 'holding' the space of conversation whether this is in the form of local meet-ups, performances, debates or festivals. The spaces of inquiry that Dark Mountain curates thus depend on both the interests of the organisers and the capabilities of participants to have mutual and equal interactions, and, as can be seen in the development of the festivals, events and local groups, they have evolved over time in line with the learnings of participants. A central issue has been that developing these kinds of reciprocal conversations requires a great deal of attention to the inquiry itself as well as a degree of conversational skill. As a community of inquiry it has taken time for the Dark Mountain Project to move beyond debates and justification of positions, especially in light of the many critiques that were levelled at it from its beginning. Online interactions have been particularly prone to defensive and argumentative modes of conversation because of the physical and temporal disconnection between participants, and the discussion fora on the Ning platform were eventually closed because they lacked reciprocity and became dominated by a few loud voices (DH I-C, 24.01.13). A major lesson in the first years of the Dark Mountain Project was that uncivilising involves unlearning and moving away from the activist mindset which tends to see verbal coercion as an acceptable mode of interaction (see e.g. PK P-I, 11.05.12). It has been especially difficult to remain within an open and respectful space of inquiry where conversations have turned on sensitive or emotionally charged issues (see e.g. my own reflections on taking part in such a conversation, REM, 25.04.12), and some people have not felt at ease within the conversations

and meetings of the Dark Mountain Project.

However, while finding a common attitude to mutual inquiry has been a challenge, Dark Mountain deliberately invites differing viewpoints and opinions into its conversations. This is captured by Archdruid, author and mountaineer John Michael Greer's (2010) use of the term 'dissensus' as "the deliberate avoidance of consensus and the encouragement of divergent approaches to the problems we face" (na.)[13] – see also section 6.6. This can be seen as an expression of the spirit in which the Dark Mountain Project curates conversations, the attitude it seeks to encourage – as Cat Lupton puts it: "a stance of humility, navigating with uncertainty instead of the desire for security, or the even deeper desire to be right" (Lupton 14.09.10, na.) – and the method it engages – in the words of Tony Dias: "a letting go, an acceptance of the chaotic, not only as the true state of our condition, but as the only way past our condition" (Dias 15.03.14, na.). There has clearly been a tension between this approach and the openness of the spaces that Dark Mountain curates. Dougald Hine says of this:

> Part of the energy and power of the spaces that Dark Mountain tends to create is that it is possible to shed that pretence at agreement – without the opposite of agreement being having an argument – but the things that that has to be defended against is the people who think "wow, we could act really powerfully from this space" because you can't and it becomes a car crash when you try to do that (DH I-C, 24.01.13).

When the urge to frame the inquiry in terms of action has been circumvented, it has created a point of contact between people who come from a wide variety of backgrounds and who bring diverse perspectives, experiences and stories to the shared questioning and examining of personal and collective cultural narratives. And where this approach to mutual inquiry has worked it has opened up for the possibility of experimenting with other ways of seeing both one's personal situation and much broader social issues, as was my recurring experience. These spaces of inquiry have offered support and inspiration for personal practices and questioning of habitual or engrained preconceptions. And as a meeting point for people who are interested in finding new ways of being and doing, the Dark Mountain Project is also a space where there is an exchange of skills, tools and life practices – because as a negative movement of unlearning the habits and assumptions of civilisation, *un*civilising needs to be complemented by a process of *stepping into* new ways of seeing. The following section explores this in more detail.

4.7 Moving beyond the realm of civilisation

GQ: How is it possible to avoid reproducing the worldviews and relationships of modernity in the development of new ways of speaking?

[13] Dissensus – the opposite of consensus – is a term which John Michael Greer has borrowed from Ewa Ziarek (2001) and which has become a central concept for some mountaineers in thinking about movements, see e.g. Dias 15.03.14 and Lupton 14.09.10. The term should not to be confused with JacquesRanciére's ideas on the 'politics of dissensus' (Rancière, 2011).

Early on in my research it became clear that it is not a straightforward matter to inquire into the transformation of worldviews. There simply is not a way to 'change view' or find a 'new way of seeing' overnight because routine behaviour and habitual patterns of thought are deeply embedded in our everyday lives. In this sense, developing new ways of seeing the lifeworld requires the same attention, care and practice it takes to master an art form or a new instrument and it involves moving back and forth between new insights and unresolved questions. Civilisation is not a material reality that we can simply 'walk away from' and life in modern societies is intricately tied up with infrastructures and landscapes which are profoundly shaped by the civilised worldview. In the terms of *Uncivilisation*, living in contemporary society is a life 'at the heart of a machine' without anywhere to escape and in this quandary the best one can do is "negotiating a relationship with it which gives us as much autonomy as we need or can get or can cope with" (Kingsnorth 04.05.12, na.). As described in the foregoing sections, uncivilising is broadly conceived as a process of questioning the assumptions of progress, 'uncentering' the mind, and beginning to experiment with other 'constellations' in which to be human. This engagement with the deep cultural narratives that frame the lifeworld and modes of social interaction derives from an ontology which sees reality in terms of the various stories, narratives and myths that give meaning and purpose to a life narrative. In this view, resisting the violence of civilisation means creating new forms of living which do not reproduce the civilised mindset through challenging civilisation's foundational myths, actively searching for other cultural narratives and experimenting with other ways of seeing one's own life and situation.

However, contesting the dominant meta-narrative of progress (and searching for alternatives) can be approached from different onto-epistemological perspectives and emotional positions. The beginning point of *Uncivilisation's* 'end of the world' as a grappling with a 'lost future' represents a profound disillusionment with the meta-narrative of progress as expressed in contemporary culture. While it is both emotionally and intellectually painful, acknowledging disillusionment as a natural and valid response to the prospect of such immense processes as are denoted by 'climate change' and 'species extinction' is crucial for resolving the psychological process of loss. If this is ignored, there's a significant risk of both idealising the past and pursuing a 'symbolic recovery' of what is lost through false solutions, as Randall (2009) explains: "The past is not mourned and moved on from [...] Instead, it is set up in collective consciousness as preferable and ideal" (p. 127). A key characteristic of progress as a meta-narrative is the valuation of one thing, the future, above its opposite, the past, and this tendency is latent in the logic of progress more generally (cf. Gray, 2004). Thus, an indicator to the 'helpfulness' of other cultural narratives or 'constellations' of being human is whether they continue the same linear and oppositional logic inherent to civilisation as a meta-narrative. Otherwise there is a danger of falling into false solutions or idealising 'uncivilised' ways of living which, in essence, would be just another extension of the linear and dualistic thinking of the civilised mindset. This is something Ran Prieur examines in his essay 'Beyond Civilised & Primitive':

> ... the civilised-primitive framework forces us to divide things a certain way: On one side are complexity, change, invention, unstable 'growth', taking, control and the future. On the other side are simplicity, stasis, tradition, stability, giving, freedom and the past. Once we abandon that framework, which is itself an artefact of Western industrial society, we can integrate evidence that the framework excludes, and we can try to match things up differently (Prieur DM1, pp. 125-6).

Thus, it is important to avoid taking a reductive view of civilisation as simply meaning the source of what is wrong with the world. This divides the world in a similar way to the meta-narrative of progress – only this way it raises the past as the better thing to strive for. Rather, contemporary civilisation can be seen as a product of a worldview which, in its exclusive reliance on Logos-centric ways of knowing the world, is incapable of appreciating those aspects of life which lie at the negative end of the dualisms it erects.

As a psychological process, 'abandoning the framework' of dualistic opposites is not just one of intellectual insight but involves engaging with other ways of knowing (cf. section 4.4) and a resolve to avoid habitual sense-making. Author, publisher and narrative psychologist Sharon Blackie observes about the ambition to find new stories or ways of seeing as a process of psychological change:

> We want to believe that we can change the world, and change it right now! But we don't always want to put the work in, the long and necessary and very disciplined work, to do it in a way that will stick. That's the danger, to me. I worry that people, all excited by the transformative power of storytelling, won't take the time to understand how those superbly transformative stories develop. The kinds of stories we're talking about are filled with archetypal images and tropes that have been growing for hundreds and sometimes thousands of years [...] Stories are magical. They have to be seduced, cajoled. Stories are the basic constituents of the world – at least, of the way we perceive the world and our place in it. They deserve to be treated with respect (SB P-I, 27.12.12).

Blackie's understanding of stories as *basic constituents of the world* points to the mythopoetic view of meta-narratives as more than simply containers for designating meaning: they have their own life as 'poetic, supernormal images' (cf. Campbell, 1969, p. 472). If uncivilising is understood purely as an intellectual movement of negating the existing cultural narratives or social order, there is a danger of misinterpreting the deeper ontological position which the authors of *Uncivilisation* put forward: walking away from civilisation is not just about finding new myths or images through which to see the world, it is based on a view of cultural narratives having their own existence and constituting particular kinds of realities. 'The role of stories in making the world', 'living by stories', 'weaving reality through stories' and 'finding new stories' (Kingsnorth and Hine MA) is therefore not so much about *making up* new narratives as it is about finding and regenerating other and older ways of seeing (SB P-I, 27.12.12). This perspective is connected with strands of thought which include animism, deep ecology, Taoism, and radical orthodoxy. Dougald Hine explicitly rejects an ontological 'privileging of the negative' as an error which:

> ... sees the fact that you can step outside of the game as meaning that nothing is more real than something – in other words, that meaninglessness precedes meaning. Rather, we could imagine a condition which is neither meaning nor meaninglessness, which precedes them both... (DH P-I, 18.11.11)

Thus, uncivilisation as a search for new ‘constellations’ or ‘what games to play next’ also involves an epistemological perspective which does not privilege one way of knowing over another but asks questions about the role of language, stories and myths in designating meaning and creating a sense of reality. In this view, the transformation of the cultural narratives that help make sense of one’s life is best understood as a lived process rather than as a matter of ‘choice’ or a process of simply ‘scripting’ new and better stories.

Stepping *out of* a certain cultural narrative is in this way necessarily more than simply rejecting a particular set of beliefs in favour of another. It involves a space to mourn the future that was once expected to happen but which now looks far too uncertain and chaotic to understand. In my own experience, to avoid getting entangled in a reflexive move into again making sense of the lifeworld in terms of the unconscious myths that a worldview is rooted in, it is necessary first to refrain from trying to make sense at all (REM, 15.02.12). This is quite an important moment in a transition between onto-epistemological assumptions. It is a complex activity which proceeds from a condition of liminality and breakdown of meaning (see section 5.4) as well as disillusionment and mourning for the hopes and dreams of a future which has passed. And it does not ‘end’ in resolution but is part of a continual process of becoming something else. In the sense that it cannot be ‘willed’, it is better understood as a ‘growing out of old skins’, as Tony Dias put it in one of our interview-conversations:

> In this transitional time it is hard to let go of our old skins. They must fall away of their own accord. Until they do, we carry baggage of our old ways of thinking. Shreds remain attached. We are like a snake shedding its skin. I feel this across many parts of myself. Thresholds have been crossed. I have shed some things. Then, I realise I haven’t left them all behind. I am, we all are, caught in obsolete language (TD P-I, 25.10.12).

Rushing something as important as personal transformation is only going to make it more difficult and risk short-cutting the process of grief. To me (being someone with a core interest in social change and innovation processes) that has been the most challenging aspect of this inquiry because in the same way as personal change cannot be forced neither can the habit to grasp for solutions be discontinued at once. And yet, the uncertainty and unknowing that follows the breakdown in meaning poses questions about how to begin orientating in relation to what remains of the ‘lost’ future (see Figure 4.9 for an artistic expression). What are the different things, histories, life-events, peoples and relationships that survived this loss? And, as Charlotte Du Cann explains, navigating such questions entails finding new ways of doing:

> ... how are you going to live there? How are you going to live in a culture where it is not getting better and has no chance of getting better? You've got to do something else. You've got to know that it's got to be about bigger things. So it's got to be about getting back on track with the planet. That's where having a practice to me is one of the most important things [...] if you have some kind of practice then your life gets a lot more noble and a lot more worthwhile (CDC P-I, 23.04.13).

And, eventually, the re-prioritisation and development of personal practices also involves finding places where such personal work resonates and is valued.

Figure 4.9: Jackie Taylor, 'Sediment of Memory'. Acrylic on board, 2010.

4.8 Venturing into the unknown

GQ: So, what is *the Dark Mountain Project?*

This chapter has discussed key aspects of the ideas, approaches and developments which led to the formation and diffusion of the Dark Mountain Project. I have described Dark Mountain in various terms, namely as: a critique and questioning of the meta-narrative of progress; a space for exploring alternative cultural narratives; an assembly of objects and events (including the publications, online platforms, events and performances); a curated conversation about the process of uncivilising; an attitude to life and way of being; an evolving community of inquiry; a network for sharing skills and practices; and, a

metaphor for a journey into an unknown territory. As such, there are many ways to engage in the Dark Mountain Project: venturing to 'the poet's dark mountain' is a journey of personal practice and sense-making. The lack of any established objectives of the Dark Mountain Project – besides working through the process of uncivilising – creates an inherent ambiguity to what Dark Mountain *is* and *does* as a network of participants. During the research a friend asked me a very helpful question: "if I wanted to tell the Dark Mountain Project that I had read the manifesto what would I do?" The Dark Mountain Project does not exist in this sense because, as a networked and 'edgeless' organisation, it does not have an agency of its own (I return to the topic of the Dark Mountain Project as an organisation in Chapter 6). The thing to do would be to strike up a conversation with other mountaineers in whatever fashion you could find them. This of course makes it problematic to write about the Dark Mountain Project as an entity with a unified voice and purpose and where I refer simply to Dark Mountain this is necessarily from the perspective of my own experience and understanding the Dark Mountain Project as an attitude or view of the world (I otherwise attribute specific views to the participants I have researched with).

The conversations, images and concepts that have sprung up around the ideas of *Uncivilisation* convey a narrative about sustainability where the limits to human control of the natural world have been reached and the longer-term future will unfold as a gradual collapse of many of the socio-technical systems that underpin dominant institutions. The contention of the Dark Mountain Project is that technical or managerialist solutions to the disintegration of these institutions and to the wider social-ecological 'unravelling' are not effective because they continue to enact a worldview where humans are fundamentally separate from their environment and which represents the natural world as resources rather than a source of meaning, well-being and communion. In this framing, the question is not whether modern life is sustainable but what human communities wish to sustain in the face of collapse. As Clive Hamilton (2010) observes about the experience of 'mourning for a lost future', if it is not just to end in despair, it involves a change in "the very way we see and understand the world, our way of being in the world" (p. 219). Opening a narrative space for exploring 'uncivilised' ways of being, *Uncivilisation* provided a place to converge for having a qualitatively different conversation about the questions, prospects and uncertainties of a future beyond the worldview of progress. This became a platform for experimenting with new ways of seeing in writing, art, performances and practices within an emerging network of mountaineers seeking alternative ways of living and thinking within civilisation. The conversations and interactions that ensued after I began my research on the Dark Mountain Project opened up new questions and perspectives on the relation between meta-narratives and social change. After encountering and venturing to the poet's dark mountain, another journey began which was about finding a way of being that could hold my questions about *how I was going to live there* beyond the boundaries of civilisation and progress without the solutions or answers I had lost on the way.

Chapter summary: This chapter has described the emergence of the Dark Mountain Project as a cultural movement, its outlook and position within the wider debate on social-ecological crisis as well as the ways in which participants come into this conversation and the approaches to inquiry they have taken up. A key aspect of the development of the Dark Mountain Project is the ways in which it turned from an ambition to establish a literary journal to a much wider cultural movement. This entailed embracing an attitude which focused on the 'thing at the heart of it'. It is also visible in the gradual change from having to defend the manifesto to focussing on establishing and curating 'safe spaces' where people could experiment with other ways of speaking and doing. This has been crucial for the wider narrative of *Uncivilisation* to begin to be expressed in the activities that take place within the Dark Mountain Project: various kinds of writing, art, craft, music and conversations in a range of different media and events. As a radically different narrative about social-ecological crises there are clear barriers to engage with its central assumptions. However, once a participant agrees with its fundamental outlook there are no prescriptions about how to express this narrative. It is open-ended and framed as an ongoing exploration of possibilities which the narrative of progress has closed down.

As an attempt to 'change the rules of the game' there is an explicit focus on creativity and discovering stories of other 'constellations in which to be human together'. For these kinds of inquiry to work, there has to be a high level of trust and a willingness for interactions to move beyond individual notions of right and wrong. The prospect of collapse is also an emotionally and intellectually challenging narrative and it has been important to acknowledge and support the psychological process of loss. The notion of 'mythos' as a complementary mode of knowing the world has been a focal point for exploring the deeper significance of 'the end of the world as we know it'. This is a way of valuing intuitive and creative forms of knowledge and shifting emphasis from the discursive intellect towards what lies beyond 'consensual reality'. That is also connected with the foundational assumption in *Uncivilisation* that it is 'through stories that we weave reality'. In this way, the aspiration to 'shift worldview' can be seen as a determination to disrupt and change the meta-narrative that defines reality and the wider relations within the lifeworld. In this shift it is key to avoid valuing the new story above the old: that only reproduces the deeper logic of progress which is supposedly rejected. Discontinuing beliefs of progress, and the social relationships they imply, thus involves a two-fold process of suspending key assumptions, habits and social narratives while simultaneously gaining experience with new ways of seeing and doing.

This suggests that narratives play a crucial role in framing both what kind of knowledge and action is available to participants. By valuing 'mythos' and delegitimising 'quantitative' ways of speaking about the world, the Dark Mountain Project frames the inquiries that take place within its curated spaces in terms of radically different forms of knowledge compared to similar discussions about social-ecological crises taking place within the 'split narrative' of climate change. This can be seen as a shift both in the 'metaphoric webs' (cf. Larson, 2011) and the 'discursive terrain' (cf. Williams, 2012) that describe modes of environment-making and position narrators within wider cultural narratives. In

this way, the Dark Mountain Project opened up for a discursive space that was previously inaccessible to many participants and which explicitly inquires into the ideas, meanings and narratives that underpin notions of sustainability (and forms of environment-making) as seen from the view of progress. Further, the role of stories in enabling new practices and ways of speaking can be seen as pivotal in this change: the *story* of 'uncivilising' is what attracts participants and motivates many of the inquiries in the first place. The next chapter goes on to explore this in more detail by examining the experience and practice of engaging with re-narrating the lifeworld.

Chapter 5

(Re)imagining reality

> For years now, I had been emerging from an outlandish sleep to discover the world and I detached from one another's realities. This was not the private sleep that nightfall and temperament determine but a kind of generational amnesia from which thousands of us were waking to find that what we'd taken for reality was the stunned edges of stupor.
>
> *Melanie Challenger in* Dark Mountain*, issue 2, p. 6*

The experiential and historical relation between Logos and Mythos is described in psychiatrist and philosopher Iain McGilchrist's (2009) remarkable book *The Master and His Emissary*. Through an extensive investigation of the asymmetry between the two brain hemispheres, McGilchrist describes how the nature of the attention brought to bear on the world shapes what *kind* of world is attended to, and experienced, in the first place[1]. Drawing on a wide array of psychology and cognitive studies and contextualising his findings in the history of philosophy, his achievement is to show how a persistent attending through abstraction, categorisation, and representation in Western thought – modes of knowing described as Logos-centric in the previous chapter – has led to a dominant way of seeing the world which is characterised by conceptualisation, rationalism and disembodiment. His findings have important implications for understanding the role of the imagination in bringing forth particular realities. Reviewing how *mimesis*, the capacity for imitation, is key to individual and cultural development, McGilchrist describes how imitating, imagining, and actually doing something share the same neural foundations. In this way, the imagination "is not a neutral projection of images on a screen. We need to be careful of our imagination, since what we imagine is in a sense what we are and who we become" (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 250).

Inhabiting a different reality in the imagination and beginning to embody these stories

[1] McGilchrist is careful not to essentialise the differences between the two brain hemispheres and emphasises the need to see the different ways in which the left and right hemisphere construe the world in the light of the modes of attention they embody rather than definitive and differential brain functions.

in the lifeworld is key to the personal re-narration of the lifeworld that takes place within the Dark Mountain Project. Viewed as a collective inquiry into onto-epistemological assumptions which move beyond the meta-narrative of progress, there is an emphasis on understanding how stories frame reality and particular ways of seeing. In this chapter, I describe the Dark Mountain Project as a community of inquiry where distinct but overlapping circles of conversations have formed and examine some of the main questions participants deal with in this endeavour. Building on the foregoing discussion this chapter examines the questions about how sustainability narratives inform modes of knowledge and agency and how they are expressed in worldviews and actions. It does so through examining the alternative narrative framing of the Dark Mountain Project and showing how this positions participants narratively 'between stories'. From this position personal narratives emerge from the interactions and practices that unfold: by reworking a personal narrative framing and engaging in different forms of creative practice, mountaineers begin to imagine and embody other ways of seeing.

5.1 Finding community

GQ: What characterises the Dark Mountain Project as a community of inquiry and why do people join the conversations?

In August 2011 I travelled down to the Sustainability Centre in Hampshire for the second Uncivilisation festival to get a feel for whether the Dark Mountain Project could be a case study in my research. The programme consisted of talks and workshops with titles such as 'Collapsonomics', 'On extinction', 'We can no longer afford to ignore the sacred', 'Living on the edge – and by the word', 'New myths for new worlds', 'Wild writing' and 'Visions of transition'. I was interested in finding out why people had come to this kind of festival and what the Dark Mountain Project meant to them. Roger, an architect and boat enthusiast who stayed in the tent next to me, told me: "sometimes one can feel overwhelmed by the problems of the world, and I go away from this [festival] feeling less overwhelmed, and thinking 'no, perhaps all these ideas I have aren't so silly after all, and I should carry on pursuing them' [...] There are projects which I want to start getting moving which will... coming here makes me feel more like I am going to do them" (RB I-C, 20.08.11). My other festival neighbour, Ana, said: "For me Dark Mountain is a meeting point where... really, the main point is listening, is hearing other people. Seeing how they do things, and then how that can help me do my thing" (AB I-C, 21.08.11). During the session 'The Dark Mountain Project: what next?' on the last day of the festival I heard a variety of opinions about what Dark Mountain is and what the participants thought it could do (PK DH A-R, 21.08.11). Some people felt that there was a need to formulate more clear political views and focus on creating a movement for social change. Others talked of it as 'the literary wing of Transition'. One person expressed how she felt that the Dark Mountain Project balanced an intellectual and spiritual response to climate change. There was a general sense that what was unique about Dark Mountain was how it 'facilitated a

space to look at questions differently' and 'enabled conversations about what we actually think and feel' about the world (see also REM, 30.08.11).

As a space of inquiry where there is a focus on 'having conversations differently', as Cat Lupton expresses it in the previous chapter (CL P-I, 20.12.12), the conversations take different forms in talks, workshops, performances, local meetings, online fora, the journal and artistic work. In this way, the Dark Mountain Project is a network of participants who take part in different kinds of conversations, at different times and with different levels of engagement. Seeing Dark Mountain as a community of inquiry therefore implies many circles of conversation that intertwine but do not always include the same participants or topics. And because participants have very personal and differentiated experiences within Dark Mountain their descriptions of what it is and means also vary. Inquiries or conversations revolve around the conditions and concepts which structure personal lives: ideas about relationships and family, career and work, nature and wildness, loss and personal identity, modes of interaction and organisation. This is not dissimilar to the questioning that is taking place within environmentalist movements (e.g. Deep Green Resistance and the Transition movement) and other cultural critiques (e.g. critical and postmodern) that in some sense react against industrial civilisation. However, whereas many of these explicitly aim to find solutions or strategies, inquiries within Dark Mountain tend to ask questions about whether it is possible to avoid seeing contemporary problems as issues which need to be 'solved' in the first place. This is one of the defining features of the Dark Mountain Project. Charlotte Du Cann, who has been a long-time participant in both the Transition movement and the Dark Mountain Project, says:

> For me Transition is about, I think I described it in a blog I wrote once, it's the village. It's ordinary life, it's your ordinary dealings with people. Whereas Dark Mountain is very much the artist. It could be the artist in the community but it is not the same as being in the community. I think we need both. I think if you are just the artist you're on the outside all the time. And if you are just in the community you are dealing with things on a very humdrum level. Which, as a writer, doesn't satisfy me completely. For me to be whole, or to answer the whole story, both need to be there (CDC P-I, 23.04.13).

As 'the artist', there is a deliberate focus on process, creativity and emergence (see e.g. O-D, 14.09.12). That the Dark Mountain Project is not a member organisation with a formal structure for participation but a platform for interaction is important for understanding the various conversations, events and collaborations that have grown from it.

The shared experience of inquiring about alternative ways of seeing connect individuals within circles of conversation which explore different ways of understanding and relating to various aspects of living with social-ecological crises. Many participants express a sentiment that inquiring into the stories and assumptions that have come to be taken for granted in the dominant meta-narrative of progress opens up for an encounter with ways of seeing which give new meaning to the lifeworld (see also section 5.7). For some, this is a potential entry point for a transformation in personal identity, a powerful experience

which sometimes sees the beginning of friendships and further collaboration between participants in the inquiry (see e.g. Figure 5.1). These are not effortless or light conversations and require a degree of readiness but for people who are actively seeking this kind of conversation the experience is often one of solace. A salient reason for the flourishing of 'uncivilised' art and writing in the wake of the publication of the Dark Mountain manifesto can be found in the space it opened up for conversations about thoughts and emotions which previously had no means of expression in mainstream discourses about social-ecological crises (cf. section 4.2). And therefore one of the primary topics that has emerged in Dark Mountain inquiries is the psychological implications of living in an age characterised by such immense issues like global pollution, species extinctions and climate change.

Figure 5.1: The hearth. Own photo.

5.2 The reality of collapse

GQ: What is the experiential and psychological significance of the Dark Mountain Project's narrative of the 'collapse of civilisation'?

As described in the previous chapter, participants' first encounter with the Dark Mountain Project is often related to a disruption of their personal outlook or circumstances in connection with coming to terms with the prospects of social-ecological crises. This points to an important feature of many of the conversations that follow from participation in the Dark Mountain Project: they tend to proceed from a destabilisation of particular assumptions about the future. *Uncivilisation's* framing of the present age as one where 'familiar restraints are being kicked away' and 'foundations snatched from under us' opens up for conversations about what makes sense in the face of the 'end of the world as we know it' and the gradual 'collapse of civilisation'. The scale and overwhelming complexity of this framing can be both unsettling and disorienting; it can create a turbulence within familiar ways of thinking which is both emotionally difficult and psychologically disconcerting (see e.g. REM, 25.08.12). But the framing of collapse allows giving up hope or expectation – at least momentarily – and come to terms with the reality that cultures, languages, creatures and habitats are disappearing at a rate which has very few precedents in Earth's history, often replaced only by an eery silence and a destitute landscape (DMB, 17.10.13). While this is not an easy process, it is an important psychological experience with parallels to Randall's (2009) work on dealing with loss. In this sense, the framing of collapse involves denial and acceptance in different measures in a process of realising that certain things we value now are disappearing for good. From the perspective of the individual lifeworld, the frame of an ongoing 'collapse' should be seen as real insofar as its acceptance means it is gradually embedded and enacted in the life narratives, cognitive frames, and metaphoric webs which constitute social reality (cf. sections 2.2 and 2.3). And this shift in the imagination away from seeing the future as progress profoundly affects 'what we are and who we become', as McGilchrist articulates it above.

So while the perspective of collapse is seemingly reflected in major contemporary issues such as climate change, economic recession, austerity politics, species extinctions, industrial pollution and increasing resource scarcity, it should not be seen simply as a claim about, or analysis of, material reality. Rather, it implies a dissolution of a particular imagination of the future and the gradual cessation of associated concepts, meanings and beliefs. In this way, collapse is also a breakdown in the validity and meaning of some of the concepts and constructs which have previously made sense of reality and shaped a course of life. This applies to the wider cultural realm where concepts and narratives framed by progress are increasingly failing to explain the course of history as well as the individual lifeworld where particular life aspirations are no longer feasible in the face of changing socio-economic conditions (see section 5.3). This 'collapse of meaning' implies a sort of conceptual vacuum where faltering ideas no longer do work in making sense of the world (AT P-I, 31.03.21). And it is this space that the Dark Mountain Project sets out

to explore in its commitment to "face this reality honestly and learn how to live with it" (Kingsnorth and Hine MA, p. 19). As described earlier, insofar as collapse is a moment of realisation that the future portrayed by the meta-narrative of progress is failing it is not a fully formed counter-narrative but rather a framing that questions the assumptions progress projects onto the future (see e.g 5.2 for an artistic expression). It is, in the words of Paul Kingsnorth, a "realisation that everything is changing, it is not going to go back to how it was. And in some ways things are falling apart in ways that we can't quite pin down. We don't know what the results will be but we better start taking it seriously" (PK P-I, 11.05.12). This implies accepting that certain aspects of contemporary life are changing irrevocably as the consequences of social-ecological crises manifest in lived reality.

Figure 5.2: Moment from 'Funeral for a Lost Species'. Performance by Feral Theatre, *Uncivilisation* 2012. Own photo.

The acceptance of collapse is the most contentious and provocative position of the Dark Mountain Project. Prominent critics and academics have interpreted this acceptance as 'practically unthinkable' (Gray 10.09.09), 'flawed' (Adams 2014) and 'conceit' (Hogget 2011). If *Uncivilisation* is read as an expression of defeatism or catastrophism, and the rhetoric of uncivilising is interpreted as escapism or a rejection of worldly life, such proclamations would not be off the mark. But there is another possibility: reading the manifesto as an expression of a complete disillusionment with civilisation as a system of belief and an honest acceptance of its demise – for good and for bad. It is in this manner that the question *what du you do, after you stop pretending?* should be understood, and the ability to ask that question honestly is perhaps the best gauge to whether someone

will find the narrative framing of the Dark Mountain Project compelling. Accepting collapse, and engaging with uncivilisation as a response to that acceptance, first of all means questioning the meta-narratives of progress and civilisation. But it does not necessarily imply inaction, survivalism or utopian striving for another world. The issue of acceptance presents critics and participants in the Dark Mountain Project with a dilemma as they are speaking across fundamentally different assumptions, beliefs and narrative frames which cannot be reconciled and, thus, many of the early debates between mountaineers and non-participants were characterised by fundamental disagreements and misunderstandings. This also points to another important psychological aspect of collapse which is that, in this narrative frame, lived reality is qualitatively different from the social expressions and aspirations of the dominant culture. Psychologist and counsellor Steve Thorp speaks about 'psychological collapse' as an unspoken aspect of social-ecological crises that is largely ignored or invalidated by mainstream culture but which can be an entry point for re-narrating the lifeworld through facing those aspects of life that cannot be controlled (ST P-I, 16.07.12). As a narrative which not only tells a radically different story about the future but holds that the future *cannot be known* with the accuracy and certainty that the meta-narrative of progress proclaims, collapse repositions human subjectivity and agency in relation to the natural world and asks questions about the deeper values inherent to contemporary society.

In this way, the contention of the collapse narrative that global issues like climate change is not a 'problem in need of a solution' is a contestation of the thinking and values that underpin recent political paradigms like ecological modernisation, new public management and the inverted entrepreneurialism of the Big Society. The claim is that it is the thinking and values inherent to such managerial approaches which constitute the 'problem' by reproducing those logics and value-systems that created the social-ecological crises and which now spell 'the end of the world as we know it'. As an expression of an 'apocalyptic' imagination (cf. Skrimshire, 2010b), the collapse narrative is a challenge to the values, practices and strategies which characterise 'risk thinking' as an approach to the future based on managerialism, control and technical-rational solutions (Groves, 2010) – see also sections 6.2 and 6.3. This challenge goes to the core of modernist assumptions about the relationship between the past, present and future. In this way, the framing of collapse poses deep ethical questions about how to relate both to the current consumerist culture and those future generations which will live in its shadow. If the future is characterised not by progress but by the foundering and transformation of many current institutions and modes of organisation, what do we want to nurture today and to carry with us into the future?

The scale and implications of collapse in its broadest framing at the level of civilisation are of a magnitude and complexity that are impossible to entirely grasp, and the disjunction between the temporalities of everyday life and the much larger time scales of global social-ecological change obscures the different causal chains which connect the infrastructures that support civilised life with processes of resource depletion, pollution and degradation of natural habitats. In this context, collapse is a framing which asks questions

about how to respond to conditions of uncertainty, dissolution of meaning and the disintegration of some of the social structures which characterise modern life. This also makes the framing of collapse an important psychological notion which requires recognition and attention. This was an underlying theme in many of my interview-conversations and the stories that participants told would often include elements of mourning and despair. In parallel with Randall's (2009) work on the psychology of loss, Thorp holds that: "[t]o me it's a necessary response. But I don't see despair as a path to anywhere and I don't think we have to work through it" (ST P-I, 16.07.12). Acknowledging loss and despair seems requisite for dealing with the framing of collapse psychologically. In his practice as a philosophical counsellor, Andrew Taggart finds that the experience of deep changes in the social order causes confusion and 'stuttering' when it comes to describe lived reality. He describes this as a response to the discrepancy between the concepts used to describe one's own life and social reality:

> ... the speculative thesis would be that you'd see a lag in which social reality has actually moved ahead of the concepts we're using still [...] it very well could be the case that the idea of a 'career' is just one particular concept that could no longer really make sense of most of social and economic life. And yet people hold on to it as a structuring narrative. That's creating a pretty profound sense of disquiet for those who still hold onto it as a way of being in the world, despite its distinct impossibility for most... (AT P-I, 31.03.21)

The significance and meaning of collapse at the level of the individual lifeworld depends entirely on personal circumstances, attitudes and beliefs. But as a narrative framing which affects the experience and enactment of reality it should not be dismissed as unreal – it is part and parcel of a reorienting and re-positioning of the individual lifeworld within the context of social-ecological crises (see e.g. Figure 5.3 for an artistic expression).

As such, it entails reconciliation with the future lost and those cultures and creatures that are irrevocably disappearing. Loss is also a central theme running through the Dark Mountain journals and events, it has inspired poetic invocations like Nick Hunt's 'Loss Soup' (Hunt DM1) and ceremonial performance rites like the 'Liturgy of Loss' at the 2013 Uncivilisation festival. In my interview-conversations there were several references to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' (1969) work on the five stages of grief, which she developed through her work with terminally ill patients. Kübler-Ross describes a general pattern in the patients' coping with death beginning with denial, going through anger, bargaining, and depression until arriving at acceptance. While the psychology of loss is clearly more complex than simply passing through set stages of grief, many mountaineers describe the process of coming to terms with collapse in similar terms. This can be a difficult process in the context of a mainstream culture which does not acknowledge the perspective of collapse. Dougie Strang says:

> ... we're all carrying the burden of it. I don't know if you feel that but it's there, weighing down on our psyche, and most people in our culture are completely ignoring it. Either

> wilfully or ignorantly, despite the news, the dramatic increase in extreme weather events, the unfolding ecological collapse. I don't think as a thinking species we've faced this before (DS P-I, 27.02.13).

Having a community to offer companionship, clarity and support in dealing with this experience is invaluable. My own experience of coming to terms with collapse has been protracted and I recognise both bargaining and resistance to acceptance in the process. It has involved a confrontation with my own acculturation to optimism and a gradual easing into acknowledging the many things I cannot do anything about despite my urge to change them (REM, 25.08.12). But if we only assume disillusionment is a tragedy and we recoil from it, we miss a kind of *joyful disillusionment*, as Tony Dias remarks (TD P-I, 25.10.12). Letting go of the urge, need or feeling of responsibility to 'save' the world can bring a sense of relief and joy when action ceases to be based in guilt – "the world is not ours to save, as it quite possibly is not ours to completely destroy" as blogger and mountaineer Daniela Othieno puts it (Othieno 31.01.12, na.). While the big frame of a global sort of 'unravelling' provokes both feelings of despair and joy, it brings up new questions about how to navigate the uncertainties that arise from accepting the failure of the meta-narrative of progress. This suggests that when the narrative framing begins to shift the lifeworld gradually begins to look different, which poses the question: what sort of future life does collapse imply?

Figure 5.3: Mat Osmond, 'Hare'. Mixed media drawing on paper, 2013.

5.3 Descending into the future

GQ: How does the Dark Mountain narrative frame the future and how does this position individuals narratively?

The framing of collapse has its roots in the archeology and history of past civilisations as well as analyses of the logic inherent to the idea of progress. Ideas of civilisational collapse have been explored from various perspectives such as historian Arnold Toynbee's (1961) theory of decay, anthropologist Joseph Tainter's (1990) framework of civilisations as complex systems, and popular science writer Jared Diamond's (2005) accounts of reduced carrying capacities. Collapse as a present phenomenon has also recently begun to attract wider attention among academics and researchers as seen by a string of publications on this theme including astrophysicist Martin Rees' (2003) 'final century', studies on abrupt climate change such as the 2003 Pentagon report (Schwartz and Randall, 2003), James Howard Kunstler's notion of the 'long emergency' (2005), professor Guy McPherson's writing on resource depletion (e.g. 2011), Richard Heinberg's work on energy decline (e.g. 2007), Leahy *et al.*'s (2010) social research, Ehrlich and Ehrlich's (2013) recent article in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society*, and the recent study in *Ecological Economics* on the scenario of civilisational collapse (Motesharrei *et al.*, 2014). While there is no shortage of speculations about the imminent collapse of civilisation both in print and on the internet, many analyses fall into the dualistic narrative framework described in section 4.7. If collapse is seen as a frame which renders the future uncertain and unpredictable, hard claims about future events based on model projections are unfeasible. Nonetheless, by observing trends unfolding on longer time scales and understanding aspects of their inherent dynamics it is possible to see the contours of a future which, although unknowable, contains hints to the drift of history in the coming decades – because some things, like radioactive decay and the production rate of certain resources, are well-established and non-negotiable.

To avoid falling into a dualistic understanding of collapse as the negation of civilised life and the arrival of apocalypse, it is necessary first to sidestep the understanding of history framed as progress: as a series of improvements leading from a primitive past to present civilisation and onwards into a future which yields solutions to contemporary problems through better knowledge and technology. This can be difficult because notions of progress have become unconscious assumptions: belief in progress has "ramified and hardened into an ideology – a secular religion which, like the religions that progress has challenged, is blind to certain flaws in its credentials. Progress, therefore, has become 'myth' in the anthropological sense" (Wright, 2005, p. 4)[2]. In other words, progress frames reality according to its inherent narrative logic which is largely unconscious and

[2]Wright does not here mean to say that myths are inherently untrue, rather that they are "maps by which cultures navigate through time" (2005, p. 4). The view of progress as a 'secular religion' should be understood primarily in terms of this map being based on indisputable beliefs and not as a claim about a historical secularisation of religious doctrine (see e.g. Wallace, 1981). This is discussed further in section 6.2.

yet structures how the world is perceived. Wright describes this internal logic as 'progress traps': extrapolating what works well in a given context to ever larger scales, the reasoning of progress entails unintended consequences which deepen and accelerate over time (i.e. solutions that appear to be improvements in one context introduce new problems that extend beyond the resources or knowledge available). Comparing different civilisations, cultures, technologies and social-ecological systems, he describes how this logic has persistently undermined itself and eventually led to a collapse of the societies that depend upon it. This historical account of the logic of progress is key to understanding *Uncivilisation's* contention that current social-ecological crises are not problems in need of solutions: technological advances do not solve individual problems without creating further complexity and unforeseen outcomes which will require new solutions. John Michael Greer's (2013) explanation of progress as a civil religion and cultural myth (see also section 6.2) complements Wright's analysis of the logic of progress with a psychological investigation of how progress has gained traction by providing a cosmology which explains human destiny as one of salvation and projects this redemption into the future.

Greer is one of the early writers on collapse and a respected voice within the Dark Mountain Project whose humorous and polemical writings centre around the psychological, spiritual and material implications of the end of industrial civilisation. His prolific writings present a fascinating and incisive entry point to the challenges of peak oil and resource scarcity and their potential implications for energy-intensive societies and future generations. Greer describes belief in the myth of progress – being a central source of meaning and a justification of life in contemporary society – as pushing collective human activities in directions which are deeply unsustainable, so much so that they are now faltering. In *The Long Descent* (2008b) Greer introduces the idea of 'catabolic collapse' which envisions a slow decline from contemporary civilisation into something more akin to earlier agrarian societies. He contends that collapse will not be a rapid, catastrophic event which will change the world all at once but a series of ongoing and inter-related crises that will gradually render high consumption lifestyles impossible. While the social prospects of collapse are grim – Greer describes the four main impacts likely to characterise catabolic collapse as declining energy availability, economic contraction, collapsing public health and political turmoil – the nature of this descent will depend on the ability to let go of many of the expectations and wants which arise from the idea of progress. As one generation gets poorer than the one before it in material terms, assumptions and ideas about wealth and prosperity will begin to change and so will the societal narrative. This basic analysis can be found in various forms within the Dark Mountain Project (see e.g. PK P-I, 11.05.12).

While this broad framing of collapse – here re-presented in a single paragraph – does not say much about the ability of new technologies to offset some of the immediate impacts of rising energy prices and resource scarcity in particular regions, it illustrates how collapse can be imagined outside the meta-narrative of progress. And a critical aspect of this view of collapse as a slow decline is that it is not a deterministic process: *how* it happens makes all the difference. Ran Prieur reflects on this:

> The more we are forced to abandon this system, the less we will learn, and the more aggressively we will fight to rebuild something like it. And the more we choose to abandon it, the more we will learn, and the less likely we will make the same mistakes (Prieur DM1, p. 130).

But Prieur does not say that 'abandoning the system' is currently a possibility on any large scale. One of Greer's (2013) main points is that living with progress as a structuring societal narrative makes it very hard to abandon – this is one of the core rationales that makes collapse plausible in the first place. The framing of progress makes it psychologically difficult to understand crisis as anything but a temporary aberration and for a long time it is simply unmentionable. Greer describes how rather than addressing the traps and flaws of progress as a central cultural myth, modern societies collectively find ways to avoid dealing with them. Drawing parallels to fictional, but historical, disorders like 'drapetomania' (the supposed compulsion of slaves to run away from home) and the 'housewife syndrome' (lethargy in women bound to their domestic lives), Greer suggests that social-ecological crisis is currently being redefined in personal terms: as the fault or lack of skills on part of the individual (this is similar to academic analyses such as Hobson, 2004).

This points to a key aspect of collapse as a framing of the future: irrespective of how accurately this narrative is perceived to describe current conditions, the lived reality of the future will to a large degree depend on the extent to which societies can collectively cope with the absence of progress and imagine a different kind of social reality. Engineer and collapse thinker Dmitry Orlov, who appears in *Dark Mountain* issue 3, observes that trust and meaning are key to the eventual depth and scale of collapse. In his book *The Five Stages of Collapse* (2013) he connects the various phases of collapse which he anticipates with the degree to which trust and faith in the status quo are undermined (the five stages of collapse are: financial, commercial, political, social and cultural). He sees the framing of collapse as a "challenge to most of the notions we received as part of our schooling and socialization" (ibid., p. 261). This connects directly with the idea of uncivilising as a process of unlearning and it entails revisiting history as a movement of progress: in this way, the past is no longer devalued but a source of learning. Importantly, this exploration and re-imagining has to arise from a personal desire or disillusionment. As acupuncturist and scholar Steve Wheeler points out in his interview with the anarchist philosopher John Zerzan: "... you can't force this on people. It's commonplace in therapy, even if you know a certain change would be good for people, you can't force them to do it, you have to just create a space for them to move into" (Wheeler and Zerzan DM4, p. 198). A central difficulty for collapse as a narrative framing is to open up such spaces in the imagination rather than closing them down by claiming that history is locked into a specific course within the range of possibilities it describes in its challenge to the meta-narrative of history as progress (I will return to this issue in section 6.2).

There is a wide range of possible scenarios for a future characterised by collapse in addition to those discussed here. As macro-narratives of the 21st century they trace the edges of human understanding and abilities to foresee the future in the face of uncertainty

and complexity. The indicators collapse thinkers employ to build their narratives – such as resource availability, environmental change, consumption patterns, pollution levels, financial instability, and cultural developments – are best understood as providing a 'topography of collapse', a landscape where certain features are clearer than others but where the details of particular events remain unknowable. In this landscape, the Dark Mountain Project contends that cultural upheaval is a central element and, insofar as mountaineers are trying to change anything, their effort is directed at the narratives of progress which explain social-ecological crises as temporary or an irregularity. Instead, Dark Mountain maintains that crises will be a defining feature of the coming decades and the cultural plight is to learn how to live with this fact (see e.g. Figure 5.4 for an artistic expression). How it plays out is impossible to say but the framing of collapse makes it possible to think differently about it – see e.g. Dougald Hine's collaboration on The Institute For Collapsonomics[3]. And it positions the individual very differently by overturning the certainties of the meta-narrative of progress. As Cat Lupton observes: "It's knowing that the overall picture is correct, but the devil is in the detail, and it's in the detail that each one of us has to work out the best way for him- or herself to live!" (CL P-I, 20.12.12). In this predicament new questions eventually arise about how to find ways of living with uncertainty rather than just seeking new answers.

Figure 5.4: Bridget McKenzie, Untitled. 2012.

[3] 'Collapsonomics' is defined as "[t]he study of economic and state systems at the edge of their normal social and economic function, including preventative measures to avoid destructive feedback loops and vicious cycles", see http://collapsonomics.org/.

5.4 Between stories

GQ: How are new stories integrated into the lifeworld within the narrative framing of 'uncivilising' and how do they affect personal identities?

As a collection of individuals who engage in inquiries about ways of seeing and understanding contemporary social-ecological crises which lie outside the dominant meta-narrative, the Dark Mountain Project is home to a wide range of stories about soul-searching, journeying and re-envisioning social life. Many of the events, performances and journal writings thematise conditions of uncertainty, confusion and the loss or search for meaning whether in personal processes of sense-making (such as McCann and Jensen DM1, Lewis DM2, Smith DM2, Lewis DM3, Henderson DM3) or in endeavours to re-frame history or establish a collective cosmology (see e.g. Fairlie DM1, Griffiths DM1, Draper DM2, Rao DM2, Hester DM3). The notion of being 'in between stories' was a recurring topic in my conversations and readings, describing a state where there is no fully formed narrative to explain personal or collective developments. This wider context of in-determinacy and 'in-betweenness' frames many of the questions that participants explore within the conversations curated by the Dark Mountain Project.

A corollary of Kingsnorth and Hine's suggestion that the lifeworld is assembled, or weaved, through stories is that a lack of reliable or credible stories brings a degree of dis-order and chaos into the lifeworld. This can be seen as a leitmotif in both the method and output of uncivilised art and writing: while civilisation's intrinsic stories are 'crumbling' there are no other current narratives "which we are yet prepared to believe in" (Kingsnorth and Hine DM2, p. 2). Importantly, the search for *new* stories, is not just a search for a new meta-narrative that can explain or give meaning to this state of affairs because, as Sharon Blackie explains,"[m]eta-narratives are not usually told outright, but are reinforced by other more specific narratives told within the culture" (SB P-I, 27.12.12). This points to a critical feature of the Dark Mountain Project's ambition to find and create uncivilised stories: while the meta-narrative of civilisation can be analysed and challenged, it cannot be wilfully changed because it is of a higher order – it is a story about a story. Instead, Blackie describes the process of 'bottom-up' change in structuring social narratives as occurring within a 'web of myths and stories' which connect stories of personal transformation: "we don't change the meta-narrative by sitting around thinking up new stories. We do it by getting out there. By not only seeing in new ways, but *living* in new ways. By being the subjects for those stories. More than that – by being the stories" (ibid.). The search for stories is in this way also a search for a way of living without an orderly, structuring meta-narrative and finding new ways of approaching the uncertainties that arise from this condition.

The dissolution of particular narratives implies a period of not knowing or being without reason, a threshold state where clarity and meaning are absent and given identities and social positions are momentarily suspended. The notion of threshold or 'liminal' states, are a central feature of Dark Mountain talks, events and conversations (see e.g. Du Cann

03.09.13). Anthropologists describe liminal states as "characterized by the dislocation of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies, and uncertainty regarding the continuity of tradition and future outcomes" (Horvath *et al.*, 2009, p. 3). A degree of liminality is inherent to transitory situations or events where participants stand at a threshold between worldviews (Szakolczai, 2009). It is a state where social structures are temporarily interrupted and from which new relationships can emerge (Turner, 1974). Being ‘between stories’ as a conception of a situation or time where established ideas and identities give way to new relations and ways of seeing is implicit in many of the writings, conversations and performances inspired by the Dark Mountain Project. In ‘On this Site of Loss’, Hannah Lewis describes this as a personal sense of displacement:

> Incongruity and contradiction between the various narratives by which I'd explained and justified things reached an extreme where they suddenly annihilated each other: the tottering edifice of stories collapsed, leaving a kind of inner Ground Zero (Lewis DM3, p. 121).

This experience followed from various challenges to Lewis’ identity and ways of thinking which led to the disintegration of her normal framework of interpretation and sense-making. The essay’s description of moving into and through a psychological ‘Ground Zero’ to a new sense of convergence in meaning is a direct parallel to the notion of liminality as a process of "opening up new fields of enquiry and spaces of imagination" (Thomassen, 2009, p. 5).

Liminal spaces and states are a central focus and motivation for the *Mearcstapa* collective[4], a group that evolved around a performance-installation at the second Uncivilisation festival. *Mearcstapan* actively engage with the idea of being in a state of dissolution and inquiry. Creating otherworldly settings in and around the festivals, the troupe’s mythical and chimerical characters have enacted rituals and performances which invite onlookers to become participants in the liminal world *Mearcstapa* inhabits (see Figure 5.5). These encounters are often both intriguing and unsettling. Dougie Strang, founding member of *Mearcstapa*, describes how the motivation for performances is creating an experience which is:

> ... playful but it's dark as well [...] Being unsettled can put you in such a strange space and when you come back out, your perception might just have shifted a bit. I'm very wary of making any great claims about what art can do so I'm not going to say too much about that. It just is. It just will be, and people will respond. But it feels important to be doing something that has an edge to it (DS P-I, 27.02.13).

Strang explains that as an artistic expression *Mearcstapa* aspires to create a magic which is ‘just caught out of the corner of the eye’ and subverts ordinary assumptions and ways of seeing. Providing a space where people can be unsettled and have an encounter with

[4]Mearcstapa is an Old English word meaning ‘border-walker’ or ‘boundary-treader’.

the liminal, *Mearcstapa* creates a temporary other-world, a place where participants can enter a realm beyond normality if they are willing[5]. *Mearcstapa* member Daniela Othieno describes it in these terms:

> We have a goal – to provide a space for experiences outside the current norms of seeing, acting, understanding and maybe that way to effect change in some way. But we only invite – who takes up the invitation and what they do with it is outside our control. Mearcstapa takes the long view of time – if there are outcomes for people who have experienced something we did, they may not be clear immediately, they may pop up after time, may never be directly attributable to us, and in any case, we will likely never know (Othieno 30.05.13, na.).

Imparting a sense of the liminal also means that *Mearcstapa* members themselves have to embrace the happening as transformative by "receiving the weight of [the audience's] expectations, the impatience, the questioning faces, the unease (theirs and our own), the disorientation, the urge to take control, the urge to run away" (ibid., na.).

Figure 5.5: *Mearstapan* at *Uncivilisation* 2012. Photo by Bridget McKenzie.

As an embodiment of an underlying attitude or approach to uncertainty which runs through much of the Dark Mountain Project, the boundary-walkers of the *Mearcstapa* collective value the liminal as a space where known ways of seeing and being can expand (see Figure 5.6 for an artistic expression). Although transformation is in no way given – it is of course possible to revert back to and reinforce old ways of seeing when confronted

[5]Victor Turner (1974) refers to such experiences as 'liminoid' denoting that they are optional and do not necessarily involve personal transformation.

with uncertainty – the potential arises. An evident, but consequential, point is that *how* one approaches encounters with liminality matters – there is plenty of room for things to go nowhere or even go wrong. But as Hannah Lewis observes about experiencing her 'inner Ground Zero', such experiences can also give rise to moments of insight which culminate in a new sense of meaning:

> Another sudden insight shook me with the peculiar impact of a thought that reclassifies all other thoughts – the realisation that *ideas evolve*. Until then, I had thought that ideas might be true or not true, or more or less true, in relation to a more or less static world. Suddenly it was clear to me that ideas and stories developed in relation to *each other*, to the whole surrounding ecology of ideas, practices, and interpretations of experience, which might propagate, mutate, conflict with or override one another (Lewis DM3, p. 121).

Such experiences or moments of insight are not something that can be planned or controlled. And in an extended period of being between stories – characterised by uncertainty, contradiction and loss of meaning – new understandings often settle gradually rather than instantaneously. But the state of unknowing, however it is experienced, is a crucial stage in finding new stories and meaning: it is necessary for finding something which is by nature outside of existing frames of reference or understanding. As Sharon Blackie writes, the new story "both consolidates and moves beyond everything that we now know" (SB P-I, 27.12.12). This poses questions about the extent to which it is possible to find new, uncivilised stories from within the conceptual framing of incumbent ways of speaking about social-ecological crises.

Figure 5.6: Midnight ceremony at *Uncivilisation* 2013. Photo by Bridget McKenzie.

5.5 Reworking the frames of reference

GQ: How can new ways of seeing and speaking emerge without being enclosed by those conceptual frames and webs of metaphors they seek to undermine?

The sense that 'our words and Reality no longer meet', as Rob Lewis formulated it in the previous chapter, is a primary motivation for many of the essays, articles, poems, short stories and illustrations that feature in the Dark Mountain books. In this way, the journal itself can be seen as an exploration of the ways in which the language and concepts of narratives of progress frame ways of seeing, speaking and understanding the world. This is an exploration which involves "facing up to a cultural sphere where all your linguistic, social and imaginative preconceptions are challenged" (Bek DM2, p. 204) as the blogger Wilfried Hou Je Bek[6] describes it. There are different aspects to this challenge which centre on the way that contemporary ideas and values express particular beliefs about the nature of reality and shape associated self-understandings and relationships. But if the framings, conceptions and relations inherent to the cultural narrative of progress are flawed, how can they be reworked? Broadly, the Dark Mountain Project engages with this problematic in three main ways: by challenging dualistic thinking which frames issues in terms of binary opposites (cf. section 4.7), by exploring alternative worldviews and modes of sociality based on animism and ecocentrism (cf. sections 4.3 and 4.7), and by experimenting with new forms of expression and doing in writing, art and creative practices (see section 5.6).

Through engaging with the wider 'ecology of ideas' – as Hannah Lewis calls it above – which establishes the meaning and content of particular concepts, it is possible to gauge how ways of thinking frame individual ways of seeing. In section 4.7, this was exemplified by the way the civilised-primitive framework divides the lifeworld along two oppositional thought and value systems. In conversation with Sajay Samuel, Dougald Hine describes this framework as a 'hidden consensus' which characterises most current debates about the public good:

> It's still very common to speak as if the space of politics is mapped out by the state at one end and the market at the other end, and what we're doing is sliding a rule somewhere between the two. And in terms of how we respond to ecological crisis, to look at how far down we can slide from the dirty tech into the clean tech. And in both cases, this is a way of framing things which misses out – and makes it almost impossible to see, from the perspective which these frames create – a whole world of people's lived experience and how people have made life work, and continue to do so (Hine and Samuel DM3, p. 96).

[6]Shut Your Mouth or, literally, Hold Your Beak.

A similar framing can be observed in many other areas of public debate including nature-culture, human-animal, future-past, progressive-traditional, growth-stagnation, and public-private. This framing effectively divides the totality of lived experience into separate domains (cf. chapter 2). Samuel and Hine's deeper point is that ignoring how the categories of this dualistic framing relate to lived reality produces a disembodied way of thinking which 'speaks from nowhere' and conflicts with practical and place-based ways of knowing. This is a theme which is present throughout the different issues of the journal and place, belonging and knowing are central topics of inquiry in many Dark Mountain talks, events and conversations (see also section 6.1).

The contention is that blindness to what lies outside the polarity of the hidden consensus and the privileging of disembodied forms of knowledge structure individual and collective lifeworlds in terms of a subject-object dichotomy which frames the world as an objective reality in which subjective experiences take place (note the similarity with Ingold's notion of the 'double disengagement', cf. Chapter 2). Within this framework, speech about the world which aims for objectivity easily devalues lived experience as less 'real' than abstract reasoning. This is the fundamental premise which the Dark Mountain Project, viewed as a philosophical project, criticises and abandons. The 'voice from nowhere' – analogous to Shapin's (1998) 'view from nowhere' – can be seen in connection with the wider historical process of 'disenchantment' first described by Max Weber (1946), who describes it as a belief system where "there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather [...] one can, in principle, master all things by calculation" (p. 139). Disenchantment thus denotes an increasing intellectualisation and rationalisation during modernity and it has been used in parallel with the notions of Logos and Mythos within the Dark Mountain Project (cf. Kingsnorth 22.03.12, Hine 12.02.12, NH A-R, 20.08.11, SB A-R, 20.08.11). In the essay 'Following Nature's Course', Andrew Taggart describes how disenchantment lies at the heart of the worldview of civilisation which provides explanations and justifications by beginning from the high level of generality and abstraction:

> From a distance, we *inspect* objects, breaking them up into analysable parts. We speak of objects as *having* discernible properties (recall Locke's primary qualities). We regard morality as being law-like and as applying *without exception*. We think of humans as *deliberative* beings from the first, always on the verge of acting rightly or wrongly. We *apply* principles and laws to cases (e.g. bioethics, foreign policy). We accuse each other of hypocrisy (that is, of acting contrary to our stated principles). We think of God, if we do at all, as an *abstract* entity. We speak to each other in terms of valid and sound arguments. We offer defences of our firmly held positions. We conceive of material reality in terms of its abstract *uses*, its resources, its utility, its market value (Taggart DM3, p. 195).

In a disenchanted world 'nature' is conceived as essentially other and relating to the environment in this way produces a world which appears to consist of 'natural resources',

where humans are set apart and eligible – through their intellectual prowess – to exploit these resources to their advantage.

It is in this light the Dark Mountain Project can be seen as a break with mainstream environmentalism and the historical project of sustainability: the idea of balancing human needs and environmental limits is already framed as a problem which can be solved by 'sliding a rule' between consumptive societies on one hand and ecological resources on the other. This framework privileges ways of thinking and living which take for granted that there is intrinsically a friction between human society and ecological health. The critique of environmentalism that the Dark Mountain Project proffers in various guises is that a coherent or sound approach to sustainability has to move outside the 'hidden consensus' which presents identifiable constraints on the imagination by framing humans as 'users' and nature as 'resources' (see e.g. Kingsnorth DM1). And the broader significance of the framing of sustainability as progress is that it becomes difficult to imagine society as anything other than an extension of the present: solutions to the sustainability challenge tend to focus narrowly on 'improving' existing systems of provision and ways of living by optimisation and efficiency measures. The unintended consequences of technological 'fixes' to achieve sustainability illustrate this sentiment (Klein DM2, Kingsnorth DM3).

Uncivilisation contends that the solutions that are negotiated within the framing of the 'hidden consensus' will continue to produce future problems because they "perpetuate the attitude which has brought us here" (Kingsnorth and Hine MA, p. 14). Further, because solutions which are conceived in this framing usually enact this fundamental dichotomy in the process of problem-solving, the suppositions inherent to a particular narrative framing can eventually *produce* the realities they are supposed to reflect[7]. This can be seen as equivalent to Larson's (2011) notion of the naturalisation of metaphors: as the concepts implied by the framing of a user-resource relationship are socially performed and accepted, they gradually obtain status as 'normal' or 'objectively real' and become increasingly unquestionable (cf. Chapter 2). It is the naturalisation of concepts that imply a fundamental divide between human society and the natural world which is the fundamental target of *Uncivilisation's* ambition to 'unhumanise' the web of metaphors and concepts which constitute the civilised worldview. To 'uncentre the mind' entails a rejection of an anthropocentric vocabulary and a trialling of other metaphors, concepts, plots and ways of speaking. It is a claim that technical, abstract and abstruse language alone is not sufficient to address the nature of the sustainability challenge. As Rob Lewis observes, a language

> ... set up to handle data and computer models, [cannot handle] moral dilemmas and cultural inertia. It speaks technically when we need to speak plainly. It orientates itself around facts when we need to orientate ourselves around feelings. It elucidates data when we need to elucidate meaning. And it altogether ignores the sacred, which we can no longer afford to do (Lewis DM2, p. 225).

[7] As Sajay Samuel shows elsewhere (Samuel and Robert, 2010) neo-classical economic accounts produce scarcity by embedding certain assumptions about human needs into its theoretical framework: they both legitimise and propagate limitless acquisitiveness and profess to solve the associated problems.

Instead, uncivilising implies a radically different framing of the lifeworld, one which acknowledges both the function and limits of language in designating meaning (ibid.). In David Abram's articulation, it involves:

> a reconceiving and a re-seeing and sensing of this wild-flowering world as something that cannot ever be fully objectified, a zone of unfoldings that can never be understood within a purely quantitative or measurable frame (Hine and Abram DM2, p. 64).

The 'search for new stories' is in this way also a search for ways of speaking and writing that establish a ground for the imagination that makes it possible to manifest realities which move beyond disenchanted points of view (see Figure 5.7 for an artistic expression).

Figure 5.7: Kim Major-George, 'Going with the flow'. Hand pulled collagraph print embellished with gold leaf, 2012.

5.6 Embodying change in creative practice

GQ: How are alternative conceptions of reality enacted?

This raises questions about the ways in which new forms of environment-making can be embodied in practice without unintentionally reproducing the rules and visions of the user-resource perspective. In the course of the research, I began to sense that if the intellectual work on shifting the frames of reference is to avoid becoming a ‘doubly disengaged’ activity which further divides the lifeworld along binaries, it needs to be engaged from an attitude which, as far as possible, complements critique and deconstruction with the kind of disciplined work Sharon Blackie describes is needed for understanding the transformative power of stories (see e.g TD P-I, 25.10.12). Mountaineers invariably speak of this as a process requiring sustained effort, discipline and deliberately circumventing engrained habits which can be both frustrating and unsettling. A recurring theme in my interview-conversations was the importance of developing and sustaining a personal practice (broadly conceived as practicing creative or reflective skills) which can support and structure this effort. This is also relevant in building shared spaces where trust and compassion is imperative for enabling experimentation and learning new forms of conversation and interaction: "[i]t’s worth emphasising ‘practice’ because most of us aren’t automatically good at these things, so it is very much about practicing and learning to do them better" (CL P-I, 20.12.12), as Cat Lupton reflected. In the gradual development of the Dark Mountain Project into a more or less coherent collection of individuals who are experimenting with various forms of creative expression, the different forms of practice have come to include writing, painting, photography, crafts, storytelling, performance-installations, game-playing, music, body practices, dialogue, permaculture, theatre, improvised rituals and contemplative exercises (see e.g. Figures 5.8, 5.9, and 5.10).

This diversity of practices reflect a recognition that the meta-narrative of civilisation is also embedded in physical patterns of perception and ways of doing. Steve Wheeler emphasises the role of the somatic as a necessary and complementary aspect to uncivilising viewed as an analytical process of reworking the narrative framing of progress:

> I think one of the answers to that question, "where next?", is that it isn’t just conversation. I mean, so many of these things that we are talking about are ways of reversing alienation. So yes, it’s a shift from Logos to Mythos, but it is also a shift away from intellectualisation, verbalisation in general, to feeling and to the physical. So, you see people doing... there’s people doing crafts just over there, they are weaving things out of New Zealand flax. It’s really valuable to experience something like this and actually come out and connect with nature and connect with crafts and working with your hands. I think it is all part of the same thing. When you start making those connections, it starts awakening something in you (SW P-I, 14.03.13).

A central feature of the Uncivilisation festivals has been a diversity of workshops and skill shares – from ‘fieldsensing’ and scything to Qi Gong and foraging – which focus

on physical practice as a way of connecting the mind, body and the surrounding environment. This can be seen as a direct expression of Blackie's notion of 'being the stories', as embodying a different kind of world. The role of art and creativity in imagining and inhabiting different stories is central to many mountaineers. Dougie Strang says of this:

> ... we live in a culture that has dismissed those connected ways of being. I'm thinking of the rites and rituals that help to define traditional cultures, and which have at their heart the idea of liminality, a stepping into sacred space or time. Maybe now, in a secular culture, this has become art's role: where it can invite us to step out of ourselves, or it creates a space within which our worldview can be shifted, even just for a moment (DS P-I, 27.02.13).

In opening up a space for imagining a different kind of reality, art and creative practice can support both envisioning and enacting new worldviews.

Figure 5.8: The General Assembly, 'Dark Mountain Music' album cover. See http://thegeneralassembly.bandcamp.com/album/dark-mountain-music.

Hence, as a practice which directly engages the imagination, art is a way to examine ways of seeing which lie outside the normality of everyday life. Mario Petrucci writes about this in his essay 'Three hot drops of salmon oil':

> Art can catalyse the imaginative leaps required to engage with time and space on a scale beyond our usual ken, helping to balance that tendency for the low-risk localised 'now' to dominate. Art also exercises the imaginative faculties, which are essential to a full appreciation of facts: imagination is crucial when contesting or challenging any accepted interpretation of data, just as it is to those who seek to disguise the facts or skew the analysis (Petrucci DM1, p. 141).

This perspetive engages directly with McGilchrist's insight that the imagination plays a central role in the process of forming personal identities. As Petrucci puts it: "[e]ach object we create, whether fanciful or rooted in cast-iron physical-mathematical precepts, is an extension of our imagination" (ibid., p. 141). It is in the imagination that the meaning of a particular narrative or story falls into place within larger structures or webs of metaphors (cf. Chapter 2) and thus the imagination is key to sense-making: it is where we make sense of what new experiences mean and where our identities are integrated (cf. McGilchrist, 2009). This should also be seen in connection with the view of stories as productive of reality. By imagining what a story is like in lived reality it subsequently becomes possible to enact this within the lifeworld. Tony Dias describes how

> While reading stories we are not trapped in thought, we are. We exist imaginatively within an alternate set of conditions, not stuck within our present conditioning. We leave the finite limitations of what-has-been-conceived. We expand our view (TD P-I, 25.10.12).

In this way, art and stories can activate the imagination which is the faculty that helps us navigate the lifeworld: we *imagine* where we are going, how we might get there and what we need on the way.

Figure 5.9: 'Liminal'. Performance at *Uncivilisation* 2011. Photo by Colin Perrett.

Because art springs from and is grasped through the imagination, it is a medium which provides direct access to other ways of seeing. In creating a poem, a piece of writing, a painting or picture, an artist has to remain open to the ambiguity within what is created in order to let the work emerge and take form. And, if a work of art tells a particular story,

the artist becomes familiar with the people and things that inhabit that story: in storying, we imagine how plots unfold and how people and objects relate (cf. Ingold, 2011). In conversation with David Borthwick at the 2012 Carrying the Fire festival about her eighth novel, *The Gathering Night*, Margaret Elphinstone explained how she had come to imagine the lifeworlds of her characters living in Mesolithic Scotland eight thousand years ago. This involved researching the tools, rituals and language of hunter-gather cultures at that time and imagining how they would have seen the land, related to the animals and thought of life and death. She says of the difficulties for a modern human being to imagine a pre-historic way of life:

> We can't help it. We're post-Enlightenment, post-Romantic, urban. We have a degree of self-consciousness about communing with nature. We can't help it because there is that dichotomy between our world and the natural world and we have to make ourselves cross that barrier (ME A-R, 21.04.12).

How does one begin to relate differently to 'nature' when the very concept which is used to denote what we think of is part of a way of seeing which upholds the separation one is trying to imagine is not there? Understanding what the 'environment' or 'nature' might mean outside the contrasting concept of 'culture' implies abandoning the dualistic logic that underpins nature-as-environment and culture-as-human (cf. section 5.5). Elphinstone describes this as "trying to think back to a mindset where individual separation from community and nature is not perceived in quite the same way as today" (ibid.).

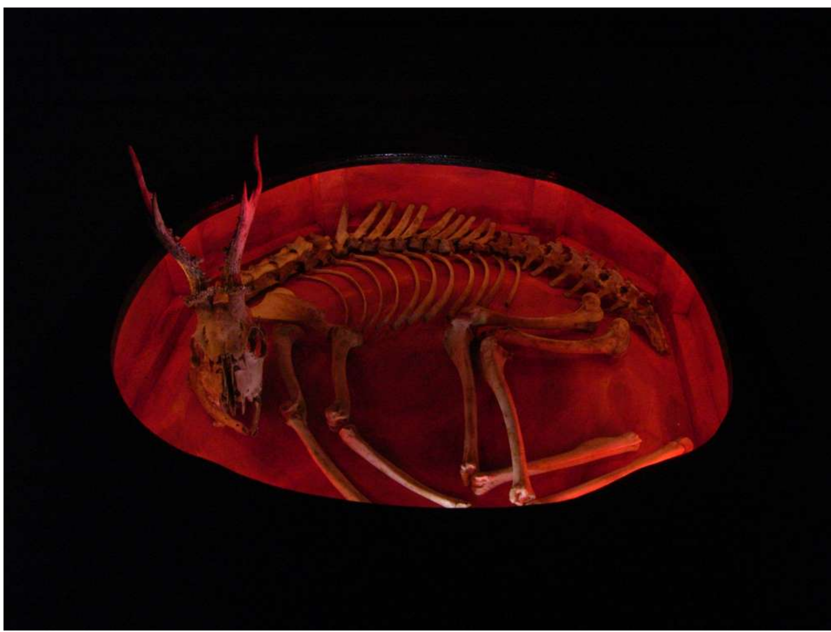


Figure 5.10: Dougie Strang, 'Roe deer'. Part of the installation 'Charnel house for road kill', *Uncivilisation* 2013.

In many of the conversations, events and activities I took part in, there was a clear sense that engaging in an artistic practice is a means of changing worldview by inhabiting

a different mindset in the imagination, seeing the lifeworld differently and experimenting with new metaphors and imagery which can hold this experience. Through exploring and practicing such different consciousness in the imagination it is possible to begin to embody that different way of relating to the surrounding world and articulate what it is like. But this embodiment takes place slowly and without any act of will: it is like the metaphor of 'a snake shedding its skin' that Tony Dias offers as a description for this kind of transformation (cf. section 4.7). It is not possible to change one's way of seeing by sheer determination because it involves *inhabiting* the world differently, not just *acting* differently. Reason can help identify those concepts and ways of thinking that delimit the imagination but experiencing the meaning of those limits is a practice of probing into what the world might be like without them. That is as far as directed thought can take us because the change itself occurs outside of thought: it is the sensing, experiencing, perceiving body which registers differently. When a change can be observed, all of one's relationships are seen from a different view – as epitomised by Hannah Lewis' experience of 'a thought that reclassifies all other thoughts' (cf. section 5.4). This cannot be planned, controlled or willed. It is much like Rima Staines' description of painting as an alembic process where transformation happens both within the artist and within the artwork. She writes about the painting 'The Alchemist': "it looks nothing like I imagined it would when I thought it up [...] it has painted me, and I almost don't know how it happened" (Staines DM3, na.) – see Figure 5.11.

This experience of a poem, a song or a painting 'creating itself' is familiar to most people who engage in creative lines of work. As a way of knowing it is radically different from the discursive, deductive and abstract mode of Logos: where the effectiveness of facts and reasoned discourse ends, it is possible to arrive at new understandings through intuition, empathy, creativity and imagination. McGilchrist (2009) describes this as *mimesis*, the ability to inhabit experiences beyond our own history, which makes it possible to

> "escape from the confines of our own experience and enter directly into the experience of another being: this is the way in which, through human consciousness we bridge the gap, share in what another feels and does, in what it is like to be that person. This comes through our ability to transform what we perceive into something we directly experience" (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 248).

This insight is directly connected with the ambition in the Dark Mountain Project to shift from Logos-centric ways of knowing to engaging with the deeper roots of mythopoetic reality. It explains the meaning of Mythos as a complementary mode of knowing: in creative practice an idea is received in the imagination and expresses itself materially in the activities of imagining and doing. Ideas can be expressed as themes in the work but holding or pursuing a predefined thought too vigorously can also inhibit creativity itself. Unable to control the final 'output' an artist has to remain open to the transformation that takes place within the work. However, the recognition that facts, discourse and analysis can only take one so far in understanding a new way of seeing is not a dismissal of Logos as a way of knowing or the boundaries it draws within the lifeworld. As McGilchrist shows, the

apparent dichotomy between different modes of knowing and attending to the lifeworld is not one of opposition but of affinity. The holistic mode of attention embodied by the right brain hemisphere encompasses what the left brain hemisphere dissects: "it is simply another reverberative process, in which something comes into being – as all life does – through the union of separated forces, retaining their separation but within that union, one entity acting with another" so that "what would look to the left hemisphere like the individual's identity being *lost* in the group becomes merely its being taken up (*aufgehoben*) within the group where it belongs" (ibid., p. 256). And hence, Mythos pervades Logos, so that Logos without Mythos is impossible: by shifting view from dualism-as-opposition to dualism-as-relation it is possible to embrace either aspect without having to commit to one as superior. And in this way, a possibility is opened for re-storying the lifeworld without the onto-epistemological assumptions of the civilised worldview which sees in terms of an underlying opposition between self and other, nature and culture, humans and more-than-human natures.

Figure 5.11: Rima Staines, 'The Alchemist'. Watercolour and gold wax, 2012.

5.7 Re-storying: the narrator of the lifeworld as poet

GQ: How does active re-narration of the lifeworld enable the 'constellation of an alternate reality'?

This chapter has described the process of questioning and re-imagining the conceptual framings which characterise the meta-narrative of progress and illustrated how participants in the Dark Mountain Project engage with the process of embodying change in creative practices. While this is a personal process which is unique to each participant, there are also broader parallels both between the conditions for engaging with this inquiry and how it unfolds. First of all, it is crucial that there is an openness towards the underlying sentiment that there is something defective about progress as a 'myth' or meta-narrative. But there also has to be a willingness to engage in a mode of inquiry which is not always easy and sometimes disorientating. At this point there is a potential for people to turn away from the inquiry. Engaging with the idea of uncivilisation as a process of challenging progress involves a degree of acceptance of a perspective where the future is not by definition an improved version of the present. It is also a confrontation with the deeper rules, norms and habits that structure one's own way of seeing. For many mountaineers, including myself, this is an unsettling experience because it introduces a far-reaching uncertainty into the lifeworld and it means giving up hope that many of the deep afflictions and injustices that have happened during the age of industrial civilisation can be undone. This shift in perspective may seem cynical or despairing but – while this may at times be the case – it also represents a more profound change in attitude: rather than being problems to be *solved*, they are wounds to be *healed*, which implies a different process, namely grieving and reckoning (see e.g. REM, 15.02.12). In my own experience, inquiring into the meaning of 'uncivilising' has been inseparable from coming to a greater understanding of the extent to which my personal lifeworld is entangled with and affected by a history of colonisation[8]. The most appropriate description I have encountered of this shift in attitude is Derek Rasmussen's (2002) formulation of a pedagogy for the oppressor: "It seems to me that if our way of life is causing most of the problems that the rest of the world has to deal with, the best thing we can do is *deal with our own way of life*" (p. 86, original emphasis). In this view, contesting and expanding the conceptual framing of what kind of life is possible and desirable is the first step in creating ways of living that do not reproduce the antagonisms of progress.

As described in the foregoing sections, it is possible to begin enacting new modes of seeing and being through imagination and creative practice. This can be described as a process where mimesis turns from imitation and *being like* to embodiment and *becoming* (cf. McGilchrist, 2009). By inhabiting alternative ways of thinking and doing in the imagination these perspectives can gain authenticity and meaning when they become relevant to and embodied in personal lifeworlds. Mountaineers describe this process in varying

[8] See e.g. my sister, Naja's, study of being mixed-race (Graugaard, 2013) and her work on the cultural and political relations between Denmark and Greenland (Graugaard, 2009).

ways which often depend on what kind of personal practice is involved. In my own experience as a researcher, the shared inquiries, conversations and reflections about aspects of personal transformation were key. Through my recurring dialogues with Tony Dias, I discovered the significance of McGilchrist's observation about how attention shapes the lifeworld. I found that my tendency to impose my own intention on a conversation affected the outcome in a very tangible way and it became my practice to ease out of this habit (O-D, 14.09.12). Through his work as a painter, writer and designer, Dias had come to see the importance of not getting stuck in preconceptions and critique:

> ... this talk about putting energy into explaining what's wrong with whatever is out there now becomes self-defeating pretty quickly. It is an attention hog. It holds our gaze on a mirror where we are looking at them. It does not help us focus on what we *can* do. For each of us, what we can do starts with how we focus our attention. How we untangle our attention from this mess. How we use our attention to re-integrate our selves (TD P-I, 11.12.12).

In light of work like McGilchrist's on cognition, this is a key insight into the process of change in onto-epistemologies. Alan Wallace, scholar on cognition, perception and attention, writes:

> "Our faculty of attention affects us in countless ways. Our very perception of reality is tied closely to where we focus our attention. Only what we pay attention to seems real to us, whereas whatever we ignore – no matter how important it may be – seems to fade into insignificance" (2006, p. 2).

When a creative practice allows for refining attention and awareness it can support the process of enacting and embodying new life narratives. Through stories it is possible to access unaccustomed perspectives and exist imaginatively. Stories also dramatise some of the conflicts that arise during personal transformation and help make sense of the process; there is a sense in which it is in stories that new ways of seeing and doing are weaved into the lifeworld.

I came to see this weaving, or narration, of stories into individual lifeworlds as a creative process where the narrator becomes a *poet* – a word which derives its meaning from *maker* – in the sense of actively seeking new meanings within a personal life story. By engaging with the mythopoetic nature of stories, new characters, perspectives, and plots are weaved into the lifeworld by the narrator as poet. This is, however, not a process commanded by reason and it can be psychologically demanding: in those instances where a different way of seeing challenges something which is a source of someone's personal identity, changing view can be difficult – if it is not actively resisted – because the other way of seeing is perceived as threatening to the stability of one's own personhood or broader role in the structures of social life (cf. Peavy, 1997, 2004). This highlights the paradoxical nature of changes in worldview. The person who wants to change cannot do so *alone* because the change lies partly in a destruction or re-drawing of the boundaries

of the self and its relations. Something else is required beyond *wanting* change: an openness towards letting one's own sense of self be infused by the otherness inherent in one's relations with the world (see e.g. O-D, 06.12.12). Therefore a degree of resistance to the immediate impulse to make sense in terms of one's preconceptions is necessary for new aspects of self-other relationships to develop outside deeper, acculturated ways of seeing. To remain open in the breakdown of meaning that follows *not* making sense in terms of one's preconceptions, it is necessary to trust the otherness of one's relations, to be prepared that they may be saying something although it cannot be immediately heard or understood. Openness and trust were key themes in my interview-conversations about this kind of change: it involves "a letting go of certainty and being open to risk and the fact that you may have to adapt and be more flexible" (SW P-I, 14.03.13).

The web of metaphors conjured by modern narratives of progress frame contemporary society as the outcome of social interactions where the combined actions of 'individuals', who 'compete' over 'scarce resources' in a struggle for 'survival' (or just out of plain 'self-interest'), benefit 'society' through the 'self-regulation' of 'markets'. Through metaphoric resonance with other figures of speech which correlate and substantiate each other this account is motivated as an explanation of economic rationality – the 'free market', the 'invisible hand' and 'growth' are all part of the same vocabulary which describes the neoliberal economy (cf. Larson, 2011). As Naomi Klein points out in her essay 'On precaution' the deeper narrative and assumptions inherent to this worldview revolve around an idea of nature as an 'inexhaustible frontier' – they only make sense in a world of availability and access to infinite resources:

> It is only this underlying assumption of limitlessness that makes it possible to take the reckless risks that we do. Because this is our real master narrative: However much we mess up, there will always be more: more water, more land, more untapped resources. A new bubble will replace the old one, a new technology will fix the mess we made with the last one (Klein DM2, p. 23).

As soon as we speak of nature as 'resources' and social life in terms of 'competition', the conversation is framed by webs of metaphors which imply a setting where individuals vie to satisfy their self-interest within a background environment of 'natural assets' or 'raw materials'. Unless these metaphors are challenged the imagination becomes limited by their implications.

Becoming an active narrator of the lifeworld can be seen as a 'de-naturalising' of such dominant metaphors. As "our ideas about the world, including our values, are built on much deeper conceptions concerning the nature of reality and of knowledge" which "in turn shape the conception of the self from which we act" (Hamilton, 2009, na.), we can say that re-narrating those webs of metaphors which support a view of the natural world as consisting of (limitless) resources is also an act of envisioning alternative relations within more-than-human nature and initiating new forms of environment-making. And as a community of inquiry which is both questioning the cultural narratives that structure life within civilisation and experimenting with new ways of storying the lifeworld, the

Dark Mountain Project curates conversations which can support and enable such personal reorientation of guiding social narratives. The journals feature a number of essays which deliberately subvert and contest particular metaphors, concepts and histories which have been naturalised – or mythologised as Warren Draper puts it in his revisionist account of the Luddite uprising (Draper DM2) – in the worldview of civilisation. This can be seen as an experimentation with framings that describe and elicit social interactions away from the dualistic language of progress towards a relational and connecting language which sees humans as a 'strand of a web' (Kingsnorth and Hine MA).

Re-storying the lifeworld implies becoming a poet of one's own lived reality and finding the appropriate roles, concepts, metaphors and plots with which to narrate a way of life that is not bounded by the binary framing of progress. The claim of the Dark Mountain Project is that this reframing is the best way to approach a future which is radically uncertain but profoundly precarious. This position holds that what kind of future we face depends on this re-storying, as Dougald Hine suggests in conversation with Vinay Gupta:

> ... if we frame the question of sustainability as – how do we achieve the most energy-intensive society we can, within ecological limits – the result is the end of democracy. There is no political choice left about our way of living. Whereas, if we include the range of positions below those limits, we have many possible ways of living (Hine and Gupta DM1, p. 44).

In this way, opening up aspects of reality that lie outside the narrative and metaphors of progress is a way of practicing and enacting ways of living which are viable in a future 'topography of collapse' where material wealth is subsiding. And that poses further questions about how to approach the transformation and establishment of institutions and modes of organisation which support radically different ways of relating to each other, the natural world and the future.

Chapter summary: In this chapter, I have described the wider significance of the Dark Mountain narrative for understanding the future as a 'topography of collapse' as well as the way this positions the individual 'narrator as poet'. Understood both as a personal reality and a wider historical framing, 'collapse' undermines the conceptual and discursive framework of the meta-narrative of progress. Rather than replacing the belief in progress with other predictions of the future, the 'topography of collapse' can be seen as an acceptance that the future is radically uncertain. At the personal level, the dissolution of narratives of progress implies a foundering of established concepts and a phase of indeterminacy and 'liminality' where participants often find themselves in a space without an orderly or structured life narrative. By reworking personal narrative framings and engaging in different forms of creative practice, mountaineers begin to imagine and embody other ways of seeing. In this process of questioning and 'uncivilising', new understandings and relationships emerge which express qualitatively different ways of thinking and being to those implied by the disenchanted view of progress. This can be seen as an act

of re-storying lived reality by finding new roles, metaphors and plots that can guide a way of living outside the dichotomies presented by the meta-narrative of progress.

This underlines the role of stories in enabling new practices and forms of interaction, and through examining their characteristics – their imagery, casts and plots – it is possible to know more about the social relationships they imply. The relation between narratives and forms of knowledge has also been examined further and this chapter suggests that the deeper conceptual and linguistic framework which distinguishes a particular cultural narrative is reflected in the kind of knowledges and actions it makes available. By virtue of its binary framing, the 'hidden consensus' of the meta-narrative of progress can be seen to devalue those knowledges and actions which it deems at the negative end of this polarity. In this way, knowledges and actions that centre on the past are treated as inferior as a result of being 'traditional', 'romantic', 'primitive' or 'uncivilised'. A transformation in a guiding life narrative away from such dichotomies opens up for new ways of seeing and doing which were previously inaccessible. This can be seen as a re-positioning of the individual narrator of the lifeworld. By becoming aware of the processes by which narrative positioning occurs, the 'narrator as poet' can become a co-creator of the personal narratives which structure the lifeworld and thereby begin to inhabit a mode of being which is qualitatively different.

Addressing the foundational assumptions, metaphors and narratives that shape the mindset of progress, inquiries within the Dark Mountain Project construct an alternate – onto-epistemological – frame of reference which allows new meanings and forms of interaction to emerge. This both challenges existing authority structures and develops a vocabulary of 'uncivilising' which introduces new relations and meanings to the life-world. Such inquiries can thus be seen as an experimentation with rules and visions of environment-making which present a radically different view of sustainability to the user-resource perspective: the idea of balancing human needs and environmental protection is displaced by a search for a vocabulary which moves beyond quantitative and 'disenchanted' ways of speaking about more-than-human nature. The next chapter continues to consider the assumptions and relations that characterise modes of environment-making within the Dark Mountain Project as well as the social institutions it has given rise to.

Chapter 6

Embodying the future

> The wild god reaches into a bag
> Made of moles and nightingale-skin.
> He pulls out a two-reeded pipe,
> Raises an eyebrow
> And all the birds begin to sing.
>
> *Tom Hirons in* Dark Mountain*, issue 3, p. 125*

In the foregoing chapters I have described the emergence of the Dark Mountain Project as a community of inquiry which explores what an 'uncivilised worldview' is like, and examined how re-storying the lifeworld occurs as a gradual process of re-imagining and embodying aspects of this worldview through creative practice. This chapter goes on to examine the inherent assumptions and values that characterise the Dark Mountain Project as a cultural intervention, and considers how this affects notions of place, time, agency, social change, innovation and developing new institutions. Dark Mountain's focus on stories, myth and narrative can be seen as an acknowledgement of David Abram's (1997) description of the present age as one where meaning has become impoverished through the codification and abstraction of language itself: in this view, 'disenchanted' ways of speaking about the world (cf. section 5.5) are an active 'displacement of sensory participation' in the surrounding environment which "functions to *eclipse* the enveloping earth from human awareness" (p. 217, original emphasis). This helps to explain the emphasis on the role of Mythos, language and perception in the search for uncivilised stories: the ambition is to practice ways of seeing and speaking which re-enliven the environment by bringing more-than-human perspectives into the lifeworld. It is an approach which involves engaging with and shifting the conceptual and narrative frames of reference which make sense of these perspectives (cf. section 5.5). Making sense of the lifeworld, in Abram's terms, is "to release the body from the constraints imposed by outworn ways of speaking, and hence to renew and rejuvenate one's felt awareness of the world" (ibid., p. 265). The inquiries into re-storying the lifeworld that take place within different circles of conversation in the Dark Mountain Project can thus be seen as a practice which enables

new relations between the ‘narrator as poet’ and the world in which she moves.

In this chapter, I probe into the significance of this practice with a view to elucidate the deeper connections between narratives, knowledge and action. Building on the inquiry into this relation in the previous chapters, as well as the foregoing observations about the role of stories in enabling new ways of doing, I consider what the lifeworld begins to look like once the narrative framing of progress is questioned and delegitimised. Experimenting with new ways of seeing involves a re-sensing and reconceptualisation of contextual and temporal aspects of personal identities and visions of the future. Hence, the first two sections delve into the deeper onto-epistemological assumptions within the Dark Mountain Project concerning *space* and *time*, while the sections 6.3 and 6.4 explore the underpinning attitudes, skills and ethics that support these ways of seeing the world. Lastly, sections 6.5 and 6.6 then go on to consider the ways in which new modes of interaction and social institutions emerge from this ground. In this way, this chapter directly addresses the question about how sustainability narratives affect the organisation and diffusion of the Dark Mountain Project, and I draw out findings from across the empirical chapters to show how the relations implied by particular ways of seeing and doing affect the emergence of new modes of interaction and organisation within Dark Mountain. Finally, this chapter points to the wider significance of finding ways to interact that do not channel participants’ energy into a programme of action for the emergence of new forms of environment-making.

6.1 Re-enchantment and relationship with place

GQ: What characterises the transformation of individual identities and life narratives within the Dark Mountain Project and what kind of relations to the surrounding world do they express?

Seeing the rules and visions of environment-making conveyed in the imageries, narratives and practices that express and embody particular relations within nature-as-matrix, opens up questions about what kinds of relations the inquiries within the Dark Mountain Project give rise to. In this and the following section I explore the underlying onto-epistemological assumptions regarding *space* and *time* in order to show what kind of world the Dark Mountain narrative situates the ‘narrator as poet’ within. I do this in relation to the overarching theme of *enchantment* and draw on documentary analyses, the interview-conversations and participant observation across the different narrative sites to show how Dark Mountain relates to more-than-human nature as a community of inquiry.

A central image used to describe civilisation as a belief system in the Dark Mountain Project is that of a ‘machine’: "[o]nce the air was a machine, and once the people breathed it" (Thorp and Major-George DM3, na.), and human agency is frequently depicted as ‘cogs’ in this machinery (see e.g. Kingsnorth DM3). The search for uncivilised stories is therefore also an endeavour to rediscover and reconnect with those aspects of the lifeworld which have been suppressed by mechanical, Logos-centric and disenchanted

ways of speaking about the world, to "celebrate writing and art which is grounded in a sense of place and of time" (Kingsnorth and Hine MA, p. 19). A clear, if understated, aspiration of *Uncivilisation* is the "affirmation of the wonder of what it means to be truly human" (Kingsnorth and Hine MA, p. 15) and the desire to

> accept the world for what it is and to make our home here, rather than dreaming of relocating to the stars, or existing in a Man-forged bubble and pretending to ourselves that there is nothing outside it to which we have any connection at all (ibid., p. 15),

entails a partial surrender to the otherness of 'outside' nature where the 'barrier of self-consciousness' that Elphinstone describes (cf. section 5.6) recedes as the natural world is no longer envisaged as standing in opposition to the individual self. In relation to the historical process of the disenchantment of the Western worldview (cf. section 5.5) this resolve expresses a sentiment that "we have long been exiled from our sensuous natures and also from the wellspring of existence" (Taggart DM3, p. 183). In this way, embodying other ways of seeing, and opening up to Mythos as a way of knowing, can be described as a gradual *re-enchantment*, where meanings and metaphors that have been rendered invalid or unreal by privileging reason as the sole measure of knowledge or criterion of validity (cf. section 4.4) begin to find new expressions in the lifeworld.

The various descriptions of this in the Dark Mountain journals, talks and conversations (e.g. Hughes DM1, Challenger DM1, Morris DM1, Hirons(a) DM3, Thorp and Major-George DM3) often express a sense of speechlessness and a blurring of the distinction between 'inner' and 'outer' worlds: "if we could speak, words / would climb out of our mouths / and dance all over the trees, / the bushes and horses / and revolving earth" (Strang DM2, p. 83). Tony Dias describes this experience as a form of nonverbal communication with the surrounding world:

> Throughout evolution what led to this organism and what keeps it functioning, has accumulated something, an intelligence we can learn to trust. The more we trust it, the more we listen to our organism, and the more we relate to it with compassion and respect. The more we do this, the more it speaks to us. The more we and our organisms communicate, the more we converse with all of the other organisms around us (TD P-I, 20.11.12).

This kind of communication is conveyed by Phil Brachi as a "kind of empathic attunement to our ancestors' world of experience" (Brachi DM3, p. 117) which exists in the quiet of the mind:

> As most times and cultures have attested, it is here coexisting and awaits our stillness. This beautiful attunement arrives quite naturally; it is easier to enter this state than to describe it (ibid, p. 223).

Brachi observes that this form of communication is accessible through quietude and respectful suspension of apprehension. As such, it can be seen as analogous to the experience in Eastern wisdom traditions of *no-mind*, or wu-hsin (see e.g. Watts, 1999), a state

where "the mind becomes silent, the center dissolves, and love does what it will" (Moffatt, 1976, p. 43). Because this state of mind takes place outside of reflexive thought (Bohm, 2004a) it does not lend itself easily to analysis, but it can be described, with Elphinstone's expression, as an experience of *communing with nature* which 'joins together' the apparently separate individual self and its environment (cf. section 5.6).

Communion with more-than-human nature and finding a personal sense of the sacred is, in Doug Tompkins' words, "one way those of us coming from the techno-industrial culture can try to get a grip on the idea that we need to share the planet with other creatures" (Kingsnorth et al. DM3, p. 148). It is a way of reinstating the importance and uniqueness of *place* in cultures of progress which routinely substitute the notion of distinctive place with homogenous space (cf. Escobar, 2001). As "a qualitative matrix, a pulsing or potentized field of experience" (Abram, 1997, p. 190), place is deeply entwined with the physical and biological temporalities of its various elements – a fundamental attribute which the notion of space tends to erase (see also section 6.2). Engaging with place and temporalities through personal and creative practices can thus also be seen as finding new ways to relate to more-than-human nature. In 'Finding Roe Deer', Thomas Keyes conveys how the process of making vellum from road kill deer becomes a practice which connects the author with the animal, the materials and their history (see Figure 6.1):

> It is as if the sacrifice of the deer into the human world has set in motion all these activities; a series of rituals are evolving, self-organising through the logic of the materials and the landscape [...] Making vellum is like fire, so deep and comforting it dissolves history. Going through motions and movements and smells and textures that connect thousands of years into the 'distant' past; awakening dormant thoughts that will pass into the future and reemerge whenever deer and people connect (Keyes DM3, p. 60).

Relationship with place through connection with materials, landscape and history is another motif which runs through many of the essays, stories, poems and images in the journals (e.g. Griffiths DM1, Armstrong DM2, Challenger DM2, Wolfbird DM2, Szabo DM3, Alcock DM3, Mckenzie DM3, Hirons(b) DM3) and the craft and skill sharing that takes place at the festivals are direct ways to practice and build a connection with the land.

Finding a renewed sense of place and belonging to the land can be seen as a process of re-awakening a sense of indigeneity (cf. McIntosh, 2012a). Although the word *indigenous* is contested, especially within the context of industrialised, modern societies, it is the term which best describes this deeper sense of relationship and belonging (cf. Williams, 2012). It should thus be understood in terms of Derek Rasmussen's (2013) description that:

> *An Indigenous People are those who believe that they belong to a place;*
> *a Non-Indigenous People are those who believe that places belong to them.*

In this sense, connecting with place is a reclaiming of the land as a source of identity. And this entails, especially in cultures with a colonial past or present, a confrontation with the

Figure 6.1: Thomas Keyes, 'Roe deer in spring Birch'. Roe deer parchment, birch wood smoke and birch tar smoke, 2014.

habits, attitudes and views which objectify indigenous ways of living. This is a difficult and nebulous task which requires a re-examination of one's connection with, and personal part in, the history of colonialism, as Jay Griffiths points out in her essay 'This England': "For the English to have back our deep, lovely Englishness, we need to remember our past soberly, and to stop repeating its iniquities today through the devious reach of corporate colonialism" (Griffiths DM1, p. 207). Such re-examination is inherent to many of the writings and talks within the Dark Mountain Project (e.g. Simon Fairlie on the Commons (Fairlie DM1) or Warren Draper on the Luddites (Draper DM2) as mentioned earlier). Once a relationship with place develops and it becomes part of one's identity, it is difficult, if not impossible, to view it merely as 'resource', as Sharon Blackie proposes in my interview with her:

> True commitment to place – love for a place – should lead inevitably to ecological stewardship: if you are devoted to a place, and know yourself to be a part of its ecosystem, then you're more likely to protect it – and to fight for it, if necessary. And these days, it's too easy to walk away. If we *genuinely* connect with our places, and *genuinely* connect with our stories, then walking away simply isn't an option. It'd be like walking away from life (SB P-I, 27.12.12).

Such a connection implies getting to know the landscape and ecology of one's immediate surroundings and rediscovering the history and myths of the place one inhabits (see e.g. Figure 6.2 for an artistic expression). In his talk at the Uncivilisation festival in 2012,

'Gambling with the Knuckle-Bones of Wolves', storyteller, author and mythologist Martin Shaw described myth as *the power of a place speaking*, as a voice of the land through which its inhabitants speak to the human world (MS A-R, 18.08.12). Hearing this voice is a practice which requires 'listening at the edge of one's understanding' and opening up for new stories and plots to give meaning to the lifeworld.

Re-enchantment can thus be understood as a way of acknowledging the voices of the natural world and to begin learning how to listen to them. The 'earth-ethic' (Griffiths DM1) and eco-centric (Kingsnorth et al. DM3) imagery and language of the Dark Mountain Project has been construed as a framing where "[t]he nuances, contradictions, ambivalences and conflicts inherent to society are abolished so that 'civilization' becomes a psychical object devoid of differentiation" (Hogget 2011, p. 271) producing a 'reverse image' of the enlightenment ideas that gave rise to the modern notion of progress. This frames the experience of uncivilising and re-enchantment as a wilful rejection of its opposite, *dis*enchantment. However, in light of the earlier observations about abandoning the framework of dualistic opposites (cf. section 4.7) and Logos and Mythos as complementary rather than oppositional modes of knowing (cf. section 5.6), it is important to avoid seeing enchantment as being in broad opposition to disenchantment, modernity or civilisation. In parallel with McGilchrist's observations about the relation between the different modes of attention embodied by the two brain hemispheres, Patrick Curry (2012) remarks that enchantment encompasses disenchanted ways of seeing: "in a powerful moment of enchantment, the secular pieties of modernity, such as the radical difference between 'subject' and 'object', 'man' and 'universe', 'cultural' and 'natural', simply vanish" (p. 81). This is similar to the 'reverberative process' of integrating individual identity with the wider environment through 'the union of separated forces' described in section 5.6. Drawing on Tolkien's understanding of enchantment as the 'realisation of imagined wonder', Curry describes the ontology of enchantment as relational, perspectival and participatory, a way of being which is integral to the health and functioning of human relations: it is a form of communion with more-than-human nature which is ultimately unbiddable and cannot be controlled (ibid.). In this perspective, enchantment and the sacred should not be seen as an esoteric or transcendent experience but as existing in an awareness or mode of perception and *already* present in those aspects of life which exceed rationalist prescription and preconception.

As a mutual inquiry about place and the role of the sacred in communing with the natural world, the Dark Mountain Project opens up for the possibility of a re-enchantment of the lifeworld. This is reflected in the central role which the notion of *wildness* plays in the writing, performances, art and events of Dark Mountain: as Curry (2012) writes, the experience of wildness – "the quality or attribute of uncontrollability by human will" (p. 79) – is also one of enchantment. Finding a personal practice which enables communion with place is central in the shift towards enchantment and connecting with the more-than-human world beyond conceptions such as 'resource' or a background 'environment'. Key to attuning to the voice of places is engaging with their inherent temporalities rather than imposing an abstract sense of time which overrides naturally embedded cycles of

evolution. And this leads to another of the central aspects of the onto-epistemological assumptions that guide environment-making within the inquiries and practices of the Dark Mountain Project: a reconfiguration and re-experiencing of the linear conception of time inherent to the worldview of progress.

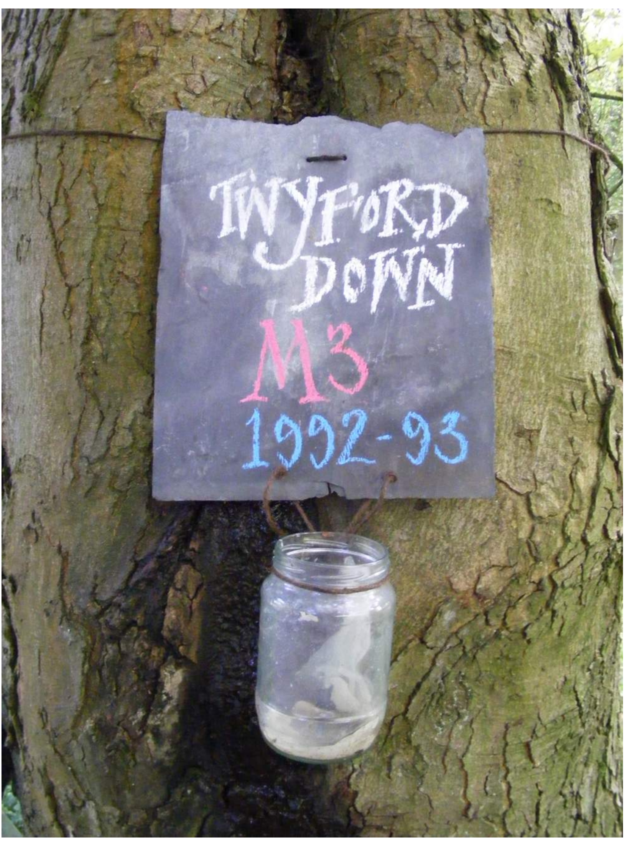


Figure 6.2: Tom Hirons, 'Twyford Down'. Chalk on slate. Installation commemorating protest sites against the UK road building programme in the 1990s at *Uncivilisation* 2012. Own photo.

6.2 Wild time and embodied temporalities

GQ: How does a transformation away from linear understandings of time shape personal identities and worldviews?

The reclamation of place as a source of identity and communion with more-than-human nature also underpins the search within Dark Mountain for historical narratives which provide alternative explanations for why particular worldviews, modes of social organisation and technologies have become prevalent (see e.g. Hester DM3). From a historical perspective, the imbalance between Logos and Mythos (cf. section 4.4) is seen as a consequence of gradual "shifts away from the sensuous and the specific, towards the abstract and exchangeable; and one of the axes along which this has taken place is our relationship to time" (Hine and Abram DM2, p. 266). The role of time in structuring both

individual and collective lifeworlds is central to Dark Mountain's critique of the understanding of history as progress and as a continual improvement of the human condition: this view of history implies an 'enslavement of the present to the future' which breaks the immediate perceptual connection to one's surroundings (Hine and Abram DM2) and the view of time as primarily abstract, absolute and homogeneous is thus part and parcel of the disenchantment of the natural world.

To understand the temporal dimension of disenchantment it is worth considering recent studies of the ecology of time (cf. Serres, 1995; Adam *et al.*, 1997; Adam, 1998; Adam and Groves, 2007; Hassan, 2009; Groves, 2010; Svenstrup, 2012; Bastian, 2014) which examine the temporalities of industrial society, modernity and social-ecological crisis. This approach to the history and perception of social and technological time describes the difference between the mechanical time of progress and the cyclical time of ecology as a difference between disembodied and embodied temporalities – which give rise to very different conceptions of the future. Barbara Adam (2010) observes about the dominant understanding of time in modern societies:

> "The difference between contextualised and decontextualised futures is significant because embodied futures could not be traded [...] The commodified future, emptied of all contents, in contrast, can be traded, exchanged and discounted without restrictions or limits. Divorced from context, it can be exploited anywhere, at any time and for any circumstance" (p. 366).

This historical account of the co-production of social and technological time describes how the relation between social life and place-specific temporalities has been gradually weakened and supplanted by the disembodied temporalities of modern forms of organisation. The pursuit of progress – and with it the pursuit of growth – has in effect erased embodied and contextualised temporalities in favour of a vision of the future which is 'empty' and therefore open to be enrolled and manipulated for present gain. Because the decontextualised future of progress is "[d]evoid of content and meaning" it is not contingent on the past but "a realm destined to be filled with our desire, to be formed and occupied according to rational blueprints, holding out the promise that it can be what we want it to be" (ibid., p. 366).

The view of the future as 'empty', and of time more broadly as abstract and disembodied, is a main target of *Uncivilisation's* critique of progress: this is the belief that underpins the attitude that, historically speaking, 'actions do not have consequences' and that history itself is 'an escalator leading to human perfection' (Kingsnorth and Hine MA). The tendency to project future hopes, desires, plans and aspirations onto the present, and to disregard temporalities which do not match those projections, is seen as essentially ideological. And this points to the central perception in this line of critique: unquestioned belief in progress as a meta-narrative is based in *faith* in its basic tenets much like institutionalised religions. Drawing on Bellah's (1967) concept of civil religion[1], which

[1]Robert Bellah developed the notion of civil religion from Rosseau's use of the term in *The Social Contract* and it subsequently gained importance as a sociological concept that examines the sacrosanct nature of

describes how the symbols, practices and beliefs of the USA as a national community compares to an organised religion, Greer (2013) shows how belief in progress is similarly based on "values that the community considers so self-evident that they stand outside the sphere of reasonable debate" (p. 44), in other words, values that have become ideology[2]. These values pertain to the centrality of humanity within the cosmos as both the past and the future revolve around the belief that "all of human history is a prologue that leads directly and inevitably to us" and proceeds "through us to a future that looks like today's industrial societies but even more so" (ibid., p. 46). Within this historical narrative – and attending social imaginary – progress is framed in terms of temporal concepts and metaphors which conceive of time as unidirectional[3]. This is mirrored in the way the converse of progress is framed either as stagnation or as a complete, catastrophic and final event which annihilates the values that progress represents (cf. Greer, 2012).

While cyclical elements can certainly also be found in ideologies of progress, these enter the progress-stagnation dichotomy which this view of history expresses as a negative (together with the past, nature, tradition, simplicity, etc.) or are assimilated into the linear meta-narrative. In his work on the apocalyptic imaginary, Stefan Skrimshire (2010a) finds that the modern notion of progress subsumes the idea of 'the end' into its logic: "[f]aith in the eventual perfection of creation is coupled with an acceptance of periodic crises in the world. Those crises are seen as an aspect of its unfolding 'reason' or story" (p. 227). The deeper significance of this integration of apocalypse into the imaginary of progress is that crisis becomes a *necessary* feature of history which is reflected in the emergence of climate change as an 'immanent apocalypse' or "the transformation of a future expectation into the perpetuation, and normalization, of the present" (ibid, pp. 232-3). As an ongoing apocalypse, Skrimshire writes, climate change is in danger of becoming a fatalistic narrative where the inadequacy of human agency leads to finding consolation in resignation to a cleansing rupture. In parallel with the 'split' mainstream narrative about climate change which denies the loss that is occurring presently (cf. section 4.2), the view that history progresses through a series of crises leaves little room for dealing with the psychological 'cost' of the scale of present social-ecological crises and the ethical questions that follow.

As an intervention into the apocalyptic imaginary, the Dark Mountain manifesto's claim that current generations are living through 'the end of the world as we know it' departs from the idea of 'the end' as final or cataclysmic and instead invites participants to envision what the 'topography of collapse' might be like – it is not 'the end full stop'

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certain cultural beliefs.

[2]The notion of progress as a civil religion does not imply that progress is simply secularised eschatology. While there are parallels between religious and secular notions of progress – and it has arguably been "the unfortunate fate of later thinking about progress that it inherited from Augustine the immanent teleology and the conception of humanity as the subject of all progress" (Adorno, 2005, p. 146) – it would be a simplification to view modern conceptions of progress as mere reuse of Christian conceptual vocabulary (cf. Wallace, 1981).

[3]It is important to distinguish here between time as a teleological flow towards perfection (or catastrophe) and the notion of irreversibility which ensures the flow of time in a single direction (cf. Prigogine and Stengers, 1984). It is in the former sense the word 'unidirectional' is employed here.

(cf. section 5.3). While mountaineers have very different ideas about the future, there is a general acceptance that many of the amenities of modern societies are likely to disappear, as Paul Kingsnorth expresses it here:

> ... if you are just gradually getting poorer it's easier to pretend it is not happening [...] You know, my children are going to be poorer than I was, they're going to have less opportunity, they're going to have to pay forty grand to go to university, they're probably not going to have free healthcare, they're not going to have a pension. My parents had all that stuff as well, I haven't got it. You know, we're not horribly poor, we're still some of the richest people in the world but things are getting worse (PK P-I, 11.05.12).

While the idea of a 'slow descent' and an acceptance of limits to the capacities of industrial societies to change many aspects of social-ecological crises could appear as a form of resignation, *Uncivilisation's* 'end of the world' also opens up for a very different imagination of the future: one which takes seriously the irreversibility of many of the processes that have caused social-ecological change and at the same time asks what kind of actions and living make sense in a future where the expectations and promises of progress have failed (see e.g. Figure 6.3 for an artistic expression). A vital aspect of this change is a renewed relationship with time which recognises the temporal diversity that is concealed by the projection of future expectations onto the present.

Figure 6.3: Jamie Jackson, 'Intertext'. Vinyl print, 2010 ©Jamie Jackson.

This recuperation of a personal sense of time is not just an abstract intellectual exercise, it connects with the lived temporalities implied by modern forms of organisation, the

social relationships presupposed by contemporary modes of work and the subjugation of natural temporalities to industrial societies (cf. Svenstrup, 2012). Dougald Hine describes the dominant mode of organisation in industrial societies as one of 'orchestration' where

> ... great amounts of effort are synchronised, coordinated and harnessed to the control of a single will [...] The position of the conductor standing on the podium is not so different to the position of the politicians, democratic or otherwise, of the industrial era, addressing unprecedented numbers of people through new technologies which make it possible for one voice to be amplified far beyond its true reach (Hine DM2, p. 264-5).

Mountaineer, writer and author of *Pip Pip: A Sideways Look at Time*, Jay Griffiths observes that this harnessing and subjugation of natural time scales is both an appropriation of the idea of time and a "theft of lifetime at the cutting edge of capitalism" (JG P-I, 14.09.12). She contrasts the abstract notions of time implied by progress with the 'wild time' inherent to the diversity of time scales found in the natural world:

> ... to me the best definition of what is wild is what is self-willed. In early Teutonic and Norse languages the root of 'wild' is in 'will', something wild is self-willed, uncontrollable: the will and the wild are connected right from the beginning. And so you could almost say that when something is allowed to live fully in its own time it is in a wild time as in a self-willed time. So that's the time, for instance, of crops to grow in their own time and not the force fed crops of industrial agriculture. And it is what people talk about as mountain time, it's got its own self-willed time and crucially an integrity which is different from the self-willed time of something else (ibid.).

Here, the connection between the ontology of wildness or enchantment and the poetics of *inhumanism* becomes clear: it is an aesthetic and an attitude which endeavours to experience, as far as is possible, the world on its own terms rather than living in anticipation of future developments to resolve current problems – it is a determination to acknowledge the 'self-will' of the natural world and to avoid subjecting it to mechanical temporalities or projections of the future.

Viewed in light of Dark Mountain's philosophical influences this endeavour can also be described as one which aims to re-integrate those identities and aspects of life which have been separated out or divided into distinct domains within the lifeworld (e.g. belief, nationality, class, ethnicity, social status, etc.) through ongoing historical processes like disenchantment (Weber, 1946), economic rationalisation (Polanyi, 1957), marketisation (Graeber, 2011) and enclosure (McCann, 2005). The perhaps deepest of these divisions is that which separates the human world from the natural world and to move beyond this dichotomy necessarily entails engaging with the experience of place and time. Abram (1997) suggests that "when space and time are reconciled into a single, unified field of phenomena [...] the encompassing earth become[s] evident, once again, in all its power and its depth, as the very ground and horizon of all our knowing" (p. 217). This 'unhumanised' view reveals the arbitrariness of our conceptual divisions as well as the deeper

ground of being. Re-enchantment through creative practice and re-examining the deeper role of place and time as primary sources of identity and belonging (see e.g. Figure 6.4 for an artistic expression) can be seen as a rehabilitation of the sensory participation in one's immediate environment which counteracts the tendency to think of the future as a realm to be 'formed and occupied according to rational blueprints'.

This raises the issue of what forms of environment-making arise from the ontology of enchantment, wildness and *inhumanism*: what are the implications in term of new possibilities for 'sustainable' living?

Figure 6.4: Mr. Fox at *The Telling*, February 2013. Own photo

6.3 Improvisation as an attitude and mode of organisation

GQ: How do participants in the Dark Mountain Project approach the deep uncertainties that arise from accepting the 'topography of collapse'?

The foregoing observations about re-enchantment poses questions about what perceptual and practical skills aid embracing the 'uncontrollability by human will' without inhibiting effective action or provoking despondency. As described in section 5.2, the sustainability narrative of the Dark Mountain Project can be seen as a challenge to the 'risk thinking' of management approaches which deal with social-ecological change by attempting to quantify and control future risks. Insofar as risk thinking is emblematic of the deeper logic and worldview which the Dark Mountain Project reacts against, it is helpful to contrast the

attitude and mindset which characterises Dark Mountain with risk thinking in order to understand the practical and ethical implications of the relational ontology of enchantment. Christopher Groves (2010) describes risk thinking as a 'set of institutional habits of mind' characterised by "the projection of an empty future in which what constitutes optimal performance is judged against the background of uncertainties that are to be assessed as risks" (p. 114) and where "the future is understood primarily in terms of the fate of a finite set of quantitative variables" (p. 116). The knowledges employed to determine risks are based on depersonalised expertise and standardised methods which favour "short-term visibility of results that reduces other dimensions of uncertainty to invisibility, and in doing so violates certain ethical intuitions by incorporating unquestioned value-judgements" (ibid., p. 118), thereby framing decision-making within "a discourse based upon monistic universally commensurable numbers" (Spash, 2007, p. 713). A defining feature of this way of thinking is thus the attempt to purge uncertainty by converting potential future outcomes into probabilities which can be utilised to determine a course of action.

However, in circumstances characterised by high levels of ontological uncertainty, where "the entity structure of actors' worlds change so rapidly that the actors cannot generate stable ontological categories valid for the time periods in which the actions they are about to undertake will continue to generate effects" (2005, p. 10), projecting or predicting future outcomes may become ineffective modes of action because the set of assumptions on which a prognosis is based is inadequate for anticipating outcomes. Further, expanding on Groves observation that risk thinking ignores certain ethical intuitions, Anthony McCann (2005) perceives a basic dislocation of lived experience within this mindset[4]:

> "... the more we participate in the discursive 'elimination' of uncertainty, the more we are likely to become alienated from what is happening. The more our discursive renderings of what happens are suffused with the dispositional expectation that uncertainty can be or should be 'eliminated', the more misrepresentative are likely to be our renderings of our experience and of whatever we might refer to as reality" (pp. 228-9).

Striving to achieve certainty about the future can in this way be seen as a fundamental denial of a basic existential condition which exerts a subtle but profound 'epistemological violence' when it is used to govern the futures of others. McCann's research shows how the tendency towards discursive elimination of uncertainty can be reproduced in critiques of management approaches if the premises of the discursive framework are not acknowledged and challenged. In this light, the Dark Mountain Project's ambition to move towards ways of knowing that do not re-enact and perpetuate disenchanted views of place and time – e.g. treating the prospect of deepening social-ecological crises as problems to be solved by forecasting, managing and controlling the future – can be seen as embracing the reality of profound ontological uncertainties regarding the future and experimenting

[4]McCann's work is building a sociological framework for understanding the dynamics at work in processes of enclosure and commodification, and he has been an important influence within Dark Mountain.

with ways of living within this condition.

This entails giving up on the idea that social-ecological crises can be solved by creating blueprints for the future. But it also implies, more generally, an attitude that takes the expectation of a future resolution to current problems inherent to progress to be fallacious because it ignores how the habits of thought and action which lie at the root of present predicaments are reproduced when imagined solutions are projected onto the future. As Steve Wheeler expresses it:

> The opposite of that isn't a different kind of anticipation of something different in the future. It's not living in an abstract future so much, it's living in the now. And that's when we realise improvisation is such a strong part of it, because improvisation is about not anticipating, it's about paying attention to what is now. You think things are going to go one way and – oh no, they are going in a different direction. You just go with that and suddenly the entire future is different, all the possibilities are different. And you're going from there and then it bifurcates again [...] It doesn't mean I'm giving up or backing away, it means that you are just more responsive to what is possible (SW P-I, 14.03.13).

Importantly, 'living in the now' is not just another way of deferring a confrontation with the habits and contradictions of personal modes of thought and action. It involves becoming attentive and responsive to those moments when uncertainty disrupts expectations of the future. As a means of becoming responsive to the possibilities that uncertainty opens up, improvisation has emerged as a core principle and method in many of the inquiries that have developed across different circles of conversation within Dark Mountain.

As a response to the condition of ontological uncertainty, improvisation represents a way of being which focuses on building practical skills and enhancing the courses of action available through creative practice, play and experimentation. Improvisation (from *improvisus*, unforeseen) is the skill of unrehearsed action in the face of unanticipated circumstances, and it is a key practice in creative activities including artistic expression and problem solving. As an art form, improvisation relies on intuition, technique and skill and it is an important capacity in theatre, performance and storytelling. In *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*, Keith Johnstone, a key influence on Dark Mountain thinkers and practitioners of improvisation, describes improvisation as a craft which involves disrupting the routines and habits that hold spontaneous creativity in check. His experience as a teacher and director showed him that a lack of creativity is not rooted in inherent dullness but in a blocking of the imagination. Responding creatively is thus often a matter of changing view: "If I say 'Make up a story', then most people are paralysed. If I say 'describe a routine and then interrupt it', people see no problem" (Johnstone, 1989, 138). A such, improvisation is also a life skill which opens up new perspectives by learning to be attentive to what is going on in the moment and getting to grips with how to respond creatively to that. It can be seen as a form of action which implies detachment from outcomes, attention to means, and openness to the surrounding environment – in many ways corresponding to an attitude of 'being open to the unexpected' (cf. section 4.6).

Figure 6.5: Mearcstapa eyed at *Uncivilisation* 2012. Own photo.

Improvisation as an attitude and method is visible both in the evolution of Dark Mountain itself (cf. section 6.6) and in the conversations it has sparked (see e.g. Figure 6.5 for an artistic expression). It came up frequently as a theme in my interview-conversations (see e.g. Appendix F) and as a concept it helped make sense of the co-creation of narratives about Dark Mountain which took place in those conversations (O-D, 18.03.12). In our interview-conversation, Alex Fradera, a scholar and improvisational performer, described improvisation as a way of "[t]rying to gauge with more input than just what the rational mind is trying to plan for you: to predict and control the shape of things, and to get you to a safe place" (AF P-I, 31.01.13). Crucially, it embodies a radically different approach to the future than risk thinking: "when we think about Progress and solutions and so on, one of the things that improvisation emphasises is that the solutions lie behind you rather than in front of you" (ibid.). Fradera describes listening, presence and generosity as core values and characteristics of improvisation which makes the improviser able to deal with, and draw strength from, vulnerability and uncertainty. He sees improvisation as a process which produces emergent outcomes rather than predefined outputs: they grow from within a given situation rather than being implemented through set procedures which require predefined elements. This also means that improvisation is a skill which is valuable in situations where material resources are few or lacking:

> ... improvisation is actually incredibly well honed over the years to be an art form that operates within [conditions of scarcity]. Because it doesn't need power to survive,

> it doesn't need planning, scripting and so on. You don't need a wealth of people to prepare and make something happen. It's in person so you don't need any technology to mediate it [...] it's a highly democratic and a highly resilient piece of art technology that any society can use to entertain themselves (ibid.).

As a practice, improvisation works to develop presence – "when we think ahead, we miss most of what's happening" (Johnstone, 1999, p. 131), spontaneity – "we struggle against our imaginations, especially when we try to be imaginative" (ibid., p. 105), and narrative through recurrence – "stories achieve structure by referring back to earlier events" (ibid., p. 131). Thus, improvisation skills can create meaningful and effective responses without having to refer to pre-planned ideas or requiring specific resources.

Dougald Hine proposes that improvisation offers a radically different principle for social organisation to that of orchestration (cf. section 6.2) as it involves learning to communicate and partake in complex relationships without continually having to arrive at an expressed agreement or consensus (see also section 6.6). He sees such smaller, decentralised and flexible modes of organisation to be likely to play an increasingly important role in the functioning of social institutions within situations characterised by high degrees of ontological uncertainty. However, viewed from the meta-narrative of progress this can often seem like a step 'backwards' and Hine suggests that within the 'topography of collapse' (cf. section 5.3) it is necessary to rethink the role and value of the past:

> What gets us through the times ahead may well be those moments when we look backwards and find something from earlier in the story that we can pull through, that becomes useful again. Our leaders are very fond of talking about 'innovation', the point at which some new device enters social reality; we don't seem to have an equivalent word for when things that are old-fashioned, obsolete and redundant come into their own in the hour of need (Hine DM2, p. 269).

As an attitude to innovation, improvisation is more concerned with developing personal abilities and perceptual skills that make new relations between people, objects and environments possible than developing novel artefacts. As Alex Fradera reflects about this: "much of the transformation is in the way that we see things rather than trying to change the external environment" (AF P-I, 31.01.13). The resurfacing of ways of doing 'from earlier in the story' is visible at the Uncivilisation festivals in the teaching and sharing of historic crafts and techniques, folk song and storytelling, body practices, plant medicine, wild foods, traditional tools and the recreation of rituals. These practices offer personal ways of becoming more independent of industrial society while they are routes into connecting with the natural world.

By engaging with improvisation as a skill and a mode of organising that is able to respond effectively and creatively to situations characterised by deep uncertainty, it is possible to sidestep some of the deadlocks that a logo-centric insistence on comprehensive answers and formal governance can induce. As a life skill, improvising means letting go of the idea of control, becoming accustomed to seeing problematics from different

viewpoints and learning to read and respond to other people non-verbally. For the 'narrator as poet', improvisation is an important way of unblocking the imagination, finding new viewpoints and weaving new meanings into the lifeworld in collaboration with others. Alex Fradera describes how a 'group mind' and shared outcomes can emerge from improvisation when different perspectives are mutually acknowledged, listened to and incorporated so that they converge on a conclusion which is unique in that it is unpredictable and dependent on each participant's contribution. In this sense, improvising, when it works, creates wholeness out of difference by developing a shared viewpoint or story from each individual perspective (see e.g. Figure 6.6). The next section continues to explore how the approach and attitude described here connect with the development of human-scale ways of living.

Figure 6.6: Closing ceremony at *Uncivilisation* 2012. Photo by Bridget McKenzie.

6.4 Craft and the vernacular

GQ: What forms of life are implied by the transformation in worldviews and life narratives within the Dark Mountain Project?

The shift in focus away from macroscopic solutions towards the possibilities inherent to the present at a personal level has been interpreted as a withdrawal into survivalism (Hogget 2011). While withdrawal is a notion which for many mountaineers constitute a necessary part of the response to 'living within the machine', dismissing this attitude as one of superiority fails to recognise the politics inherent to this stance. Rather than striving to change the world through 'orchestrating' and controlling the future, this is a

position which asks "what power do you have to preserve what is of value – creatures, skills, things, places?" (Kingsnorth DM3, p. 25). It is a 'micro-politics' which holds the potential to recuperate 'hope beyond hope' insofar as it empowers action on a level that is commensurate with the possibilities, abilities and reach that characterises each individual lifeworld (see e.g. Dougald Hine and Anthony McCann's conversation about this politics, Hine and McCann 30.04.14). Once the framework of risk thinking and the need for certainty is suspended, the drive to reach for solutions that aim to 'fix' social-ecological crises begins to seem less attractive – striving for solutions appear as part of a way of thinking which perpetuates the problems themselves by transmuting what can be done in the present into an expectation of resolution in the future. This is difficult to accept, especially from within a worldview which sees uncertainty as an obstacle to effective action. Many of the contentions created by *Uncivilisation*, both within and beyond Dark Mountain, have revolved around some aspect of this difficulty and it has been part of my own struggle of coming to terms with the irreversibility of social-ecological crises as can be seen in the various outputs produced in the process of this research. However, as the flourishing of uncivilised art and writing that celebrate the experience of being human attest, giving up on finding technological or political 'solutions' to the 'problems' of climate change, species extinction and overconsumption without succumbing to survivalism or hopelessness is a distinct possibility.

Rather than offering a hope that everything will turn out for the best in the 'topography of collapse' indicated by unfolding social-ecological crises, this perspective provides a possibility that it is not necessary to strive for solutions or answers to be part of change. The agency implied by this attitude is apparent in Tony Dias' contrasting of the forms of behaviour involved in technology and craft:

> Technology is a set of *mapped* behaviours, a programming. Technique is a recipe. When we follow recipes we cease engaging with reality. Our focus centres on the needs of the recipe. Our purpose shifts from doing what *can be done* to ignoring how the world is different from our expectations. In our frustration at the increasing divergence between the two, we fall into *negotiation*. We haggle with reality to maintain our illusions. We strive so as to bolster them. We focus on *means* to arrive at *ends*. *Ends* we forget are conditional (TD P-I, 25.10.12).

On the other hand, Dias sees craft as 'a conversation between meaning and contingency' which involves "bring[ing] all the wisdom available to us from within our person, our culture, and our cultural traditions to bear" on our interaction with the physical world (TD P-I, 20.11.12). Craft, as a mode of interaction, moves away from preconceived and habitual behaviours by bringing attention to the immediate experience of the world and its self-organising relations. In 'reconfiguring our relationship with what is possible' (cf. section 4.3) craft plays a vital role as a way of finding out what constitutes valuable and meaningful action. Learning 'what is real and what's not', Paul Kingsnorth finds, means to "[g]round yourself in things and places, learn or practice human-scale convivial skills" (Kingsnorth DM3, p. 25). As such, craft is also an ethic which values place-based and

autonomous forms of living (see e.g. Figure 6.7). This is reflected in the role of the vernacular, understood as 'forms of life rooted in the household and the commons' (Hine and Samuel DM3), in different circles of conversations within the Dark Mountain Project.

Figure 6.7: Making iron in a clay foundry at *The Telling* 2013. Own photo.

The vernacular is a term that was revived by Ivan Illich (1980) to denote 'the inverse of a commodity' or activities and relationships within the informal economy that have not been monetised. An astute observer of the rise of the development discourse from the 1960s onwards, Illich saw the increasing dependence on commodities as a form of 'modernised poverty' or 'disabling affluence' which undermined craft skills, traditional knowledges and autonomous living through a market ideology which "forcibly substituted standardized packages for almost everything people formerly did or made on their own" (1978, p. 24). Illich identified the emergence of specialised discourses as an obstacle to countering the 'modernisation of poverty' because jargon makes the social relations implied by commodification resistant to analysis – language itself becomes 'corrupted' (a similar conclusion to Abram's above). The notion of the vernacular is in this way an attempt to recuperate a language for ways of living which evade commodification. Dougald Hine sees the term as a way of talking about 'the reemergence of the things which made life liveable in the past', as it represents

> ... the mode of life (in all its plurality) which was overshadowed by the rise of industrialism, in which the dominant form of production was within the household or the local community, while commodities traded for money formed an exceptional class of

> goods. As industrial society destroys itself, the remnants of the vernacular emerge from the shadows, not as some prospect of a return to an earlier and simpler way of life, but as clues to how we may continue to make life work and make it worth living (Hine and Samuel DM3, p. 92).

In providing such clues, revaluing and rethinking the vernacular opens a possibility for decreasing dependence on the global market economy and building the craft skills and knowledges needed to sustain a good quality of life within the 'topography of collapse'.

A major barrier to this, as Illich pinpointed in his analysis of the corruption of language by jargon, is the way that the logic and presumptions of commodification have become embedded in the language and mindset of governance itself. Sajay Samuel observes about management approaches (such as risk thinking) that:

> The first thing to note about the systems administrator, he does not inhabit the space or the *place* that people inhabit. Forms of knowledge that grow out of practices that are embodied and in place are foreign to and antithetical to the ways and styles of thinking that managers and systems administrators presuppose (ibid., p. 99).

For vernacular and craft-based ways of living to flourish, Samual says, the disembodied way of seeing of management thinking has first to be questioned and delegitimised, which entails dismantling the 'hidden consensus' that frames the discussion about societal development (cf. section 5.5). This points to the basic, but far-reaching, challenge involved in reviving human-scale, post-industrial forms of life: it is tantamount to a 'Copernican revolution in our values', as Ivan Illich puts it, which involves a rethinking of the inclination of progress to see 'development', 'modernisation' and 'innovation' as novel improvements of a redundant past (see also section 6.5). From the perspective of the vernacular, that is perhaps – more than any lack of new technology, artefacts or ideas – the fundamental problematic that needs to be addressed to make sustainable forms of living possible on any larger scale.

And this is the 'hope beyond hope' faced with the 'topography of collapse': that such revaluing will generate new meanings and purpose within individual and collective lifeworlds which make less resource-intensive lifestyles desirable and worthwhile. As Ran Prieur imagines:

> Life will get more painful but also more meaningful, as billions of human hours shift from processing paperwork and watching TV to intensive learning of new skills to keep ourselves alive. These skills will run the whole range, from tracking deer to growing tomatoes to fixing bicycles to building solar-powered wi-fi networks – to new things we won't even imagine until we have our backs to the wall (Prieur DM1, pp. 134-5).

The resurgence of craft and DIY ethics (see e.g. Gauntlett, 2011), decentralised forms of production (see e.g. Carson, 2010) and community-based culture (see e.g. Britton, 2010) could indicate that vernacular forms a life are becoming increasingly possible. Warren Draper reflects on this vision:

> We are now, in other words, approaching a position where it may be possible to create once again an infrastructure built upon localised, craft-orientated, community-based, ecologically sensitive, production techniques [...] The artisan, it seems, is coming back from the brink of extinction – just as progressive civilisation itself begins to tip over the brink (Draper DM2, p. 148).

There is a wide range of examples of an ethics of craft and vernacular living within the Dark Mountain Project, some of which have appeared at the festivals while many are expressed in mountaineers personal lives, communities and projects. As such they have not grown out of Dark Mountain (although some have) as much as Dark Mountain has become a place to converge for this kind of thinking and living (as illustrated by Figure 6.8). And this is where Dark Mountain as an entity overlaps, branches out and intertwines with a wide range of other initiatives, ideas and practices.

Figure 6.8: Parachute stage at *Uncivilisation* 2013. Own photo.

6.5 Innovation at the level of the rules

GQ: How do new social institutions emerge from the mutual inquiries that take place within the Dark Mountain Project?

It now possible see how the cultural intervention of the Dark Mountain Project in the social imaginary is a reframing of the rules of environment-making which shifts the experiential and discursive field in which we think and talk about nature, social change

and responses to social-ecological crises. By building a language based on concepts, metaphors and ways of speaking which represent qualitatively different social relations to that of progress, it becomes possible to engage imaginatively with other ways of seeing. This opens up for a re-orientation of the attitude and values which guide individual action. Importantly, Dark Mountain provides a 'curated space' where the complex and perplexing process of unlearning certain habits and beginning to establish and manifest new personal practices can take place. The quality of this space is crucial for its transformative potential, it requires confidence and trust in the fellow inquirers and skill on behalf of those who hold the space of inquiry. Engaging in different circles of conversation, the individual 'narrator as poet' encounters new stories, plots and ways of speaking which she can weave into her own lived experience as she moves through the threshold or *liminal* space of re-narration. By creating an awareness about the co-constitutive nature of stories, the 'poet-narrator' can begin to discern the deeper significance of the meta-narrative in which she is immersed. As described in these chapters, this is a slow and gradual process which involves engaging with the deep assumptions which shape an individual worldview but it produces a qualitatively different experience of reality. As such, the individual and collective re-storying among mountaineers can be seen as a transformation in the onto-epistemological assumptions which guide environment-making and give meaning to the lifeworld (cf. Chapter 2). However, in this view, the rules of environment-making do not exist independently of the people and objects they affect, they are embodied in the lived stories and relationships they describe.

This transformation provides a radically different set of values, metaphors and narratives to those implied by the meta-narrative of progress. The ontology of enchantment, which invites wildness, myth and the sacred into the lifeworld, implies a way of being in which a user-resource relation with the natural world no longer makes sense because it reduces, or mutes altogether, the 'voices of place', or the language in which the non-human world speaks, by asserting that such communication is useless, irrelevant or impossible. The poetics of *inhumanism*, on the other hand, holds that the natural world is immersed in story and that those stories are deeply intertwined with the human world and hold important clues to the future. It is a way of seeing in which accounts of evolution and human progress on their own are insufficient to provide a coherent worldview. And where stories have their own life – they can be embodied but not controlled. The significance of this point became particularly evident in my interview-conversation with Andrew Taggart in which we inquired about the role of metaphors and language in building new social institutions. He contrasted the imagery associated with 'scarcity', in which humans are motivated by self preservation to compete over resources, with that of 'abundance' where there is just enough for everyone. These two sets of metaphors not only present contrasting views of the world, they represent radically different ways of being in the world when they become embodied in social relations. Taggart suggests that any account of social change or innovation first needs to ask about what kind of ontology – and therefore what kind of metaphors and stories – is apt for building healthy relationships and social institutions:

> ... we need to have some understanding of what first a human being is like, and second what a good human being is like. And if we can get some kind of understanding of those questions, then it should follow that we begin to see institutions being the very kinds of activities, kinds of structured activities that enhance the growth and development and flourishing-ness of human beings (AT P-I, 31.03.21).

Finding the metaphors and stories that can express the activities, practices and relationships that support a flourishing life, is also a way of finding effective and regenerative ways of responding to the 'topography of collapse'. It can be seen as a process of building a personal conceptual and ethical compass with which to navigate uncertainty.

Taggart speaks of this kind of inquiry and experimentation as a recursive process which provides a 'scaffolding' for thinking about social change through the gradual and emerging structure of a mutual language. This is not simply an intellectual process, it gives rise to new practices and social institutions as the activities that flow from this way of seeing manifests in the lifeworld. This is immediately visible in the way Taggart has established his practice as a philosophical counsellor on the principles of a gift economy[5]. The enabling of vernacular ways of life clearly also has a material aspect in the tools and modes of production that make such lifestyles possible. However, a focus on artefacts needs to avoid being reduced to a question of finding technological 'solutions' to decontextualised problems. Vinay Gupta, engineer and designer of the Hexayurt housing model[6], explains how he deliberately 'de-narrativised' the Hexayurt in order to be able to 'graft it as a prop into other people's stories' (VG P-I, 26.03.13). By taking the narrative out of the artefact, designing it so that it cannot be fundamentally abused and then letting people use it as a prop in their own story, it is possible to build tools that empower vernacular ways of life without simply becoming recipes which hold a promise to 'fix' a problem. Gupta reflects that:

> The props are the key. It's the relationship between the physical props and the story that is really the locus of action. So what I figured out was: you make new quasi-physical props, the stories change because now they have new props available they didn't have before. I don't need to control the story because there are only so many kinds of stories you can tell with this prop. It guides a particular kind of narrative (ibid.).

In this way, 'props' can resist being enrolled in solutions-focussed narratives of progress. The purpose of technologies as 'props' in vernacular life becomes the fulfilment of immediate needs rather than wealth accumulation (see Rao DM2). As an exponent of the open source movement, Gupta sees 'prop' engineering as a way of enabling the gradual

[5] In this process, Andrew Taggart has developed his own philosophy and model of practicing counselling based on the gift economy, see e.g.: http://andrewjamestaggart.com/how-we-work-together/ or http://andrewjtaggart.com/2012/02/28/gift-economy-explained-justified-and-defended/.

[6] The Hexayurt is a low cost, modular yurt made out of standard industrial materials, see http://hexayurt.com/.

transformation of the lifeworld around a radically different story and compass of values and concepts (see Figure 6.9).

Figure 6.9: Putting up a hexayurt at *Uncivilisation* 2011. Photo by London Permaculture Flickr.

As suggested throughout this chapter, the transformative potential of the mutual inquiries within the Dark Mountain Project pertains not so much to individuals or artefacts seen independently of their contexts but rather concerns the dynamic perceptual, linguistic, and imaginative attributes which establish the relations of people and objects – as expressed and developed in stories. This re-narration is a transformation of the way subjectivity, relationality and the lifeworld more generally are perceived and given meaning. It is critical that this is an emergent and gradual process which occurs through individual sense-making and the development of a personal vocabulary rather than simply being a reproduction of terms and concepts. The openness of the language of *Uncivilisation* has been important in allowing mountaineers to co-create their own understanding and use of this imagery. In the process of inquiry new practices and ways of doing can then be established within each lifeworld. Viewed as a type of innovation, the re-narration that takes place within Dark Mountain occurs at the conceptual plane of the imaginary and yet emerges from, and is responsive to, the lived experience it reconstructs. Looking across the different manifestations of Dark Mountain it is possible to observe four recurring elements of this process:

- a delegitimisation of the perspective and language of the 'systems administrator' or approaches which begin from highly abstract assumptions and aim to eliminate uncertainty. Conversely, this is an encouragement of embodied, creative and intuitive forms of knowledge;

- the creation of 'safe spaces' in which spontaneous and authentic forms of expression and interaction are possible. This also involves strengthening an attitude which move beyond conventional forms of argumentation towards one which does not strive for definite answers;
- experimentation with concepts, practices and ways of doing and speaking which explore a different mindset to that of progress. While some of these activities are planned they are uncontrollable and, by learning to become responsive to the emergent nature of such mutual experimentation, personal abilities to respond to conditions of uncertainty grow; and,
- sharing the learning, inquiries and stories which arise in the process. This occurs both in written form in the journals and on the Dark Mountain blog as well as in live gatherings and meetings.

These conditions aid the process of destabilising and re-narrating the assumptions and outlook of the meta-narrative of progress. This process requires first of all that habitual reactions and preconceptions are engaged creatively. To be creative means first to be original and creative about the *reactions* that lead to the reliance on the 'recipes' of technique (cf. section 6.3). Because new ways of doing within Dark Mountain grow not from acquiring a pre-existing answer to a particular question, but from *learning to inquire* into a set of questions without imposing one's preconceptions, the need for recipes and set answers recedes as the ability to respond creatively grows.

By reworking the framing of particular questions they can in this way be oriented around a different attitude and set of values. For example, reframing the sustainability challenge within the narrative of a 'topography of collapse' presents a radically different set of questions than the perspective provided by the meta-narrative of progress. But the crucial aspect to grasp is that it cannot be put into the service of providing 'solutions' – that would be another instance of attempting to close down uncertainty. The important outcome of the process is that, from the perspective of the lifeworld, a qualitatively different experience of reality is brought forth (and the experiential value of the questions and problematics change accordingly). I will discuss the theoretical implications of this view of innovation and social change further in the next chapter, for now it suffices to say that the process of re-narrating the lifeworld opens the possibility for establishing qualitatively different relations within the lifeworld through building new conceptual and perceptual skills. These abilities provide the 'narrator as poet' both with a creative attitude and an extended vocabulary with which to navigate uncertainty. From this position, the creation of new social institutions emerge from the condition of reciprocity rather than by preconceived design. This is visible in many of the projects and practices that mountaineers undertake – such as those described in this section – as well as in the evolution of the Dark Mountain Project itself.

6.6 Down the dark mountain

GQ: How is the underlying vision and narrative of the Dark Mountain Project expressed in its organisation and development?

The emergence of the Dark Mountain Project as a serious voice in the debate about social-ecological crises should be seen both in terms of the vision and capacities of its founders and key organisers, and in the various perspectives, skills and networks that participants have brought to the wider conversations sparked by *Uncivilisation*. The response to the manifesto and the people who stepped into the conversations that followed have shaped the project as much as the initial idea, and in this way Dark Mountain gradually became a much broader cultural project as people with different skill sets and ideas were attracted to it. The development of Dark Mountain as a community of inquiry can in many ways be seen as an expression of the mode of organisation implied by improvisation: it is evident both in the evolution of the Dark Mountain Project from a manifesto to a wider network of participants and in the way it functions as an organisation. Improvisation has worked as an organisational principle foremost through trust, working with the resources available, openness to the unexpected, avoiding to 'plan too far ahead' and sharing responsibility based on alignment with the core vision and principles of *Uncivilisation*. This is visible in the creation of spaces where people with the right skills and ideas could step in and take the spaces forward and in the openness towards letting Dark Mountain take forms that were not initially expected. Thus, from an idea for a journal, it went beyond a literary project when the offer of a venue for a festival came up and the festival itself developed from something which was set up in the style of a conference to become a gathering which relied on, and was shaped by, various people curating stages and self-organising spaces and events.

Many aspects of setting up and running the Dark Mountain Project have been similar to those of other grassroots organisations with minimal resources. The initial reliance on a few key people without any stable sources of income meant that the burden of work at times threatened the organisers with burn out. Broadening the conversation relied on personal networks and online platforms, and the manifesto and first issues of the journal were realised through crowdfunding campaigns. At times, the position of the project had to be defended against accusations and misinterpretations, and the role of leadership was developed in a process of contestation. Initial conversations revolved around what Dark Mountain *should* be and sometimes reproduced the modes of interaction it had reacted against. These circumstances and events were in themselves processes of learning, improvisation and confrontation with habits. With time, the project attracted enough interest to secure sufficient funding to not rely exclusively on volunteers and a broader team and a steering committee were established. The support received in the initial years meant that the book publications could move to a subscription-based model and there was enough submissions to begin publishing twice a year. And as the project gradually established

itself as a (bi-)annual publication and a festival, the language and rhetoric of *Uncivilisation* began to develop into the ideas and ethos described in these chapters within different circles of conversation.

While the Dark Mountain Project could certainly not have come into existence and proliferated without the dedicated and ongoing work Kingsnorth, Hine and a broadening team of organisers put into building and maintaining an online presence, editing and publishing the journals, arranging festivals and events (see e.g. Figure 6.10) as well as managing the 'brand' of Dark Mountain, the role of the poetic vision behind the manifesto in attracting participants can hardly be understated. As described in Chapter 4, *Uncivilisation* opened up a discursive space where many of the unspoken questions about deepening social-ecological crises within mainstream narratives about climate change could be discussed. What is more, the framing of this conversation as a journey set within the open-ended imagery of 'uncivilising', provides an entry point which allows participants to engage imaginatively with the particular questions they bring with them. Journeying as a metaphor creates both a sense of exploration and of fellowship. The question *what do you do, after you stop pretending?* encourages participants to let go of a defensive mindset which clings to answers and admit to themselves what is and is not possible. The 'dark' vision of 'the end of the world as we know it' where we collectively find ourselves 'poised trembling on the edge' of a change that will affect everything we know about the future, motivates questions about what is valued in the present and which things can or will be lost. In this sense, the vision of the Dark Mountain Project is not only sombre but also invites mountaineers to consider what constitutes a good life, congruous social relations and, more broadly, a healthy community and society. And as a sustainability narrative, *Uncivilisation* is a challenge to the fundamental user-resource relationship inherent to the mainstream sustainability discourse.

The shifts in onto-epistemological beliefs which characterise the move away from relating to 'nature' as *resource* or *other*, towards a relationship where human agency is recognised to be constituted by, and inextricably entangled with, the more-than-human world, is a complex and personal process which is unique to each individual lifeworld. As these chapters have shown, within the Dark Mountain Project this is actively engaged as a creative process of challenging the meta-narrative of progress, re-imagining the lifeworld and beginning to embody a different kind of life narrative. In doing so, the 'narrator as poet' simultaneously abandons a set of habits, attitudes and narrative framings, which cast the lifeworld as fundamentally separate from its wider environment, and acquires a new set of narrative skills, modes of inquiring and personal practices. This can be seen as a transformation of the beliefs, values, metaphors and stories that guide the individual lifeworld through creating a different conceptual and ethical compass with which to navigate the lifeworld. By embracing the radical uncertainty of the 'topography of collapse' the 'poet-narrator' gives up hope that the future can continue to provide for present resource-intensive lifestyles. But the loss of hope – and the grief that follows – does not mean the end of hope *per se* as new meanings emerge in the process of inquiring into what the future without progress might imply.

As a cultural movement, the Dark Mountain Project curates spaces, conversations, art and writing in which this form of inquiry can take place, individually and collectively. But the inquiry itself is a personal undertaking that does not 'take place' within a limited space: it is an ongoing process which includes the whole lifeworld. In this way, Dark Mountain inspires, encourages and supports the inquiry while this is not an activity that requires membership or agreement with a consensus view. Kingsnorth and Hine explicitly state the main purpose and aim of Dark Mountain to be creating spaces where a different kind of conversation and experience is possible, building on the 'uncivilised' body of literature and art, and giving voice and form to the poetics of *inhumanism* – not to gather members or followers. Kingsnorth holds that the Dark Mountain Project will exist only as long as it is fulfilling a need and will be wound up when people stop interacting with it, and he sees the organisational challenge of this approach as reaching out to people who are ready to engage with this kind of inquiry and broadening the conversation without being evangelist or becoming 'mainstream' (PK I-C, 28.01.13). Arriving at this attitude has also been a personal challenge, he recalls the first 'chaotic' years that followed the publication of *Uncivilisation* as a process of learning how to describe and speak about the Dark Mountain Project as well as finding a minimal model for keeping the project afloat organisationally.

Figure 6.10: Closing of the fourth and, so far, final *Uncivilisation* festival in 2013. Photo by Bridget McKenzie.

The movement from 'raising the flag' of the manifesto towards a loose community of people who are doing their own events and creative projects has shown Kingsnorth how a network can 'coalesce' around a vision rather than being actively 'built'. This also means that he sees the future development of Dark Mountain as depending on where participants

take it. Dougald Hine observes that the tension created by the 'megaphone language' of the manifesto has gradually decreased as the concepts and attitude of *Uncivilisation* have been clarified, contested and expressed in different circles of conversation (DH I-C, 24.01.13). He reflects that the willingness and ability to "sit with incompleteness and puzzlement and brokenness, and not impose anything on it" (DH P-I, 18.11.11) is an experience which cannot be encountered in many places within mainstream culture and that a key challenge for the future of Dark Mountain is to 'localise' and find ways that mountaineers can take their experiences back to their respective communities. Hine describes Dark Mountain as a safe space for transformative conversations where there is no emotional pressure but also as a space for a particular kind of conversation which cannot be extended to the whole of life:

> Dark Mountain was not the space in which you lived your whole life. It was a space that you came to for certain things. Within that space certain things were possible that weren't possible within the space that we spend our everyday lives but, equally, many of the things that we have to do in our everyday lives can't be done from the space that Dark Mountain operates in (DH I-C, 24.01.13).

He speaks of the Dark Mountain Project as a 'changing room between stories' where different aspects of one's personal identity can be challenged and changed. Both Kingsnorth and Hine suggest that Dark Mountain is part of a wider, but more diffuse, movement which is questioning progress.

The question of the Dark Mountain Project being part of a movement – and in itself being a movement – has been a recurring point of conversation. Mountaineers view and position Dark Mountain differently in relation to other movements and projects they are part of, see e.g. Figure 6.11. Dougald Hine uses the image of concentric circles to describe the 'distributed community' of Dark Mountain where "[p]eople move in and out of these circles over time, as their relationship to the organisation changes" (Hine 20.03.13, na.). The notion of viewing the Dark Mountain Project as a movement has also been resisted by various participants. Tony Dias sees a danger in thinking of mountaineering as being part of a movement insofar as this turns into another instance of 'negotiation' which leads to "perpetuating shared illusions instead of helping us engage with reality. Everyone's focus devolves into defending preconceived notions" (TD P-I, 25.10.12). He suggests that mountaineering is instead a form of 're-integration' within the larger movement of life (TD P-I, 11.12.12). As a reaction to the now global "tendency of the contemporary world to fragment communities" it has been argued that a 'movement without a name' is emerging which "derive from a common set of (albeit often inchoate) desires: for knowledge, for connection, for empowerment, for stimulation – and from a common sense of possibility" (Kahn-Harris, 2011, na.)[7]. Kahn-Harris, a sociologist and collaborator of Dougald Hine, suggests that this nameless movement is like "a source of energy that can be traced

[7] See also Aaron Bastani's (2011) reply to Kahn-Harris' article, and Paul Mason's (2012) *Guardian* article.

through a large number of spaces and projects" and which grows without any central direction (ibid.). Insofar as the paradox of a 'movement without a name' is viable – and it is possible to avoid reducing or simplifying such an idea of a movement to an abstract concept which then becomes the object of yet further argumentation and fragmentation – it will be characterised by diversity and dissensus (cf. section 4.6), comprising irreducible differences and disagreement about core ideas (Greer, 2008a). No matter whether the Dark Mountain Project is constructed as a cultural movement or a distributed community of inquiry, it is clear that its first five years has shown the possibility of a different kind of thinking and interaction which does not depend on a shared ideology or a programme of action. And yet without consensus and an ambition to change the world, Dark Mountain continues to attract people who are challenging the conventions and ideas of progress (it will be interesting to see how the project develops after the discontinuation of the centrally organised festival).

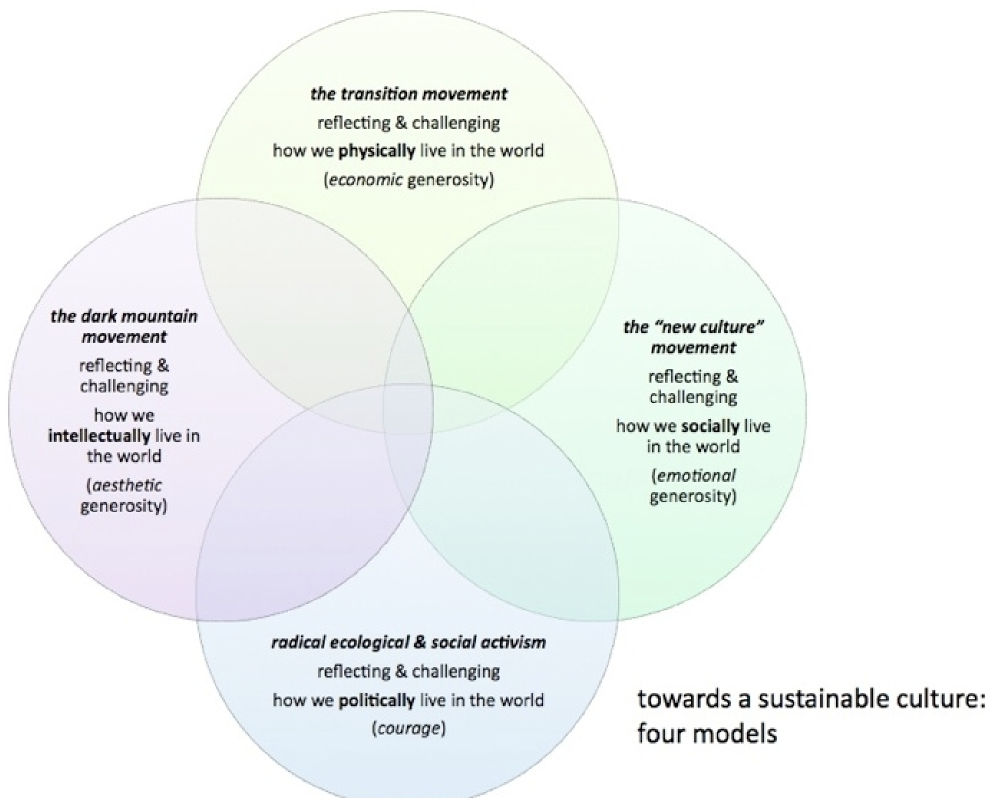

Figure 6.11: 'Towards a sustainable culture'. Source: Pollard 06.09.10.

This raises the question: what led to the diffusion of Dark Mountain as a grassroots project which aims to 'shift worldviews' rather than promote particular goals or innovations? Specifically, how did the onto-epistemological assumptions which characterise the Dark Mountain Project spread? These questions open up for a whole subset of further lines of inquiry which will be discussed in the next chapter. A preliminary answer, indicated by the present inquiry, suggests that by (de)legitimising particular ways of speaking, providing an open-ended alternative imaginary and supporting a re-storying of the wider

narrative of the lifeworld, the Dark Mountain Project has both given voice to a previously unarticulated narrative and made a story available which resonates with other collectives and projects who are facing similar quandaries. This goes deeper than creating a new 'meme', disseminating 'facts' or developing an alternative 'rule-set', it changes the narrative environment in which individual ideas, behaviours or rules circulate. From the point of view that stories have their own life (cf. sections 4.7 and 5.4), this is a process of inhabiting a story which in many ways exists independently of the individual but which becomes a deepening reality as it is embodied within the lifeworld. As a re-imagining of narratives of progress and an embodiment of the ontology of enchantment, this re-storying opens a door to see our individual lives and communities as being part of a whole, a wider community. It is a story of how we can co-inhabit the world and find a place in history which does not reproduce social atomisation, unrestrained competition, oppositional thinking and commodification. An intergenerational story of a time and place in which the beliefs and ethics of a reality where we see ourselves as fundamentally interconnected with the fate of all the other beings we co-inhabit the planet with – whether humans, animals, mountains, ecosystems, weather systems, glaciers or plankton – begin to guide our lives. A recognition that our thinking needs to reflect that reality and listen to the wisdom inherent to the voices of older cultures, the places we live and the wider natural world.

This story, while incomplete and nameless, holds a conceptual and ethical compass with which to orientate the deep uncertainties that characterise the 'topography of collapse'. But the point is not so much to theorise the story itself as to embody it, nourish it by living as if it was a reality and align with it so that it becomes as natural a part of the story of our lives as all the other 'facts' of our personal identities. Then it can be recognised in the communities and struggles of others who are moving in the same direction – not towards a time in the future but as a way of being which no longer sees humanity and nature as separate. As David Abram (1997) suggests:

> "Ecologically considered, it is not primarily our verbal statements that are "true" or "false," but rather the kind of relations that we sustain with the rest of nature. A human community that lives in a mutually beneficial relation with the surrounding earth is a community, we might say, that lives in truth" (p. 264).

Thus, the story lives where people are 'faithful to the sensuous world itself' and continue to develop ways of seeing and speaking which do not conform with a limited story or narrative framing which separates societies from their environments and the knower from the known.

Chapter summary: This chapter has explored the ways in which the approach to re-narrating the lifeworld examined in the previous chapters affect the deeper notions of space and time, and how mountaineers approach the ontological uncertainties implied by the 'topography of collapse'. This inquiry described how the re-narration of the lifeworld around *place* and embodied temporalities can be seen as a form of *re-enchantment* in

which the notion of the sacred is invited into the lifeworld as a communion with nature and which opens up for altering the experience of nature as other. By shifting attention away from projected expectations of the future towards the present, a radically different way of being is encountered: the ontology of enchantment presents an approach to the future which embraces uncertainty, otherness and wildness. This investigation has also shown how developing the faculty of attention and the practical skills of improvisation opens up for creative responses to conditions of uncertainty. When this is practiced with others, improvisation provides a principle which enables emergent outcomes and organisational flexibility. The ethical and political dimensions of this approach imply a revaluing of the 'vernacular' as a mode of life which is less resource-intensive, craft-based and autonomous. The creation of safe spaces in which to experiment with alternative ways of expression and interaction has been key in enabling such re-narration of personal identities within the Dark Mountain Project. This underlines the importance of attending to the framing of mutual inquiries: the values implied by the metaphors, concepts and ideas which structure an interaction affect outcomes in profound (and unexpected) ways. A key finding is that encouraging the experimentation with, and flourishing of, personal terms and concepts – as well as avoiding to close down meanings prematurely – is vital for this re-narration of the individual lifeworld.

This chapter also suggests that the wider narrative of the Dark Mountain Project has affected its organisation and diffusion in substantial ways. First off, the identification of the Dark Mountain Project with the concepts and imagery it has established means that the organisation and the narrative are in many ways inseparable for participants. The inherent ambiguity of the narrative of 'uncivilising' and the refusal to provide answers mean that participants have to find their own meanings within the wider narrative. This makes interactions within the Dark Mountain Project personal and unique: participants gradually find their own ways of making sense of the 'topography of collapse'. In this way, participants are encouraged to see Dark Mountain as a space to come to for certain kinds of inquiries and conversations. Second, the emphasis on improvisation and vernacular forms of life is directly reflected in the evolution of the Dark Mountain Project as an organisation. This can be seen both in the development of a broader team of organisers and in the spaces that Dark Mountain curates. With the broadening interest in the project it was possible to move from individual crowdfunding campaigns for the journal towards subscription-based publishing, and organisational roles developed in line with the organisational tasks and requirements insofar as resources and interests allowed. The festivals also evolved from being set up as a conference towards a gathering which relied on various people who self-organised stages and events. Third, a decisive factor in the wider diffusion of the Dark Mountain Project was its articulation of a narrative that was previously unavailable to participants and which connected with a wider story of change. The next chapter goes on to discuss this in more detail and conclude on the inquiry presented in these chapters.

Chapter 7

Conclusions: transforming sustainabilities

I suggested at the beginning of this thesis that the nature and scale of the sustainability challenge calls not only for a transformation in systems of production and consumption but in the way that humans *understand* and *relate* to more-than-human nature as a resource. This frames sustainability research as a matter of understanding how human societies and cultures are entangled with nature and the more-than-human world. Building a theoretical understanding of how changes in worldviews can be studied by inquiring about the onto-epistemological assumptions that support particular forms of environment-making, Chapter 2 suggested a framework which examines the social rules and cultural visions that guide environment-making within situated narrating practices in interpretive communities. Chapter 3 set out a methodological framework for researching onto-epistemological transformation through an approach of 'following the narrative', and developed an emergent and transparent approach for handling the *elusive* nature of the social forces which produce particular realities (cf. Law, 2004). Foregrounding the multiplicity of lived reality as well as my own role as mediator of these realities (cf. Mol, 2002), the aim has been to balance the search for generalities with honouring the uniqueness of the experiences I investigate. This meant that the empirical research with participants in the Dark Mountain Project in chapters 4-6 were framed as a 'virtual reality' (cf. Flyvbjerg, 2006) to allow room for the narrative of this thesis to be 'completed in the reader' (cf. Squire, 2008). The study found that sustainability narratives affect individual and collective lifeworlds in significant ways by positioning narrators within particular realities characterised by distinct agencies, knowledges and modes of participation. This chapter now proceeds to discuss the significance of this research for understanding the role of worldviews and sustainability narratives in transitions, reflect on the research process itself and provide some personal conclusions to the questions that have defined this project.

7.1 Answering the research questions

This thesis has addressed the need in the literature on grassroots innovations for understanding whether and how the grassroots – viewed as sites where 'the rules are different' (Seyfang and Smith, 2007) – motivates innovation, inspires sustainability visions, and supports alternative knowledges, practices and learning processes. Taking sustainability narratives – including the concepts, ideas, and storylines they express – as the starting point for understanding how human-nature relations are envisioned, enacted and transformed in grassroots innovations, the thesis has asked the question: *how do sustainability narratives affect lifeworlds within grassroots innovations?* During the study four further aspects of this overarching question were identified and elaborated through the development of a theoretical understanding of onto-epistemological transformation (cf. section 2.4). To answer these research questions a methodology was created based on ethnographic, narrative and participatory theories, taking a view of ontology as performative (cf. Gibson-Graham, 2008) and of social phenomena as situated within the same ontological plane (cf. Ingold, 2000). The empirical research has examined these questions in the context of the transformation of subjectivities around the narrative of *Uncivilisation* within the Dark Mountain Project. As will have become apparent throughout the previous chapters, onto-epistemological transformation is a complex process and a singular experience: it is different for everyone. However, certain commonalities have also been found in relation to the research questions:

How do sustainability narratives inform what kinds of knowledge and action participants engage with in grassroots innovations? The sustainability narrative of the Dark Mountain Project asks not whether it is possible to make current systems of production and consumption more ecologically friendly but what it is possible to keep in the course of those systems disintegrating. This premise delegitimates knowledges and action which take sustaining high consumption lifestyles as their starting point. More generally, sustainability narratives affect what is considered valid knowledge and appropriate action by framing how people understand 'nature' (including their sense of self and relationship with place) and perceive the future (what ontological entities remain stable in the long run). Representing a qualitative change in the perception of identities and relationships within the personal lifeworld, a transformation in sustainability narratives thus has the potential to open up or close down certain knowledges and modes of action. If a particular sustainability vision conflicts with received ways of seeing the world, it can also be disruptive of personal identities with palpable emotional and intellectual implications. As explained in section 5.4, this is a process which involves deep contradictions, uncertainty and disintegration of received modes of sense-making. This is akin to a threshold or *liminal* state where established structures and social positions are thrown into disarray. If a new narrative framing is reached (cf. section 5.5), it becomes possible to embody a qualitatively different way of seeing the sustainability challenge (cf. sections 5.6 and 5.7). Drawing on the insight that one's mode of participation in the lifeworld directly

affects what kind of reality is experienced and 'brought forth' (cf. section 2.3), it is possible to say that – through the creation of new patterns of meaning – a qualitative change in sustainability narratives makes alternate modes of knowing and acting available. This suggests that the nature of a particular sustainability narrative, and the degree to which it is embraced, is crucial in establishing new knowledges and action.

How are transformations in individual and collective cultural narratives expressed in participants' worldviews and actions? This research suggests that it is unhelpful to think of a transformation in cultural narratives as separate from changes in worldviews and modes of action. As I describe in section 2.2, narrative framings of the lifeworld, worldviews and agency are better understood as interdependent and inseparable. Viewing changes in worldviews and action instead as an experimental process of exploring a different kind of consciousness in the imagination and finding ways to embody this way of relating to the world, new ways of seeing can arise in creative practices and a gradual re-narration of the lifeworld (cf. chapter 5). While this is an uncontrollable and personal process – with different manifestations depending on individual circumstances, interests and capacities – effective approaches discerned in the empirical study include adopting an attitude which embraces uncertainty, evading habits and strengthening improvisational skills, developing attention and fostering an ethics of craft (cf. sections 6.3 and 6.4). By encouraging such approaches, cultural narratives can empower experimentation with new ways of seeing and being but this also requires a supportive environment, a shared community of inquiry and a complete sense of trust. In such conditions, a transformation in cultural narratives can be expressed in qualitatively different ways of doing things but, importantly, these arise out of experimentation, learning and practice – not from preconceived ideas or blueprints.

How do sustainability narratives affect the organisation and diffusion of grassroots innovations? As an initiative which explicitly engages with deep cultural narratives and attempts to disrupt the meta-narrative of progress, the sustainability narrative presented by the Dark Mountain Project has been pivotal in attracting participants and promoting its writing, festivals and events. Viewed as a novel narrative about deepening social-ecological crises, *Uncivilisation* opened up a discursive space which was previously unavailable to many participants and the attending imagery allows mountaineers to engage with its narrative imaginatively (cf. section 4.2). Because Dark Mountain is also a metaphor for the inquiries which the project organises and supports, the narrative of *Uncivilisation* is inseparable from the Dark Mountain Project as an organisation. This can be seen in the way that disparate people and groups initially responded to the manifesto's invitation and gradually coalesced into a loose community taking the idea of 'uncivilising' as a starting point for further inquiry and re-narration. The ethos and ideas of the uncivilisation narrative also permeate the later evolution and objectives as is visible in the emergence of improvisation as an organisational principle (cf. section 6.3) and the way the refusal to provide answers or solutions has led to a focus on curating spaces where a

different kind of conversation about social-ecological collapse can take place (cf. section 6.6). In this way, the diffusion of Dark Mountain is in many ways inseparable from the circulation of the Dark Mountain narrative: the development of the 'uncivilisation' narrative is directly related to the growth of the Dark Mountain Project as an organisation. This also means that narrative delimits the diffusion of the Dark Mountain Project insofar as people define themselves against the idea of uncivilising.

What is the role of stories in enabling emerging practices and tools for social change? The role of stories in social change processes is manifold – in a sense, the story is the change: by *being the story* new ways of living become possible (cf. section 5.4). However, there are different kinds of stories and there are different ways of approaching stories. As described in section 4.7, engaging with stories and storytelling as a form of personal and social transformative practice calls for an understanding of the mythopoetic nature of stories (cf. section 2.3.3) and a degree of discernment. This research has described how becoming comfortable with ontological uncertainty and practicing narrative skills can enable the 'narrator as poet' to actively find new meanings without imposing a preconceived narrative onto the lifeworld (cf. section 5.7). Becoming an active narrator of the lifeworld entails attention to the function of 'naturalised' language and metaphors, and experimentation with new roles, concepts and plots with which to describe lived experience. Such practice can produce a qualitatively different ethical and conceptual compass that guides both life decisions and outlook (cf. section 6.5). This is a process of becoming aware of the deeper narratives that shape social life as well as the role they play in structuring the lifeworld. By learning to inquire into this process and gradually re-storying the lifeworld new kinds of relationship become possible.

Thus, by connecting narrators with wider stories about social-ecological change, positioning subjectivities, and delineating agencies and knowledges, sustainability narratives can affect individual and collective lifeworlds in decisive ways. However, this research has also found that narratives themselves are only half the story because sense-making is not so much a matter of adopting a set narrative as it is an activity which gives meaning to the attending stories, imageries and concepts within distinctive personal circumstances. And learning to alter one's personal perspective and experience of the world depends on the development of narrative and perceptual skills. So *how* narrators engage in re-narration practices is important for what kind of sustainabilities emerge: the quality of the space of inquiry and the ability to co-narrate stories within the community of inquiry are key to the transformative potential of sustainability narratives.

This finding also points to the limitations of this study. Insofar as the focus for this research has been investigating and creating possibilities for change in the deeper assumptions that structure individual worldviews, the answers I have found bespeak potential rather than predetermined outcomes. In seeking to generate an authoritative narrative

account with my research participants, the methods I developed for this study have positioned me as researcher-participant within the community of respondents. As participant my main role has been to co-create spaces and possibilities for onto-epistemological transformation, not to judge the nature or value of the processes I have researched (cf. section 3.3.5), and my findings are therefore particular to the experiences of the community of participants I got to know. I have continued along trails that others chose not to go down and my experience of engaging with Dark Mountain has therefore also been unique. This study does not aim to demonstrate whether or not the Dark Mountain Project has 'changed' anyone's worldview (except perhaps my own). What I have found here pertains to aspects of the processes that people go through in their interactions within the spaces that Dark Mountain has curated – this has been my persisting focus. But while I do not claim that these findings can be 'universalised' I have approached this research from a perspective which sees the phenomena I have studied to be connected to spaces outside of Dark Mountain. The next sections explicate the connections found in this study between onto-epistemological transformation within the Dark Mountain project and understanding wider changes in the rules of environment-making in grassroots innovations and sustainability transitions.

7.2 Re-narrating sustainabilities

If, as I proposed in Chapter 2, the sustainability challenge involves a change in view of the natural world from environment-as-object to a relational understanding of 'humanity-in-nature' (cf. Moore, 2013), this entails a transformation in the rule structures (cf. Geels, 2011) – seen as shared ideas, visions, values, concepts, practices and stories – that guide the user-resource perspective on the lifeworld. Section 2.3 set out a theoretical ground for examining the rules and visions that guide environment-making, as an ongoing activity of individuals, groups and societies, through narrative inquiry. Contrasting the user-resource relationship implied by the dominant discourse on sustainability with alternative ways of conceiving and embodying sustainable living in grassroots sites, I suggested that situated narration and storytelling practices hold the potential to reposition the narrator in relation to the rules and visions of the dominant meta-narrative (cf. sections 2.3.5 and 2.3.6). Considering narratives as landscapes in which the 'perception of different possibilities' becomes possible through re-narrating the lifeworld (cf. Bamberg, 2004), the sustainability visions that inform this repositioning become key to understanding the relations – or mode of environment-making – that are brought forth in the process.

In the vocabulary developed by this study, the cultural intervention of the Dark Mountain Project can be seen as taking place on the *set* of participants' individual lives and within the *setting* of a 'split narrative' about life in an age of social-ecological crises. Against the background of a *global setting* characterised by the profound ontological uncertainties of 'collapse', participants in the Dark Mountain Project steer by the vision of 'uncivilisation' and the possibility of creating ways of living beyond the meta-narrative of progress. Venturing to the poets dark mountain is a journey 'between stories' where

mountaineers both question civilisation and inquire about how to proceed without the certainties of its foundational assumptions about the world. This plot provides the basis for the creation of new roles, concepts and props which enable vernacular ways of living – no longer as 'cogs in a machine' but in communion with more-than-human nature. This inquiry engages with the mythopoetic nature of the lifeworld and seeks to avoid projecting future expectations onto the present. The point is not so much that participants reproduce this imagery and narrative in their lifeworlds but that it creates a qualitatively different frame of reference from the meta-narrative of progress in which participants can experiment with creating their own vocabularies. The narrative of *Uncivilisation* both draws the power structures of civilisation into question and aids constellating an alternate reality by positioning the narrator-as-poet creatively among the forces which spell 'the end of the world as we know it'.

My research with the Dark Mountain Project thus confirms the vital role of a clear, inspiring and well articulated sustainability vision in the transformation of worldviews. The poetic quality and intuitive imagery of *Uncivilisation* are undoubtedly critical factors contributing to its wide circulation. However, the inherent ambiguity of the narrative of 'uncivilising' suggests that it is equally important that a vision does not close down notions of sustainability, the good life, or the future: for participants to be able to develop the imagery in ways that accommodate their personal lifeworlds, it needs a degree of open-endedness, flexibility and variation. And this points to three further aspects that have supported the circulation of the Dark Mountain narrative:

- Coherence. While the notion of 'uncivilising' is described as a journey into the unknown, the wider narrative of *Uncivilisation* provides a cogent critique of the meta-narrative of progress as well as a coherent set of concepts, imageries and sentiments which point to a radically different way of approaching the sustainability challenge. This makes the *Uncivilisation* narrative assertive, able to respond creatively to criticism and extendable without undermining the underpinning vision.

- Contestation. Following the publication of the manifesto, the concepts and ethics of uncivilising were developed within a widening community of inquiry which gave substance to its ideas and challenged its contradictions. This meant that the notion of uncivilising could evolve in line with the particular issues and interests of participants without simply becoming an idea to defend.

- Co-ownership. Where the mutual development of the Dark Mountain narrative has worked it has been because co-ownership over the narrative of *Uncivilisation* has been established so that participants have been free to take the inquiry wherever they wished. On the other hand, where the invitation to a dialogue about 'uncivilising' has been framed as an argument about the validity of its ideas or approach – whether by critics or mountaineers – mutual inquiry has been impossible. This balance has not been straightforward and both Kingsnorth and Hine have spoken of *Uncivilisation* needing to be defended against a certain attitude which disrupts the quality of the space of inquiry.

What distinguishes the Dark Mountain Project as a site for alternative sustainability narratives is the focus on building narrative skills which can express this story. The point has been not so much to disseminate the story as experimenting with *being the story*. In this way, the vision of 'uncivilising' is embodied through experimentation with ways of seeing and being in creative practices (cf. section 5.6). This becomes the ground for imagining what 'uncivilising' might mean within the everyday and beyond the curated spaces of the Dark Mountain Project.

This points to a deeper implication of onto-epistemological transformation: insofar as a qualitatively different kind of story is embodied in the process of re-narrating the lifeworld it represents a complete change in the 'narrative landscape' of the lifeworld. For example, the dominant narrative of social life as progress (i.e. developing in parallel with the expansion of knowledge) generates a certain set of meanings which no longer hold within the narrative landscape of the 'topography of collapse'. The meaning of a key idea or discourse like 'development' thus changes (cf. section 5.3). Likewise with sustainability. This suggests that changes in worldviews do not occur simply through the spreading of visions, stories or narratives in the form of 'memes' or 'meme-complexes' (Dawkins, 2006) perceived as cultural 'self-replicators' (e.g. information or behaviours) copied in a process of selection and variation. Rather, onto-epistemological transformation implies a change in the whole 'ecology' of the meanings, concepts, metaphors, stories and practices that make up the narrative landscape. And a transformation of the narrative landscape involves more than just a new story: it requires that narrators have both the creative skills and a space for experimenting with the lived implications of this change. This practical finding supports the critique of viewing a wider transition in onto-epistemology as a form of cultural evolution (cf. section 2.2.2): variation-selection-retention mechanisms seem inadequate for conceptualising changes in worldviews. The sentiment expressed within the Dark Mountain Project that stories have their own life points instead to an alternative view of working with the visions and narratives of sustainability transitions: instead of approaching stories by asking how their transformative potential can be effectively used to create social change, the question becomes how these stories in themselves develop and manifest in alternate ways of being and seeing.

The wider narrative of the failure of industrial civilisation to deliver its promises of progress (and the complementary story of its unsustainable culture, ideology and way of living), has developed within the Dark Mountain Project through the creation of spaces in which participants can experiment with alternative ways of seeing and being – whether conceptually by supporting the creation of 'uncivilised' art and writing or practically by holding festivals, events and local gatherings. What makes these 'safe spaces' work (or not) is a shared attitude to the particular form of inquiry that takes place: being comfortable with not having answers, nurturing reciprocity and embracing uncertainty (cf. section 6.3). This ethos supports the development of a practical and conceptual skill set which enables the 'narrator as poet' to engage creatively with giving meaning to the *Uncivilisation* narrative within the particular circumstances that characterise the individual lifeworld (cf. section 5.6). The importance of mutuality and generosity can hardly be overstated:

habits of argumentation and the impulse to have the right opinion are major obstacles to beginning to inhabit a different mindset. To this end, the notion of dissensus is helpful insofar as it takes the focus away from attempting to arrive at universal agreement and encourages divergent viewpoints and approaches (cf. sections 4.6 and 6.6). From such inquiry and experimentation new ways of seeing can emerge which both move beyond received ways of seeing and speaking (cf. sections 4.7 and 5.5) and enable a different mode of life to industrial civilisation (cf. section 6.4). These personal experiments can be seen as a microcosm of the wider narrative they embody. While it would be premature to draw conclusions about the significance of these stories, it is by looking across all these smaller stories that the meaning of the wider narrative can be discerned.

This poses the question of how specific stories 'align' with a wider narrative or 'story about the story' (cf. section 5.4). This thesis has argued that the connection between individual stories and meta-narratives is best judged by looking at the relationships conveyed in each narrative. The emergence of a new sustainability narrative which expresses a qualitatively different relation between humans and nature – humanity-*in*-nature (cf. section 1.1.1) – can thus be discerned by examining the relationships implied by the visions, narratives, practices and ethics of a particular grassroots innovation. Taken together, these 'rules' constitute a particular form of environment-making which guide new ways of thinking and doing (cf. section 2.3) and provide an indication of the onto-epistemological orientation of grassroots innovations. The next section will discuss the implications for understanding the emergence and diffusion of particular grassroots innovations – and the connections created by sustainability narratives across different grassroots projects – in more detail.

7.3 Diffusion of the rules and visions of environment-making

The emergence of the Dark Mountain Project as a space for conversation about aspects of social-ecological crises that lie outside the mainstream discourse on climate change and sustainability (cf. section 4.2) and the subsequent diffusion of Dark Mountain through a process of mutual inquiry into the meaning of the *Uncivilisation* narrative, point not only to the central role of a strong vision and narrative but also to a real need for many people to engage with this kind of inquiry and to develop personal perspectives, practices and skills that can cope with the prospect of the 'topography of collapse'. The momentum which the Dark Mountain Project gained following the publication of *Uncivilisation* thus also has to be understood in terms of the discursive limits imposed by mainstream environmental discourse and action. Further, part of the reason for the later diffusion of the Dark Mountain Project should be seen as an effect of the experiences that participants have had within the curated spaces of Dark Mountain: beyond circulation of the *Uncivilisation* narrative, both narrative skills and a particular attitude have proliferated.

The narrative of *Uncivilisation* and the poetics of *inhumanism* in the Dark Mountain Project centre on granting the more-than-human world agency and so inquiries focus on acknowledging the reality of subjectivities in the natural world. Seeing nature not as a

resource but as capable of having subjective experiences widens the *user-resource* relationship to become a relation between differential beings co-constituted by each other's existence. And hence, sustainability becomes not a future goal to reach in which human needs are balanced against the protection of nature but a way of relating the more-than-human world which acknowledges the multitude of subjectivities which hide underneath the label 'nature'. The meaning of this view of sustainability, while supported by the language and imagery of *Uncivilisation*, is realised only when participants begin to experience and perceive the world accordingly. And to do that, openness to this kind of inquiry is needed along with conceptual skills that can reframe ways of speaking about and seeing the sustainability challenge. In this way, it is not just the narrative, activities, materials or particular practices that diffuse but also an *ethos* and a *set of skills* that express the deeper mode of environment-making which the Dark Mountain Project supports.

This suggests that the distinction between 'intrinsic' and 'diffusion' challenges in the grassroots innovation literature (cf. Seyfang and Smith, 2007) should not be understood as hard conceptual boundaries: separating organisational challenges and objectives along the lines of 'survival' and 'growth' risks disregarding the way that they are related: modes of internal organisation reflect in the diffusion of a project and vice versa. This could also take attention away from the deeper questions that grassroots innovations are tackling: what motivates a particular innovation and how does a project express a radically different way of doing or living to the mainstream? This study suggests that while questions about internal organisation are by no means trivial, they are directly related to diffusion. Specifically, three elements which have been defining of the internal functioning and organisational mode of the Dark Mountain Project reflect in the wider diffusion of the *Uncivilisation* narrative:

- The narrative – including its imagery, concepts, meanings and storylines – has had to be credible in more ways than just providing a convincing story. It has needed to be reflected both in the outputs and development of the Dark Mountain Project. This means that it has had to be open-ended, sincere, adaptable and avoid self-justification. A core reason why the ideas of *Uncivilisation* have had such wide circulation (to the point where 'uncivilising' is often left aside) is because participants have been able to identify with the narrative without having to subscribe to any particular set of beliefs or ideology. In this way, *Uncivilisation's* 'topography of collapse' has created a narrative landscape which many people have been able to inhabit with their own personal life stories – it is extendable without being prescriptive.

- The co-creation of the Dark Mountain narrative has been possible only through 'holding safe spaces' where dialogues have avoided conventional modes of debate and argumentation (this has perhaps been the most difficult challenge and it has not always succeeded). Evading habitual modes of defending personal opinions and striving to be right or seek approval has allowed for the co-production of stories without developing doctrine. Conversely, allowing mistakes and failure has been

equally important in not settling on particular views or stories prematurely. The key to the creation of 'safe spaces' has been trust – being able to be vulnerable, mistaken or appear foolish with fellow inquirers has been vital to developing new ways of speaking and being together. This has in turn been a major point of attraction for new participants.

- An ethos of sharing and generosity has been essential for the development of personal narrative skills and practices. While art and writing has been a focal point in Dark Mountain, there has also been a wider emphasis on enabling creative re-narration of the lifeworld through craft, play, ritual and improvisation. These skills are key to establishing a personal ethical and conceptual compass which can guide decisions and activities beyond Dark Mountain's curated spaces and connecting with other people and social contexts.

In this way, by making a new sustainability narrative available and enabling participants to re-story their personal lifeworld by building narrative skills, some of the experiences that take place within the Dark Mountain Project translate into the everyday and to other aspects of participants lives. What diffuses in this process is not so much specific ideas, practices or behaviours but an approach to re-narrating which allows new roles, plots and props to enter the lifeworld (although these are no longer explicitly 'Dark Mountain').

Focussing on the experience that people have within the curated spaces of Dark Mountain and supporting a particular mode of environment-making, thus also affect diffusion directly as can be observed in the widening interest in the project, the establishment of local groups and events, an increasing number of submissions to the journal, wider distribution and larger sales. By separating out 'intrinsic' and 'diffusion' challenges, this connection is obscured – and intrinsic objectives are potentially instrumentalised if they become defined in terms of external purposes. By paying attention to the onto-epistemological assumptions and motivations of grassroots innovations this division may no longer be needed. In the terminology of sustainability transitions, the Dark Mountain Project can be viewed as a 'simple grassroots niche' (cf. section 2.1) insofar as it does not seek solutions to transform any particular dominant socio-technical regime or have ambitions beyond the micro-level, and yet it does aspire for a wider transformation in worldviews. The emergence and diffusion of the *Uncivilisation* narrative in the face of its refusal to argue anything in particular or provide specific solutions to the sustainability challenge, suggests that, in addition to the viability of particular socio-technical practices, innovations or interventions, the deeper rules of environment-making play an important role in the diffusion of grassroots innovations.

To disentangle what this means it is useful to think of these rules as characteristics that can be observed in any grassroots innovation as a whole. Based on the research presented in thesis I suggest the following reference points:

- Vision or *the direction of travel*. More than providing guidance to specific activities (Geels, 2011) by articulating a relationship between the present and the future,

visions conceive of ‘how we know what we know’ (Williams, 2012) and locate subject positions within wider social contexts including personal histories, cultural assumptions, social status and objectives.

- Narrative or *the landscape of the journey*. More than a political strategy employed to empower grassroots innovations (Smith and Raven, 2012), narratives express what kind of entities are given status as real or significant in the narrative landscape. They thus bring attention both to what is present *and* absent in a story, provide a framing and symbolic language as well as a ground for studying the closing and opening of meanings.

- Organisation or *how to travel*. More than strategies for securing resources or diffusing a particular socio-technical innovation (Seyfang and Smith, 2007), organisational principles reflect and establish the relations between participants and wider social contexts. They also affect the ‘search space’ for particular problematics and what kind of action is available in specific contexts.

- Ethos or *how to be together*. More than a consistent set of values or norms which provide the basis for normative contestation of dominant regimes (Elzen *et al.*, 2011), ethos is the attitude or approach to what to do when values and norms conflict. Thus, it provides a compass for deliberation and modes of social interaction.

These aspects can operationalise the notion of environment-making without setting up hard boundaries between a particular grassroots innovation and the broader social context in which it exists. Each aspect is equally important and reflects on both intrinsic and diffusion challenges. Further, in this perspective, the object of diffusion can be one or more aspects of these facets of environment-making and does not have to be limited to a specific practice, narrative or technology. The way in which diffusion occurs is through stories: not as memes which mutate or are gradually diluted, but as stories which have their own dynamic and enable new ways of seeing when they are embodied in practice.

It is now possible to answer some of the further questions that have arisen in the course of this thesis. First off, the role of sustainability narratives in the structuring and diffusion of grassroots innovations (cf. section 2.1.1) is to provide a virtual landscape in which a journey takes place: it establishes the actors and their relations, the hurdles, and paths available towards a particular sustainability vision. Further, the narrative landscape provides an entry point into studying how the multiplicity of realities and objects ‘hang together’ (cf. Mol, 2002) by highlighting presences, absences, framings and foundational assumptions. Related to this point, the cultural shift away from the conception of human societies and nature as separate involves more than a change in narrative: it entails a deeper engagement with the onto-epistemological foundations of one’s own worldview and how they reflect in all the different aspects of environment-making. E.g., changing the narrative may prove futile if there is no awareness of the connections with organisational principles or ethos. It is also clear that the envisioning and enactment of alternative human-nature relations (cf. section 2.1.2) is not a process of simply ‘adopting’ a new

worldview: it occurs through complex personal journeys in which a different kind of relationship is gradually imagined and embodied within the lifeworld. The practical and experiential aspects of this change are not reducible to a set of universals but the quality of the space of inquiry is a deciding factor (and trust is imperative). This points to a somewhat surprising finding regarding the question of how wider transformations in onto-epistemology occur (cf. section 2.3): the key is not so much the characteristics of a particular worldview in itself as it is creating spaces where a suspension of habitual sense-making and judgment can make new ways of seeing and being possible. Thus, supportive spaces in which to move through *liminal* or threshold states are crucial both for experimenting with new ways of being together and for these experiments to begin to stabilise within a broader social context.

In this perspective, the diffusion of the Dark Mountain Project as a grassroots project which aims to foster new worldviews – rather than provide any particular solutions or programme of action – can be understood in terms of the quality of its vision, narrative, organisation and ethos: as an outcome of coherence across these dimensions and as an effect of its alignment with a wider story about social-ecological crises and change. Coherence – avoiding contradictions in onto-epistemology while accepting dissensus – should be seen as an emergent attribute which includes all the activities, participants and outcomes of a project. This is thus directly related to how a grassroots innovation is experienced by participants and perceived by non-participants. Alignment – connection with other actors or projects with sympathetic onto-epistemological outlooks – may be an important contributor to diffusion not just because it can create direct contact with other social networks but because it may indirectly help shift the wider narrative landscape that grassroots innovations are working within. E.g., if non-participants identify and align with the wider story they can become a tacit source of support insofar as the broader social environment becomes more conducive to the journey of a grassroots innovation. In this way, the onto-epistemological dimensions identified above may be helpful in identifying interconnections between, and indirect effects of, grassroots innovations. Before turning to the implications of this discussion for future research of this sort, I want to briefly consider the prospects of seeing inquiries into onto-epistemologies as a personal journey of re-storying the lifeworld.

7.4 Re-storying the lifeworld as journeying

One of the most intriguing aspects of this research process has been the finding that it is the creation of the *possibility* for changes in worldviews (in particular through developing narrative skills and a space for experimentation), and not a specific idea or method, that holds transformative potential. I have conceptualised the narrator who weaves new stories into the lifeworld as a 'poet' in order to convey how engaging with the mythopoetic nature of reality – and its 'poetic, supernormal images' (Campbell, 1969, p. 472) – involves probing the edges of what is given status as 'real' in the lifeworld without immediately

rationalising this experience. This is an inquiry into the "deeper conceptions concerning the nature of reality and of knowledge" (Hamilton, 2009, na.) which shape personal worldviews and sense of self. In this way, becoming a poet of the lifeworld entails an inspection of the language and metaphors that have become 'naturalised' as descriptions of the world, i.e. the 'way things are' (cf. Larson, 2011). Building an awareness of the role and function of particular stories and metaphors can conversely be seen as 'denaturalising' them by questioning their framing of the lifeworld. And by paying attention to the way webs of metaphors frame ways of speaking and thinking – and close down or open up for certain meanings – it also becomes possible to begin actively establishing a vocabulary which aids the re-storying of the lifeworld. This implies finding appropriate terms, metaphors and storylines which describe the kind of life and way of living that correspond with a particular (sustainability) narrative and vision. In the empirical chapters, I have examined how this happens as an activity of simultaneously (re)imagining reality and embodying alternate ways of being. Connecting this process with Ingold's (2011) overturning of the 'doubly disengaged' view with the perspective of the lifeworld as a field of habitation, we can say that the flow of a life – and the development of the sense of self and reality – can be represented as a continual conversation with what lies beyond the horizon of the lifeworld (see Figure 7.1 below).

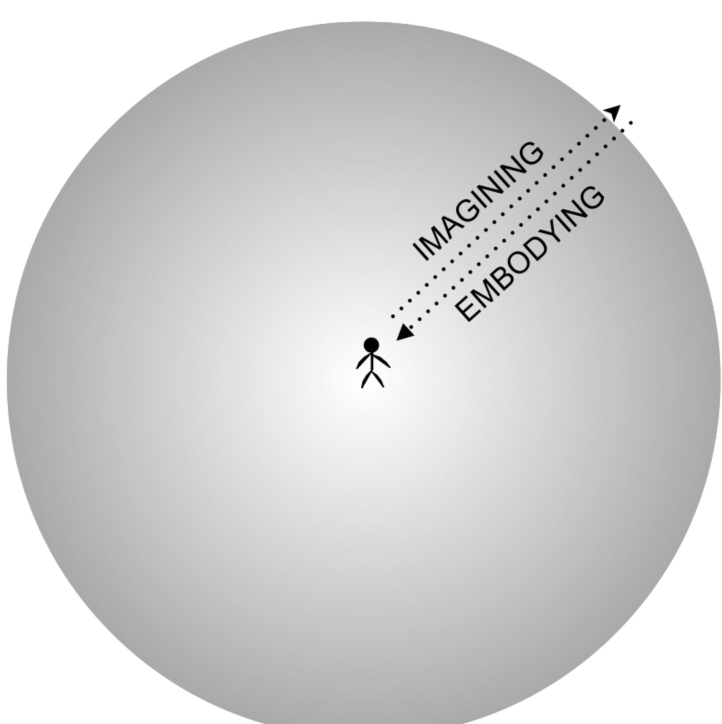

Figure 7.1: The narrator as poet of the lifeworld.

Placing the 'poet-narrator' at the centre of the lifeworld it is impossible to move beyond what presently constitutes the horizon. Instead, new realities are brought forth by 'listening at the edge of one's understanding' (cf. section 6.1) and gradually beginning to embody what is received in the imagination. With McIntosh's (2001) differentiation

between the 'imaginary' (what is unreal) and the 'imaginal' (what is beyond the present bounds of consciousness) it is possible to discern quality from illusion. Further, the process of 'constellating an alternate reality' (cf. section 2.3.1) now has an anchor point. The 'set', the 'setting' and the 'stars' are all aspects of the lifeworld which are narrated according to specific contexts: characters with different roles, props which enable different actions and storylines which connect with wider cultural narratives. Within this narrative landscape, individual and collective beliefs, values, principles and objectives provide a compass which can guide action in the face of uncertainty – both highlighting the vital role of normativities and providing a starting point for relating to other norms and beliefs. In this conceptualisation, visions can be seen as the activity of imagining and embodying aspects of the lifeworld which are not yet a lived reality. As dynamic and evolving reference points which connect across social contexts and narratives, visions provide a direction on the horizon to navigate by. This suggests that re-narrating the lifeworld is a journey, not towards a particular point on the horizon, but through an ongoing conversation with that which lies beyond it. In the following section I will return to this imagery with a view to discussing the implications for grassroots innovations but first I want to develop the notion of onto-epistemological transformation as journeying because this became a central metaphor for my own development in the course of this research.

The narrative landscape implied by the 'topography of collapse' has introduced a different focus for my lifeworld. Confronted with the waning visions of technological and political 'fixes' to social-ecological crises, *absences* rather than solutions became apparent. This has been profoundly disturbing: in the absence of basic skills to provide for my own and others' necessities how could I possibly cope with the collapse of the fossil fuel-based economy? Clearly, I cannot on my own. However, the prospect of collapse – understood as the failure of the vision of progress – also points to those aspects of the lifeworld that need more awareness by asking "what do I need to flourish in the 'topography of collapse'?" and "where should I focus my attention?" By pointing to absences, the 'topography of collapse' provides a landscape for the journey towards new presences. This journey, as I have experienced it on my own and with others, can be described as a movement from a vague feeling that something fundamental about contemporary life is not right ("as in a bicycle without handlebars, or a staircase ending in air" in Rob Lewis' formulation, Lewis DM2, p. 223) towards finding a place within the wider community of life which is "'grasped' only by participation, which is to say that it is not known through propositional knowledge" (REF, 07.12.13). By attending to absences and beginning to enact stories that operate in that space it is possible to face the radical uncertainty of the 'topography of collapse' without only feeling lack. It brings a focus to the lifeworld which introduces new meaning and quality which in turn enable new ways of relating to the world. It is not easy, and it requires sustained attention, suspension of habits and continual practice, but it does bring new perspectives and ways of doing into the lifeworld.

Enabling the re-storying of a life through developing an imagery of journeying that is appropriate to each individual lifeworld can in this way bring awareness to the way that certain sets of assumptions, habits and relations are reproduced – and new ones made

available. Identifying the actors and features of the narrative landscape and articulating visions to steer by in a process of imagining and embodying alternate realities may weave new stories, props and plots into the lifeworld by changing the patterns by which meaning is (re)produced. However, acknowledging the mythopoetic nature of stories also entails an understanding that stories have their own life: they live us as we live them. This means first of all that for the journey to be worthwhile, the unconscious stories that make up the deeper structures of the narrative landscape have to be examined. Personally, I think the extent to which thought is conditioned by such stories should not be underestimated. 'Changing the story' therefore also means more to me than simply providing a new narrative framing of experience. It means, with a concept borrowed from Anthony McCann (2013), to engage with the 'subtle power' of becoming able to alter the experience of oneself or another (cf. section 2.2.4). Strengthening this 'subtle power' means that attention needs to be given to the creation of 'safe spaces' for experimentation as well as to how interactions and conversations happen. This accords with the finding that new ways of thinking and doing grow from learning to inquire without imposing preconceptions rather than simply acquiring pre-existing answers to a question (cf. section 6.5). In this way, re-narration is a life skill that empowers an individual to engage creatively with the storied boundaries of her life.

7.5 Grassroots narratives and sustainability transitions

These findings can now be related back to the points raised in Chapter 2 about the theoretical concerns regarding the role of visions and narratives in grassroots innovations and conceptualising social change as a quasi-evolutionary process. This thesis suggests that visions are more than subjective norms that guide particular activities and that narratives are more than strategies that can empower grassroots innovations (cf. section 7.3 above). To understand their role in the evolution of grassroots projects, I suggest instead to see them as part of the rules that guide environment-making, i.e. as integral to the process of enacting and bringing forth particular realities. In this way, it is not possible to separate 'normativities', 'values', 'visions', 'beliefs' or 'worldviews' from their expression in specific actions and activities. Rather, this research has found that in order to understand the meaning of sustainability visions and narratives it is helpful to see them as an expression of an actual relation between a person and her surroundings – not just as an alternative 'viewpoint' on the world (cf. section 2.2.4). That is, as a reality in and of itself within a wider field of relations. By situating all social phenomena within the same plane, sustainability transitions can be seen as a transformation in the constitution of the phenomenal world: not from one particular socio-technical 'configuration' to another, but from one kind of relation to another. And this thesis has proposed that a guide to whether a particular transformation in social relations is sustainable is whether it moves away from a user-resource relationship towards experiencing humanity and nature as interconnected, interdependent and inextricably entangled.

This shifts the theoretical emphasis away from questions about how visions and narratives can be employed to effect social change towards understanding where they come from, how they develop and what kind of relations they embody. But sustainability visions and narratives should not be seen in isolation from other aspects of environment-making: they stand in relation to the mode of organisation and ethos that a grassroots innovation engages with. Two important aspects whereby to gauge the meaning and character of the visions, narratives, organisational principles and ethos that describe particular sustainabilities, is their degree of coherence and alignment with wider cultural narratives. This is not to suggest that, in order to be effective, modes of environment-making cannot contain contradiction or that they need to have a complete view of their own 'rules' or 'visions'. It is a proposition that, by exploring such facets of onto-epistemology, grassroots projects can discover new aspects and opportunities in their activities – both in terms of 'internal' challenges and wider diffusion. Coherence has practical implications for organisers and participants – it can increase mutual understanding, clarify objectives, make the story easier to convey – and, one might suspect, deepen the quality of the experience of a project. Alignment broadens the perspective by anchoring a project in a wider story about what participants are trying to do and has the potential to create allies and support beyond the immediate context. It also opens up for understanding the role of those aspects of environment-making that appear to fall outside a project's immediate objectives in shaping its longer-term development. And it makes a direct connection between the 'compass' by which a project orientates (its organisational principles and ethos) and the wider landscape and vision it navigates. These ideas are illustrated in Figure 7.2.

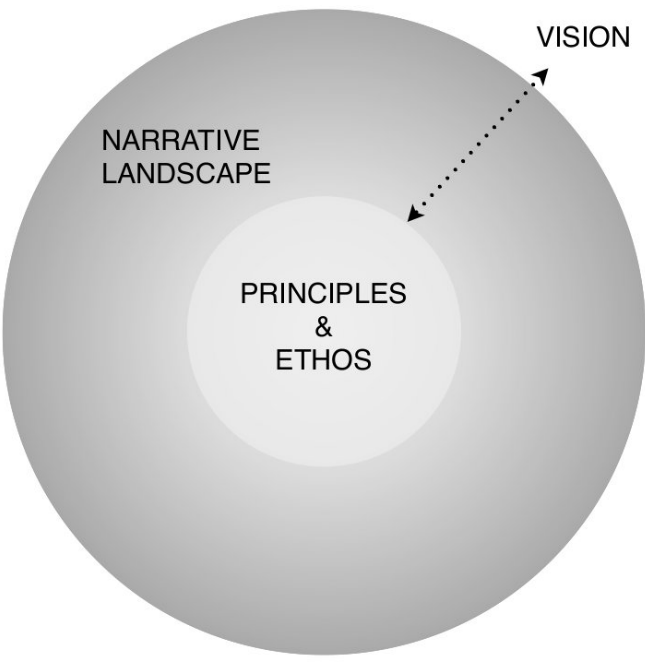

Figure 7.2: Navigating the narrative landscape.

This framework for thinking about environment-making in grassroots innovations can be populated according to the development of a project and help structure an exploration of how narrative re-positioning within grassroots innovations affects the knowledges and actions available to participants. Providing a scaffold for thinking about and formulating the visions, narratives, principles and ethos that motivate and represent a particular project, the details will be distinctive to each project. This may produce new ways of identifying openings, obstacles and interconnections on an innovation journey. It is deliberately simple: the actual form it takes is up to those who find this way of thinking helpful. Because maps are ways of ordering experience it is important to avoid projecting abstract pathways onto this scaffold. Recognising that this is a representation of social life conceived as an indivisible holomovement (cf. section 2.2.3), the map is unique to the map-maker and the journey cannot be abstracted in an attempt to calculate or predict how a certain mode of environment-making 'fits' some wider selection mechanism or trajectory. That is a double-disengagement of the analyst from lived experience which only serves to relativise particular onto-epistemologies against a background of an assumed objective reality. Further, the boundaries between an organisation and the wider narrative landscape should be seen as fluid and permeable – participants' relation to a project change, objectives and modes of organising adjust and new ways of doing emerge in the course of journeying. If such objectification can be avoided, Figure 7.2 can provide a contextualised plot for grassroots innovations: where is the journey headed, who are the significant actors, how can the aims be achieved, what constitutes success, when has a project outlived itself? The notion of visions as the (evolving) destination of a journey, narratives as the landscape which is traversed and principles/ethos as the compass that guides the story could be a powerful way of clarifying the development of grassroots innovations without losing sight of why a particular activity is undertaken in the first place. It may also elucidate *absences* and suggest alternative ways of seeing a problematic, certain skills that are needed or approaches to be explored.

This mode of theorising presents a challenge to analysts and practitioners alike: is it possible to inhabit a position where *doing* is not instrumentalised in the service of abstract goals but is instead viewed as an ongoing activity of embodying what lies beyond the horizon? In other words, how can paying attention to the different facets of environment-making aid the perception of new possibilities and help us practice what we do without imposing preconceptions? In this perspective, change is not a process – it happens – and the task of creating sustainable forms of living is one of bringing life to those stories and examples of sustainable living that already exist (if only as a vision beyond the horizon). It involves a shift in focus from trying to fix broken or unsustainable ways of life towards nurturing new ways of living (although there is certainly a place for mourning what is lost). This approach does not aspire to an objective view of a reality independent of the observer (although it does not deny the existence of an independent reality, cf. section 2.2.3), instead it shifts the conceptual focus towards relationships (cf. Capra, 1996) and acknowledges the role of the researcher as mediator of the realities she encounters (cf. Mol, 2002). By studying how communities of inquiry are (re)producing

onto-epistemological assumptions in their experimentation with and contestation of (sustainability) concepts and meanings, such an approach may gain a clearer understanding of how new realities are enacted and how that affects identities, knowledges, actions, social relationships, understandings of nature, perspectives on the future and the role of grassroots innovations in the fulfilment of genuine needs. This requires that theoretical concepts are continually anchored in the dynamic and evolving realities they purport to describe: unquestioned reproduction of conceptual vocabularies will eventually lead to an unintended lessening of explanatory power. The different aspects of environment-making discussed here may therefore also need to be revised and adapted to the specific circumstances of particular projects.

The finding that it is not the particular sustainability vision or narrative *per se* that is significant for the diffusion of a grassroots project, but rather the creation of spaces that are conducive to the co-creation of a vision or narrative, presents new lines of inquiry for further research of this kind. First of all, what forms of environment-making are productive of inclusive and experimental spaces of inquiry? Initial findings within this research project suggest that finding ways of including divergent viewpoints, co-developing skills and forms of organising as well as an attitude of openness are important factors. Second, how can participants be initiated into an inquiry in ways that discontinue the relations implied by the view of humans as 'users' of natural 'resources'? This research suggests that this is a question of practice, that allowing vulnerability and failure is key and, further, that the gradual development of a common imagery and vocabulary is important for avoiding misunderstandings and encouraging new ways of seeing. Third, in what ways can the discursive limits of a particular space be widened in order for new ways of doing to emerge? As this research has shown, the inclusion of viewpoints which were previously excluded by the mindset of progress has expanded the forms of living available to participants in the Dark Mountain Project. How does this work in other settings which have a more narrowly defined organisational structures? Fourth, how do these learnings from experimental grassroots spaces relate and compare with fixed institutionalised settings where ways of doing are more established? In particular, how can vocabularies of environment-making be refined, developed or expanded within larger institutions? To avoid the 'grassroots' becoming compartmentalised as another site for specialised knowledge(s), it is important to avoid seeing their rules of environment-making in isolation from other aspects of life. Further research on what makes different kinds of institutions liveable and response-able to genuine needs could help develop and answer such questions.

This thesis aims to contribute towards such an effort by showing how deeper onto-epistemological considerations affect individual and collective lifeworlds. It does not aspire to produce any global method but to partake in the development of new ways to inquire and practice social research. As a research project which is co-produced by a large number of inquirers, I can only lay claim to its practice and authorship. To be clear, while the findings and generalities I have arrived at reflect my own and others' experience of participating in the Dark Mountain Project, they are not universal or final. In writing this thesis, my focus has necessarily been those areas of this experience that relate directly

to my research questions and some avenues of inquiry have had to be left unexplored. It is my hope that part of the contribution of this thesis is the development of an emergent framework for doing research and the way it has introduced transparency into the research process through virtual platforms. The personal theoretical and practical insights that have emerged in the process of researching and writing this thesis suggest that in order to provide a convincing plot for sustainability transitions from the grassroots, it is necessary to research *with* grassroots actors and find ways for vocabularies to emerge that reflect their realities. This may be helpful in identifying what constitutes 'sustainable' forms of environment-making and enabling new relations between people and nature. Further, it could provide a basis for understanding how different grassroots projects align across varied contexts. Current research on sustainability transitions is already providing valuable insights into some of these connections – the idea of a transition is in itself providing a vision and a narrative (see e.g. Raskin *et al.*, 2002), the role of values is gaining recognition in guiding this journey (see e.g. Crompton, 2010) and new connections are made between sustainability, social-ecological crises, social-psychological health and onto-epistemology (see e.g. Smith, 2011; Moore, 2013; Leahy *et al.*, 2010; Randall, 2009; Skrimshire, 2010b; Curry, 2012; Rasmussen, 2013). The various literatures that this research draws on suggest that a wider transformation in onto-epistemology across different disciplines is occurring while the empirical research has pointed to the existence of a wealth of stories with transformative potential. This thesis proposes that for these signs of transition to flourish, they have to be anchored in the wider field of relations that constitutes social life. Not as pathways towards a coveted future but as a transformation in the perception and experience of the lifeworld itself.

Epilogue

A year has passed since the Chaffinch flew into this text. Although the Chaffinch and the summerhouse now seem distant – the entire thesis and many life changes lie between then and now – those months were a medicine, a salve which I have kept with me as I traveled on (REM, 16.06.13). I am on a train again, traveling from my recent home in Berlin back to my childhood home in Holstebro. We zoom through bright yellow rape fields, pine tree plantations, desolate industrial landscapes and small German towns with their unruly allotments, red brick houses and parking lots. I like trains. They offer a time *in between*, journeying hours that are not structured by the normal rhythms and schemes of the everyday and which allow the mind to wander in backside views of the places we pass through. Crossing the river Eider on the Rensburger Hochbrücke, I get a magnificent view of the surrounding suburban landscape (see Figure Ep. 1). Windy streets and open green spaces are dotted with trees and people which seem almost motionless from my window. Sitting here, squinting my eyes against the afternoon sunlight, I think of the journey with Dark Mountain. Or is it *to* Dark Mountain? Or *across*? It appears to me that the first metaphors I associated with my inquiry into what Dark Mountain is and means – *finding home*, *settling* and *becoming rooted* (O-D, 12.01.12; O-D, 08.02.12) – all took as their premise that I was already away or uprooted. But in the last months the possibility of becoming rooted *in the journey* has revealed itself. And Dark Mountain is, after all, not a place to live one's entire life but a viewpoint or a place of transformation where the boundaries that define the rest of life can be challenged and expanded. Rather than a home, I found a community of fellow journeyers, people who are experimenting with ways of living which can cope with the disappearance of the certainties and expectations of progress.

My journey began with a search for ways of coming to terms with the great sadness of seeing the social and ecological structures that support life as I know it disintegrate and perhaps fail altogether. This prospect undermined everything I had come to take for granted as a child growing up in the 80ies and 90ies. It is – with a term that my friend Tony Dias uses – an *enormity* (Dias 10.01.09): a circumstance which appears so horrific as to incapacitate or paralyse basic aspects of everyday life. As I began to speak with other mountaineers about this, I found not only support in dealing with this rupture of the future but also guidance in building my own practices to help me thrive. "We don't want just to survive, we want also to flourish", as Andrew Taggart put it in one of our conversations (AT P-I, 31.03.21). And the many conversations, inquiries and collaborations I involved

Figure Ep.1: Rensburger Hochbrücke.

myself in became part of my personal practice. My position as a researcher allowed me to cultivate a practice, develop my perceptual skills and work with the ideas presented in this thesis in a fairly consistent and continual manner. While my engagement with Dark Mountain has in this way been unique, there are many parallels between my experience doing this research and those of other mountaineers. At its very broadest this can be described as a process of breaking out of a feeling of isolation and finding community or a place to retrieve a sense of unity within the lifeworld. This is a shift which locates community in the ongoing stream of life itself and which is expressed as a radical shift in the kind of relations one has with the natural world. A re-integration.

Journeying with Dark Mountain has shown me that the shift towards re-imagining and embodying a different relationship with the world requires that many of the rationales which structure modern life are left behind. That changing worldview involves a deeper engagement with the beliefs, habits and assumptions that organise how one experiences the world. And that there are no blueprints or big solutions. This condition has been part of my own struggle in doing this research both because I have been encouraged to look for solutions as an academic and because it has been difficult to overcome my deep-rooted urge put right to wrong and try to fix my great sadness. But grief cannot be fixed like pollution cannot be washed away with dispersants. Accepting what feels like inadequacy and letting go of the hope that the enormity can be reversed has by far been the hardest part of my journey. Surrendering some of my deeply held convictions has been disagreeable and challenged my identity. Nonetheless, the great discovery for me has been the understanding that the feeling of isolation and fragmentation that follows

in the slipstream of the enormity is the result of a worldview which denies the inherent ‘relationality’ of the world. Although I first sensed this years ago, I believe this is a truth which will keep deepening long into the future as it is a remedy for a lot of the unintended consequences we tend to think of as ‘externalities’ – whether they are social, psychological or ecological.

When our relations with each other, the places we live and the wider natural world are obscured, frayed or ripped we lose not just a connection to the world but a small part of ourselves. Indigenous research paradigms hold that a researcher is answerable to all her relations (cf. Wilson, 2008) and one could restate this to say that a person *is* all her relations. When relationality is broken we become less than what we were before. This has become clear to me especially through my sister Naja’s research and our conversations about our identity as mixed-race Greenlandic-Danes. I was joined by her from time to time last year in the summerhouse when she was writing her Masters thesis on decolonising Inuit politics and identity in Greenland. She writes about the internal dissension that arises when a part of one’s identity becomes isolated and framed as conflicting with the rest of one’s person: "[t]he experiences within mixed-race lives articulate the destruction when our inherent "relationality" as living beings is suppressed" (Graugaard, 2013, p. 20). It is interesting that she has found many parallels to what I have described as *threshold* or *liminal* states in her process of resolving this fragmentation. Letting go of certain ideas about oneself can seem like ‘dissolving into nothingness’ but, she finds, "we *become more of who we are* when we, upon dissolving, embrace our relations as a part of the *becoming* our expansive selves, our lineage [...] and our embodied memory" (ibid., p. 20, original emphasis).

This possibility of becoming more of who we are seems to me to be a key to many of the problematics related to the sustainability challenge. For me, it has resolved a personal question which I set out with at the beginning of this research: how can I discontinue the relationships that have produced the enormity and where can I help build new kinds of relations? Many of the conflicts I have experienced surrounding this question faded away once I accepted that they were based on a false division between myself and the world: I do not need to act on behalf of "nature" or to "save the world" when I am answerable to all my relations. We constitute each other and in this way they are part of me as I am of them. While this may seem to make sustainability science and research less ambitious or heroic, it also makes sustainability less abstract and immediately relevant to local contexts because it implies something different depending on the personal and collective circumstances in which one inquires about what it means. As a question of meaning, it will be necessary to inquire about what a true or right relationship means and Dark Mountain has a lot to offer for this kind of inquiry because many participants are actively searching for and creating a new vocabulary which can hold the personal and collective quandaries that arise from living in an age characterised by overconsumption, climate change and species extinction.

The inquiries I have become involved with in my conversations with mountaineers

have generated a compass of evolving perceptual and conceptual tools with which to navigate my own lifeworld[1]. Some have proved invaluable while others in hindsight were less relevant. I think such creative mapping or indexing is invaluable for making sustainability an expression of right relationship – it is necessary for grounding the processes of re-imagining and embodying in the personal lifeworld. It is also required for 'doing the hard work' and avoiding simply generating abstract recipes which can be evangelised to other seekers. These vocabularies "must be the kind sketched in the dust with a stick, washed away by the next rain" (Kingsnorth and Hine MA, p. 16) as the Dark Mountain manifesto puts it. Held lightly and not pressed for answers, the poetics of *inhumanism* presents a space for the imagination where the otherness of all our relations can emerge and re-orient the settings, plots and vocabularies that guide the course of life.

The familiar open, flat landscape of Jutland is now rushing past outside my train window (see Figure Ep. 2). Spring has come later here and the green colours are lighter, almost translucent. I left this country when I was seventeen. Back then I dismissed this domesticated landscape as uninteresting and empty. It took me many years of coming back here to appreciate the finer shades it contains and I am still learning. Much of it is an agricultural wasteland, the ancient forest that once covered this peninsula all but gone. It was cleared for husbandry and used to build the fleet that made Denmark a major seafaring power until it was sacked and stolen by the English in 1807 during the Napoleonic wars. Generations of peasants worked to make the poor soils of Jutland yield, an effort which eventually paid off with the introduction of petrochemicals that made it profitable to grow the wheat, barley, rape and maize that now dominate the landscape. With each generation a small part of the past was forgotten as the changes they lived through became the new normal. It is easy to ignore that the landscape I grew up with is – ecologically speaking – an impoverished version of the past. I sometimes wonder what this country will look like in a hundred years. What will someone like me then see journeying across this land? Will there be trains to journey on? It is a thought which takes me on a tour of some of the things that trains imply: the industrial society that produces them, the places and people they connect, the ways of life they express and the modes of time they embody. Trains are one of the hallmark symbols of modernity. They represent the domestication and harnessing of the wild landscape, the co-ordination and subjugation of local time differences and the drive towards speed and efficiency which characterise industrialised societies. And still I would prefer not to be without them now that they are here.

Over the centuries-long formation of the meta-narrative of time and history as progress, linear storylines have become embedded in our institutions, our technologies and our ways of thinking. In the same way the invention of the steam engine, clockworks and linear schemata ushered in a revolution in means of production and the material world, it altered profoundly the way we think about and see the world. And it gradually led to an extreme

[1] "Building new perceptual and conceptual tools" became a tagline for the *time culture* project (http://time-culture.net) while "giving voice to clarity in community" describes the collective inquiry *concentric dialogue* (http://concentricdialogue.wordpress.com/).

Figure Ep. 2: Jutlandic landscape.

de-valuing of the past in favour of the future and the forgetting of our connection with all our relations. It is a mistake to treat 'environmental problems' as primarily a material reality: they have deeper roots inside a worldview that leads us to reproduce the social patterns and material circumstances that created pollution, waste and other externalities in the first place. While shifting worldview requires patience and practice to overcome the acculturated blindness to the otherness of the world, my feeling is that in the long run this will be more effective than technical solutions in creating a desirable future. But changing worldview cannot happen in a flash, it is the slow process of working from the margins towards the centre. It is our longest journey and it begins by creating our own maps and tools with whatever we have at hand. I recall Dougie's tongue-in-cheek question from last year when I was living in the summerhouse: *what was it you did there?* What will people say of this time and of Dark Mountain fifty years from now?

Here, approaching my destination, I remember hearing a choir of owls, foxes, whales, howler monkeys and (stinking) kippers in the forest (REM, 10.09.13) – see Figure Ep. 3 – and it appears to me that we have broken open our stories, our ways of telling and interpreting. As a movement in the social imaginary – rather than of people trying to 'change the world' – Dark Mountain has opened a door for wildness and untamed otherness to slip back into the lifeworld, offered a way of being which makes it possible to flourish even in the shadow of the enormity. It allows us to embrace and align with our wider relations without requiring us to blow up civilisation in a battle that can never be won. By retreating to the mountains and reorienting our compass it has become possible to dispel the pull on attention which the enormity exercises on us, to decide to focus our awareness on the

dark spots on our maps, on the absences wherefrom new things can grow. Journeying in this range shows that 'civilisation' is only one name among many for a pervasive logic which divides the world without anchoring complexity in the greater movement of which we all are part. At the edge, hearing the faint voices beneath the clamour of engines, it is possible to perceive the soundscape of a world which does not need us to do anything but to listen and to live our questions now.

Figure Ep.3: Depiction of dream of the genii loci of the Hampshire Downs.

Appendix A

List of articles, essays and other material from the Dark Mountain publications referenced in the research.

Author, title, publication	Marker
Alcock, N. R.: ‘Beyond Z. – a memoir of place’, *Dark Mountain* vol. 3 (2012), pp. 127–138.	Alcock DM3
Amstrong, L.: ‘The Place Looks Back’, *Dark Mountain* vol. 2 (2011), pp. 84–93.	Armstrong DM2
Brachi, P.: ‘The Truth Fairy’, *Dark Mountain* vol. 3 (2012), pp. 219–225.	Brachi DM3
Challenger, M.: ‘The Thorn’, *Dark Mountain* vol. 1 (2010), p. 136.	Challenger DM1
Challenger, M.: ‘The Forgotten Farm’, *Dark Mountain* vol. 2 (2011), pp. 4–10.	Challenger DM2
Draper, W.: ‘The Shuttle Exchanged for the Sword’, *Dark Mountain* vol. 2 (2011), pp. 131–150.	Draper DM2
Fairlie, S.: ‘The tragedy of the Tragedy of the Commons’, *Dark Mountain* vol. 1 (2010), pp. 178–200.	Fairlie DM1
Greer, J. M.: ‘The falling years: an Inhumanist vision’, *Dark Mountain* vol. 1 (2010), pp. 6–17.	Greer DM1
Griffiths, J.: ‘This England’, *Dark Mountain* vol. 1 (2010), pp. 201–207.	Griffiths DM1
Henderson, C.: ‘Barely Imagined Beginnings’, *Dark Mountain* vol. 3 (2012), pp. 161–164.	Henderson DM3
Hester, J.: ‘The Three Lessons of History’, *Dark Mountain* vol. 3 (2012), pp. 33–38.	Hester DM3
Hine, D.: ‘Remember the Future?’ *Dark Mountain* vol. 2 (2011), pp. 260–271.	Hine DM2
Hine, D. and Abram, D.: ‘Coming To Our (Animal) Senses – A Conversation with David Abram’, *Dark Mountain* vol. 2 (2011), pp. 61–73.	Hine and Abram DM2
Hine, D. and Gupta, V.: ‘Black Elephants and skull jackets – a conversation with Vinay Gupta’, *Dark Mountain* vol. 1 (2010), pp. 32–46.	Hine and Gupta DM1

Author, title, publication	**Marker**
Hine, D. and Samuel, S.: 'Rehoming Society: a conversation with Sajay Samuel', *Dark Mountain* vol. 3 (2012), pp. 90–105.	Hine and Samuel DM3
Hirons, T.: 'Sometimes a Wild God', *Dark Mountain* vol. 3 (2012), pp. 123–126.	Hirons(a) DM3
Hirons, T.: 'Nettle Eater', *Dark Mountain* vol. 3 (2012), pp. 214–218.	Hirons(b) DM3
Hou Je Bek, W.: 'Poetry First, Engineering Second – Uncivilised Writing and & Primate Poetics', *Dark Mountain* vol. 2 (2011), pp. 203–209.	Bek DM2
Hughes, G.: 'To the morning sun', *Dark Mountain* vol. 1 (2010), p. 176.	Hughes DM1
Hunt, N.: 'Loss Soup', *Dark Mountain* vol. 1 (2010), pp. 23–30.	Hunt DM1
Keyes, T.: 'Finding Roe Deer', *Dark Mountain* vol. 3 (2012), pp. 56–60.	Keyes DM3
Kingsnorth, P.: 'Confessions of a recovering environmentalist', *Dark Mountain* vol. 1 (2010), pp. 47–60.	Kingsnorth DM1
Kingsnorth, P.: 'Dark Ecology', *Dark Mountain* vol. 3 (2012), pp. 7–27.	Kingsnorth DM3
Kingsnorth, P. and Hine, D.: 'Uncivilisation: The Dark Mountain Manifesto', Dark Mountain (2009)	Kingsnorth and Hine MA
Kingsnorth, P. and Hine, D.: 'It's the end of the world as we know it (and we feel fine)', *Dark Mountain* vol. 1 (2010), pp. 1–4.	Kingsnorth and Hine DM1
Kingsnorth, P. and Hine, D.: 'Control, and Other Illusions', *Dark Mountain* vol. 2 (2011), pp. 1–3.	Kingsnorth and Hine DM2
Kingsnorth, P., Tompkins, D. and Tompkins, K.: 'The Death of Birth – A conversation with Doug & Kris Tompkins', *Dark Mountain* vol. 3 (2012), pp. 141–160.	Kingsnorth et al. DM3
Klein, N.: 'On Precaution', *Dark Mountain* vol. 2 (2011), pp. 20–25.	Klein DM2
Lewis, H.: 'On this Site of Loss', *Dark Mountain* vol. 3 (2012), pp. 110–122.	Lewis DM3
Lewis, R.: 'The Silence of Vanishing Things', *Dark Mountain* vol. 2 (2011), pp. 222–231.	Lewis DM2
McCann, A. and Jensen, D.: 'A gentle ferocity – A conversation with Derrick Jensen', *Dark Mountain* vol. 1 (2010), pp. 108–118.	McCann and Jensen DM1
McKenzie, B.: 'In the Orchard', *Dark Mountain* vol. 3 (2012), pp. 61–64.	McKenzie DM3

Author, title, publication	**Marker**
Morris, B.: 'Low country', *Dark Mountain* vol. 2 (2011), pp. 156–157.	Morris DM2
Petrucci, M.: 'Three hot drops of salmon oil', *Dark Mountain* vol. 1 (2010), pp. 137–143.	Petrucci DM1
Prieur, R.: 'Beyond Civilised & Primitive', *Dark Mountain* vol. 1 (2010), pp. 119–135.	Prieur DM1
Rao, V.: 'The Return of the Barbarian', *Dark Mountain* vol. 2 (2011), pp. 32–41.	Rao DM2
Smith, C. H.: 'The Art of Survival, Taoism and the Warring States', *Dark Mountain* vol. 2 (2011), pp. 240–245.	Smith DM2
Staines, R.: 'The Alchemist', *Dark Mountain* vol. 3 (2012), p. na.	Staines DM3
Strang, E.: 'The Miracle', *Dark Mountain* vol. 2 (2011), pp. 82–83.	Strang DM2
Szabo, M.: 'Bending Like a Peasant', *Dark Mountain* vol. 3 (2012), pp. 204–210.	Szabo DM3
Taggart, A.: 'Following Nature's Course', *Dark Mountain* vol. 3 (2012), pp. 181–199.	Taggart DM3
Thorp, S. and Major-George, K.: 'The Fixing of Things', *Dark Mountain* vol. 3 (2012), p. na.	Thorp and Major-George DM3
Wheeler, S. and Zerzan, J.: 'Why Don't You Go and Live in a Cave?!' A Conversation with John Zerzan', *Dark Mountain* vol. 4 (2013), pp. 188–203.	Wheeler and Zerzan DM4
Wolfbird: 'The Science of Imaginary Solutions', *Dark Mountain* vol. 2 (2011), pp. 164–174.	Wolfbird DM2

Table A.1: Index of data from Dark Mountain publications referenced in the research

Appendix B

List of articles, talks and blog posts related to the Dark Mountain Project referenced in the research. All markers are hyperlinked to their online location in the electronic version (accessed 26.06.14).

Author, title, place of publication, date, address	**Marker**
Adams, M.: 'Inaction and environmental crisis: Narrative, defence mechanisms and the social organisation of denial', *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* vol. 19, pp. 52–71, 2014. Available at: http://www.palgrave-journals.com/pcs/journal/v19/n1/abs/pcs201321a.html.	Adams 2014
Bell, A. (2010) 'The rise of the Environ-Mentalist', *Decline of the Logos blog*, 30.09.10. Available at: http://declineofthelogos.wordpress.com/2010/09/30/the-rise-of-the-environ-mentalist/.	Bell 30.09.10
Dias, A.: 'Dissensus', *Horizons of Significance blog*, 15.03.14. Available at: http://horizonsofsignificance.wordpress.com/2010/09/07/dissensus/.	Dias 15.03.14
Dias, A.: 'Enormity', *Horizons of Significance blog*, 10.01.09. Available at: http://horizonsofsignificance.wordpress.com/2009/10/01/enormity/.	Dias 10.01.09
Du Cann, C.: 'The Snake in the Box', *The Dark Mountain Blog*, 03.09.13. Available at: http://dark-mountain.net/blog/the-snake-in-the-box/.	Du Cann 03.09.13
Evans, A.: 'Are collapsitarians socially inadequate?' *Global Dashboard blog*, 05.07.10. Available at: http://www.globaldashboard.org/2010/07/05/are-collapsitarians-socially-inadequate/.	Evans 05.07.10
Forrest, A.: 'Climate Change: A Matter of Faith', *The Big Issue*, 26.03.12. Available at: http://www.bigissue.com/features/809/climate-change-matter-faith.	Forrest 26.03.12
Gray, J.: 'Review of Uncivilisation: the Dark Mountain manifesto', *The New Statesman*, 10.09.09. Available at: http://www.newstatesman.com/books/2009/09/civilisation-planet-authors.	Gray 10.09.09

Author, title, place of publication, date, address	Marker
Greer, J. M.: 'Green Wizardry: A Response to Rob Hopkins', *The Archdruid Report blog*, 01.09.10. Available at: http://thearchdruidreport.blogspot.de/2010/09/since-green-wizards-project-got-under.html.	Greer 01.09.10
Hine, D.: 'What do you do, after you stop pretending?', *The Dark Mountain Blog*, 31.01.10. Available at: http://dark-mountain.net/blog/what-do-you-do-after-you-stop-pretending/.	Hine 31.01.10
Hine, D.: 'The Measurable & the Unmeasurable', *talk at Aston Business School, Birmingham*, 12.02.12. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYolIzrU4J8&feature=youtu.be.	Hine 12.02.12
Hine, D.: 'A question of billing', *The Dark Mountain Blog*, 31.10.12. Available at: http://dark-mountain.net/blog/a-question-of-billing/.	Hine 31.10.12
Hine, D.: 'Organisations that matter', *Collapsonomics! blog*, 20.03.13. Available at: http://rhapsodi.se/collapsonomics/organisations-that-matter/.	Hine 20.03.13
Hine, D. and Abram, D.: 'Sensing & Knowing: David Abram in conversation with Dougald Hine', September 2010. Available at: http://blip.tv/dougald-hine/sensing-knowing-david-abram-in-conversation-with-dougald-hine-4587734.	Hine and Abram Sept 2010
Hine, D. and Brewster, C.: 'Västerås Conversations #4: Christopher Brewster and the Limits to Measurement', *ABF (Workers Educational Association)*, 21.05.14. Available at: https://soundcloud.com/dougaldh/vasteras-conversations-4-christopher-brewster-and-the-limits-to-measurement.	Hine and Brewster 21.05.14
Hine, D. and McCann, A.: 'Västerås Conversations #1: Anthony McCann and the Politics of Gentleness', *ABF (Workers Educational Association)*, 30.04.14. Available at: https://soundcloud.com/dougaldh/vasteras-conversations-1-anthony-mccann-and-the-politics-of-gentleness.	Hine and McCann 30.04.14
Hoggett, P.: 'Climate change and the apocalyptic imagination', *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* vol. 16, pp. 261–275, 2011. Available at: http://www.palgrave-journals.com/pcs/journal/v16/n3/abs/pcs20111a.html.	Hogget 2011
Kingsnorth, P.: 'Mythos and Logos: a Dark Mountain talk', *talk at University College Falmouth*, 22.03.12. Available at: https://soundcloud.com/peekay72/mythos-and-logos-a-dark.	Kingsnorth 22.03.12
Kingsnorth, P.: 'The Barcode Moment, Part 3', *The Dark Mountain Blog*, 04.05.12. Available at: http://dark-mountain.net/blog/the-barcode-moment-part-3/.	Kingsnorth 04.05.12

Author, title, place of publication, date, address	Marker
Lupton, C. (2010) ‘Minding The Gaps: Arriving At Dissensus’, *The Place Between Stories blog*, 14.09.10. Available at: http://theplacebetweenstories.wordpress.com/2010/09/14/minding-the-gaps-arriving-at-dissensus/.	Lupton 14.09.10
Monbiot, G. (2010) ‘I share their despair, but I’m not quite ready to climb the Dark Mountain’, *The Guardian*, 10.05.10. Available at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cif-green/2010/may/10/deepwater-horizon-greens-collapse-civilisation.	Monbiot 10.05.10
Newton, M.: ‘The Dark Mountain project: where creativity, intellectualism and politics combine’, *Huffington Post*, 06.10.11. Available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/mark-newton/the-dark-mountain-project_b_998945.html.	Newton 06.10.11
Othieno, D.: ‘What remains – Memories of my father and the forest’, *These precious and beautiful things blog*, 31.01.12. Available at: http://preciousbeautiful.blogspot.de/2012_01_01_archive.html.	Othieno 31.01.12
Othieno, D.: ‘Always boundary walking – Reflection on Phase One & the Mearcstapa Liminal Exploration’, *Effectiveness in Action blog*, 30.05.13. Available at: http://effectivenessinaction.tumblr.com/post/51756157157/always-boundary-walking-reflection-on-phase-one-the.	Othieno 30.05.13
Pollard, D.: ‘Climbing a Dark Mountain, and Thoughts on a New Culture’, *How to save the world blog*, 06.09.10. Available at: http://howtosavetheworld.ca/2010/09/06/climbing-a-dark-mountain-and-thoughts-on-a-new-culture/.	Pollard 06.09.10
Smith, W. J.: ‘Radical Environmentalism: Dark Mountain Project’s Anti Human, Pro Decline Agenda’ *First Things*, 21.09.11. Available at: http://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2011/09/radical-environmentalism-dark-mountain-projects-anti-human-pro-decline-agenda/.	Smith 21.09.11
Stephenson, W.: ‘Hope in the Age of Collapse’, *Thoreau Farm blog*, 03.03.12. Available at: http://thoreaufarm.org/2012/04/hope-in-the-age-of-collapse/.	Stephenson 03.03.12
Towers, D.: ‘Dire Mountain: more abysmal than abyss-mal’, *Dwight Towers blog*, 31.05.10. Available at: http://dwighttowers.wordpress.com/2010/05/31/dire-mountain-more-abysmal-than-abyss-mal/.	Towers 31.05.10

Table B.1: Index of other online data related to the Dark Mountain Project referenced in the research

Appendix C

Lists of own material produced during the research in addition to the interview-conversations (see Table 3.3) which is available online, including online diary, blog posts and conceptual notes. All markers are hyperlinked to their online location in the electronic version.

Online research diary	**Marker**
Reflections: A stone's throw, 11.01.12. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/phd/diary_2/Entries/2012/1/11_Reflections__A_stones_throw.html.	O-D, 11.01.12
Reflections: Finding home, 12.01.12. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/phd/diary_2/Entries/2012/1/12_Reflections__Finding_home.html.	O-D, 12.01.12
Reflections: Stories and making sense of them, 19.01.12. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/phd/diary_2/Entries/2012/1/19_Reflections__Stories_and_making_sense_of_them.html.	O-D, 19.01.12
Theoretical considerations: The world and I, 26.01.12. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/phd/diary_2/Entries/2012/1/26_Theoretical_considerations__The_world_and_I.html.	O-D, 26.01.12
Reflections: A place to settle, 08.02.12. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/phd/diary_2/Entries/2012/2/8_Reflections__A_place_to_settle.html.	O-D, 08.02.12
Reflections: Co-creating the Dark Mountain narrative, 18.03.12. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/phd/diary_2/Entries/2012/3/18_Reflections__A_stones_throw_2_3_3.html.	O-D, 18.03.12
Reflections: Sincerity all the way down, 19.04.12. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/phd/diary_2/Entries/2012/4/19_Reflections__Sincerity_all_the_way_down.html.	O-D, 19.04.12
Discussion: The social eco-system dance, 25.04.12. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/phd/diary_2/Entries/2012/4/25_Discussion__The_social_ecosystem_dance.html.	O-D, 25.04.12
Reflections: Changing worldviews, 25.05.12. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/phd/diary_2/Entries/2012/5/25_Reflections__Changing_worldviews.html.	O-D, 25.05.12

Online research diary	Marker
Reflections: Patterns and harmony, 29.05.12. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/phd/diary_2/Entries/2012/5/29_Reflections__Patterns_and_harmony.html.	O-D, 29.05.12
Reflections: Emergence and submergence, 14.09.12. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/phd/diary_2/Entries/2012/9/14_Reflections__Emergence_and_submergence.html.	O-D, 14.09.12
Reflections: Flickering, 06.12.12. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/phd/diary_2/Entries/2012/12/6_Reflections__XXX.html.	O-D, 06.12.12

Table C.1: Index of online diary entries

Blog posts	Marker
The Dark Mountain Project & Uncivilisation, 30.08.11, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/the-dark-mountain-project-uncivilisation/.	REM, 30.08.11
The Dark Mountain Project and narrating social change, 18.01.12, *3S blog*. Available at: http://3s.uea.ac.uk/blog/dark-mountain-project-and-narrating-social-change.	3S, 18.01.12
When the game is rigged and the ref is corrupt, 15.02.12, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/when-the-game-is-rigged-and-the-ref-is-corrupt/.	REM, 15.02.12
Stories about violence, 25.04.12, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/stories-about-violence/.	REM, 25.04.12
Bringing time into the picture, 23.05.12, *3S blog*. Available at: http://3s.uea.ac.uk/blog/bringing-time-picture.	3S, 23.05.12
Why you should get Dark Mountain Issue 3 now, 25.06.12, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/why-you-should-get-dark-mountain-issue-3-now/.	REM, 25.06.12
Repossessing the future, 14.08.12, *Time culture*. Available at: http://time-culture.net/repossessing-the-future-2/.	T-C, 14.08.12
The reality of collapse – reflections on Uncivilisation 2012, 25.08.12, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/the-reality-of-collapse-reflections-on-uncivilisation-2012/.	REM, 25.08.12
In the Field of Time, 03.11.12, *Redrawing the maps*. Available at: http://www.redrawingthemaps.org.uk/blog/?p=262.	R-M, 03.11.12
Draget, 16.06.13, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/draget/.	REM, 16.06.13

Blog posts	Marker
Expanding the possible – Uncivilisation 2013 and beyond, 10.09.13, *Remembering*. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/expanding-the-possible/.	REM, 10.09.13
Repairing the Silent Spring: a conversation with Bernie Krause, 17.10.13, *Dark Mountain blog*. Available at: http://dark-mountain.net/blog/repairing-the-silent-spring-a-conversation-with-bernie-krause/.	DMB, 17.10.13
Emergent figurative thinking, 14.10.13, *Refigurations*. Available at: http://www.refiguring.net/refigurations/Entries/2013/10/14_Emergent_figurative_thinking.html.	REF, 14.10.13
The circle and the line, 07.11.13, *Refigurations*. Available at: http://www.refiguring.net/refigurations/Entries/2013/11/7_The_circle_and_the_line.html.	REF, 07.11.13
The Experience of Collapse, 04.12.13, *3S blog*. Available at: http://3s.uea.ac.uk/blog/experience-collapse.	3S, 04.12.13
Lines of flight in a time of endings, 07.12.13, *Refigurations*. Available at: http://www.refiguring.net/refigurations/Entries/2013/12/7_Lines_of_flight_in_a_time_of_endings.html.	REF, 07.12.13

Table C.2: Index of research related blog posts

Other material
Research plan. This was the original research proposal drafted at the end of the first year of my research. Individual chapters are available separately, see: http://patternwhichconnects.com/phd/academic_writing.html
Narrative methods and my approach. This was an early formulation of my approach to doing narrative research, see: http://patternwhichconnects.com/phd/academic_writing_files/Narrative%20methods%20and%20my%20approach%20%28JDG%29.pdf

Table C.3: Index of other material publicly available

Appendix D

List of talks and events recorded during the research.

Recording	**Marker**
Paul Kingsnorth & Dougald Hine, ‘Welcome’, *Uncivilisation* 2011	PK DH A-R, 20.08.11
Panel Discussion, ‘Collapsonomics’, *Uncivilisation* 2011	PD A-R, 20.08.11
Sharon Blackie, ‘Living on the edge – and by the word’, *Uncivilisation* 2011	SB A-R, 20.08.11
Vinay Gupta & Dougald Hine, ‘We can no longer afford to ignore the sacred’, *Uncivilisation* 2011	VG DH A-R, 20.08.11
Nick Hunt, ‘New Myths for New Worlds’, *Uncivilisation* 2011	NH A-R, 20.08.11
Paul Kingsnorth & Dougald Hine, ‘The Dark Mountain Project: what next?’, *Uncivilisation* 2011	PK DH A-R, 21.08.11
Dougald Hine & Anthony McCann, ‘The Future of the University’, *Uncivilisation* 2011	DH AM A-R, 21.08.11
Paul Kingsnorth, ‘Welcome and introduction’, *Carrying the Fire* 2012	PK A-R, 21.04.12
Margaret Elphinstone, ‘In conversation with David Borthwick’, *Carrying the Fire* 2012	ME A-R, 21.04.12
Sharon Blackie & Alastair McIntosh, ‘Restorying the Earth’, *Carrying the Fire* 2012	SB AM A-R, 21.04.12
Franklin Lopez, ‘End:Civ’, *Carrying the Fire* 2012	FL A-R, 21.04.12
Dougie Strang, ‘Closing session’, *Carrying the Fire* 2012	PK A-R, 21.04.12
Andy Letcher & Adrian Arbib, ‘The Art of Protest’, *Uncivilisation* 2012	AL AA A-R, 18.08.12
Martin Shaw, ‘Gambling with the Knuckle-Bones of Wolves’, *Uncivilisation* 2012	MS A-R, 18.08.12
Paul Kingsnorth & Jay Griffiths, ‘The Earthsongs of England’, *Uncivilisation* 2012	PK JG A-R, 18.08.12
Martin Palmer & Dougald Hine, ‘Sacred Stories’, *Uncivilisation* 2012	MP DH A-R, 19.08.12
Mearcstapa, ‘Rise and Root’, *Uncivilisation* 2012	M A-R, 19.08.12
Steve Wheeler, ‘Extended Horizons: Unprogramming the Apocalypse’, *Uncivilisation* 2012	SW A-R, 19.08.12

Recording	**Marker**
Dougald Hine & Jeppe Graugaard, ‘A Breakout from the Prison of Modern Time Is Possible’, *Redrawing the Maps*	DH JG A-R, 05.11.12
Dougald Hine, ‘Taking it Home’, *Uncivilisation* 2013	DH A-R, 17.08.13
Morten Svenstrup & Jeppe Graugaard, ‘Time Culture’, *Uncivilisation* 2013	MS JG A-R, 17.08.13
Dougald Hine, ‘The Illich Conspiracy’, *Uncivilisation* 2013	DH A-R, 18.08.13
The Dark Marshes, ‘Reflections on Unciv 2013’	DM A-R, 29.08.13

Table D.1: Index of audio recordings

Appendix E

List of blogs related to the Dark Mountain Project followed during the research.

Title, author	**Address**
Andrew J Taggart's blog, Andrew Taggart	http://andrewjtaggart.com/
Changing the world (and other excuses for not getting a proper job), Dougald Hine	http://otherexcuses.blogspot.com
Charlotte Du Cann's blog, Charlotte Du Cann	http://charlotteducann.blogspot.co.uk/
Coyopa, Tom Hirons	http://coyopa.wordpress.com
Dougald Hine's blogs, Dougald Hine	http://rhapsodi.se
Elsewhere, Paul Kingsnorth	http://tumblr.paulkingsnorth.net/
Farmer versus fox, Alex Fradera	http://farmerversusfox.tumblr.com/
Horizons of Significance, Antonio Dias	http://horizonsofsignificance.wordpress.com/
How to live wiki, Vinay Gupta	http://vinay.howtolivewiki.com/blog/
Into the Hermitage, Rima Staines	http://intothehermitage.blogspot.co.uk
Paul Kingsnorth's blog, Paul Kingsnorth	http://www.paulkingsnorth.net/blog
Marmaduke Dando's blog, Marmaduke Dando	http://www.marmadukedando.com/ category/musings/
Nick Hunt Scrutiny, Nick Hunt	http://nickhuntscrutiny.com/
Psycho-Bubble, Steve Thorp	http://psycho-bubble.tumblr.com/
Ran Prieur's blog, Ran Prieur	http://www.ranprieur.com/
Re-enchanting the Earth, Sharon Blackie	http://reenchantingtheearth.com/blog/
Steelweaver, Steve Wheeler	http://steelweaver.tumblr.com
The Archdruid Report, John Michael Greer	http://thearchdruidreport.blogspot.co.uk/
The Dark Mountain Blog, various participants	http://dark-mountain.net/blog
The Learning Planet, Bridget McKenzie	http://thelearningplanet.wordpress.com/
The Place Between Stories, Cat Lupton	http://theplacebetweenstories.wordpress.com/
These precious and beautiful things, Daniela Othieno	http://preciousbeautiful.blogspot.co.uk/
Uncivilisation Ning, various participants	http://uncivilisation.ning.com/
Weaving poetry, Emily Wilkinson	http://weavingpoetry.net/

Table E.1: Index of blogs followed during the research

Appendix F

Example of thematic analysis of interview-conversations. Codes are grouped according to the different aspects of the Dark Mountain Project they relate to.

What's DM reacting against?	Way to DM	What's DM about?	Attitude	Tools
Linear narrative (DH)	Despair (ST)	Conversation (DH)	Openness to the unexpected (DH)	Deliberately opening up a space (not top-down) (SW)
Seeing the promises of progress break (PK)	Despair (DS)	Conversation (DO)	Reality as playing field (DH)	Holding the space and improvising conversation (SW)
Cultural nihilism/decline (SW)	Carrying the weight of ecocide (DS)	Way of being/seeing (DH)	Awareness of the arbitrariness of the game rules (DH)	Language as emergent and improvised (AF)
Isolation following from interest in decline (SW)	Heart ache (DO)	Innovation as theology (DH)	Wildness (AF)	The role of language and metaphor (AT)
Stuttering as the expression giving to this experience (AT)	Recovering from trauma (TD)	DM as a philosophical experiment (DH)	Wildness (ST)	DM as a place to be puzzled in (PK)
Linear time: the change is always in the future (SW)	Acceptance (PK)	Doing the same thing but in different domains (AF)	Presence (AF)	Holding the space (PK)

What's DM reacting against?	Way to DM	What's DM about?	Attitude	Tools
Enormity and psychological collapse (TD)	Being ready for the conversation (PK)	Joy and play crucial to improv (AF)	Listening (AF)	Art as a way of looking at the world as multiple (PK)
Staring reality of ecocide in the eye (DS)	Finding each other: contingency and serendipity (AT)	Reconfigure relationship with what is possible (PK)	Opening to vulnerability and risk (AF)	DM as a platform to scream from (ST)
Technology as attitude (TD)	Serendipity (CL)	Ecocentrism (PK)	Generosity (AF)	Attention-span and focus (SW)
Urgency as escape (TD)	Synchronicity (DO)	Shifting worldviews (PK)	Openendedness (TD)	Proprioception (TD)
	Synchronicity (ST)	DIY culture (DS)	Beauty (DO)	Stories (TD)
	Calling (ST)	Starting small as a point of departure in change (SW)	Living in the now: improvisation (SW)	Art as meaning-making (TD)
	Kindred spirits (DS)	Myth as sense-making on the cultural level (SW)	Control vs. virtues (patience, courage, phronesis) (AT)	Re-storying / re-narrating: creating new meanings (CL)
	Joy in finding each other (DS)	Flourishing (AT)	Fecundity without finality (AT)	Communication (TD)
		Good social institutions support being good humans (AT)	Essay as one of the great genres of today (AT)	Creativity as a way out of despair (DS)
		What's next is a way of living, not an answer (SW)	Practicing and learning together in conversations (CL)	Holding a space for conversation (DS)
		Moving between different circles of logic (TD)		Liminal as an 'unsettling' concept (DS)
		Re-integrating in evolution (TD)		Metaphor (CL)
		Shifting perspectives (TD)		Pilot and compass (TD)
		Playfulness and beauty (DS)		

Principles	Pitfalls	What’s DM saying?	What happens/emerges?	DM evolution
Improvisation (DH)	Movements (TD)	The game is almost over (DH)	Five stages of coming to terms with death (DS)	Manifesto ’hit a nerve’ (PK)
Improvisation (PK)	Signposts and labels (TD)	What we have is enough (AF)	Getting on with it (DO)	Festival changed (DS)
Improvisation at the root of what DM is doing (SW)	Ends and means (TD)	Catabolic collapse (PK)	Connecting with likeminded people (DO)	Keeping DM open, avoiding definitions (PK)
Making do with less (AF)	Ego and short-circuiting (TD)	Environmentalism: all or nothing (PK)	Shifting worldview by acting differently (DO)	Wide range of opinions within DM (DS)
Finding solutions by looking backwards (AF)	Negotiation (TD)	Psychological collapse (ST)	Stopping pretending feels better (DO)	DM as a flexible entity that will develop (DS)
Emergence (AF)	The white, male intellectual (DS)	Violence as part of life (understanding it) (SW)	Opening up for creativity and writing (DO)	Conversation (following from manifesto) (SW)
No point pretending (PK)	Violence as an obstacle to conversation (CL)	Slow decline (SW)	Exploring new ways of expression (ST)	
Cutting through to the bare bones of language (DO)	Language as a stumbling block (CL)	From Logos to Mythos (SW)	Facing up to collapse: awakening (ST)	
DM as an open space where uncertainty is allowed (ST)	Language armour (CL)	Place and connection to the land (SW)	Soul-making / acorn (ST)	
Being in Dark Mountain doesn’t carry obligation (ST)	The story of the end of growth as a linear narrative (CL)	Apocalypse as the flipside of progress (SW)	Art and performance as instances of magic (DS)	
People don’t judge you (ST)		Now is a trickster moment (SW)	Portable skills to build personal resilience (SW)	
Agility/ductility as a key part of what comes next (SW)		We live in a unique moment in history (DS)	’Deep work’ to get out of the rot (SW)	

Principles	Pitfalls	What's DM saying?	What happens/emerges?	DM evolution
Craft as an attitude (SW)		DM as 'speakers for the dead' (Ender's Game sequel) (SW)	Invoking new infrastructures (AT)	
Quality (Zen and the Art of) (SW)		Gap between social reality and the concepts we are using to describe it (AT)	Gift economy (AT)	
The role of place as fundamental to getting rooted (unlike Beckett's placeless space) (AT)		Scarcity and abundance: competition, innovation, playfulness (AT)	Improvisation and jazz: codifying language and metaphor into social reality (AT)	
Awareness, presence, training our senses (AT)		Technology and craft (TD)	Joyful disillusionment (TD)	
Dissensus (TD)		DM vs. other environmental narratives (DGR) (DS)	Creativity beyond a sense of self (TD)	
Have conversations differently (CL)		DM prompts to ask bigger questions (CL)	Ease and resistance (TD)	
Carry out enquiry differently (CL)		The role of story and myth in social change (SB)	Vulnerability and letting go (TD)	
Dissensus / disparity (CL)		Meta-narrative (SB)	Recognising abundance (TD)	
Temporalities: deep vs. flat time (CL)		Place-based stories and responsibility (SB)	Emergence (TD)	
Unlearning habits of confrontation (SW)			Collaboration beyond isolation (TD)	
			Letting go of preconceptions (CL)	

Table F.1: Example of thematic analysis

Appendix G

Example of visual analysis of Bridget McKenzie's untitled photograph (see Figure 5.4) and elaboration of my approach. This was written in an email to Bridget, 24.09.12.

hi again bridget,

i've had some time to think a little more about your question on interpretation. i've been using the work of catherine kohler riessman in working with textual narrative so a [sic] my approach is grounded in narrative sociology focusing on identity, cultural context, representation and emergent meanings. seeing narratives as co-constructed, i try to listen to the narrative as much as i can while offering open-ended questions which allow for dialogue and communicative equality. i find the process of arriving at a shared understanding of a narrative really interesting and have taken an experimental approach to analysis. you'll probably be able to see this in some of the interviews i've published about dark mountain.

as i move on from fieldwork into analysis (although these are not discrete phases), i am beginning to sense different themes and place individual conversations in the context of the others. there's a lot of thematic analysis in there but also dialogic/performative stuff which will inevitably bear on visual analysis as well, [sic] i find an appropriate way to link text and image.

the reason i was struck by your photo was that it somehow condensed a lot of the meanings i'd been finding in my conversations. the contrast of the footprint – with both its fragility and insistence – and the imprint of the sea – beautiful, powerful and unintended – bears on collective reflections about the relationship between humanity and nature, the sense of frailty and despair, wildness and civility. it also spoke to a deeper undercurrent in my personal thinking that stems from gregory bateson's ideas about meta-patterns and the relation between mind and nature. the 'organic' feel of the subsided wave (with its root structure) is oppositional to the industrially made boot/shoe, yet it just touches the footprint and beckons us to think about our connection with it. in this way, i think the image is asking me personally to consider how the patterns i see in nature are mirrored in my own life, and how i can unfold in unison with it.

so i think there are ecological, social, political and spiritual elements in there to talk about. a lot of questions emerge: is the sea encroaching or subsiding? is it coming to engulf the shoeprint or was the highpoint that moment when it just sent out a tongue to touch the shoe? was the walker there in the moment the wave came to put her foot down? was it

a moment of fleeing or playing? your story about the photo further adds questions about change, memory and beauty.

so my framework is one which basically draws on my own interpretation/subjective reading, dialogic thematic exploration and the work's contextual background. this is based in my work with interpreting meaning through a process of turning a spoken conversation into an interview through transcription, re-interpretation and editing in collaboration with my co-conversationalist. i have no idea whether this will work for visual narratives – i have a hunch that it will but it will probably need modification and a great deal more listening and contemplation.

i don't know if this really answers your question. but it gave me an opportunity to reflect on my method and re-think how this might work for images. very helpful as i am in the beginning phase of data analysis!

hope you are well and keeping on top of time :) it's been busy for me since i got back (actually with the topic of time itself as i've been working on a new project on time culture – www.time-culture.net) and so i haven't really had a good moment for sending you this email before now. take your time with replying and don't feel obliged to put too much thought into it!

i had a strange encounter with david buckland of the cape farewell project, which alana mentioned at the field. very disappointed about his presentation, i managed to challenge his linear meta-narrative with a question about failure but he just dismissed it and managed to be offensive in the process! well, there is art and then there is Art, i guess.

take care and see you further down the line. all the best!

jeppe

Appendix H

Interview-conversation, CL P-I, 20.12.12: 'Serendipity, Edges and Dissolving Language-Armour – A Conversation with Cat Lupton'. Available at: http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/serendipity-edges-and-dissolving-language-armour-a-conversation-with-cat-lupton/. Underlined text is hyperlinked in the electronic version of this text.

Last year around this time, I found myself responding to an invitation by Cat Lupton to contribute a piece to her new blog The Place Between Stories. That was the beginning of a longer conversation that has unwound itself into the words below. The text is based on a conversation we had in St. James' Park last spring, which I transcribed and we subsequently played with in a process of continued dialogue. It begins, as many of these conversations have done, with Dark Mountain and unfolds in several directions at once. It still is.

JDG: How did you find Dark Mountain?

CL: Kind of by accident. I took this transition in my own life in 2009, I gave up my job as a university lecturer and was basically in recovery from that. And I stumbled on Paul Kingsnorth's piece in the Ecologist which then led me to the manifesto. And I just felt very inspired by it. I guess the idea of new stories about the world, new possibilities for writing and creative responses to the world is what drew me towards it initially.

But I think the strongest thing is the expressed desire to have conversations differently, to carry out enquiry differently. To open up space for saying let's not just bring our received ideas and ways of speaking, of engaging with each other, to the table and keep repeating them. What I mean is the kind of speaking that sounds pre-scripted and depersonalised – say, the habit any of us can fall into of saying things like 'we really must do something!', when it's not at all clear to whom that 'we' is referring. I recently came across Andrew Taggart's distinction between reciting and improvising, and I found that helpful for thinking further about this. I connected with people in the project who seemed to share this sense of openness. So that's probably the touchstone for me.

And it's a metaphor. The Dark Mountain. You are not dealing with a programme, you're dealing with this poetic metaphor which is very powerful. People have the mountaineering metaphor, the image of base camp, or gathering around a fire. It's a sort of place where you gather and a place where you can go off to have your own Dark Mountain experience. The suggestiveness of having a geographical image is very strong (and mountains are already powerful metaphors for difficult inner journeys and spiritual experiences across many cultures). So you kind of know what it means without having to define it.

JDG: Yes. What I've found is that by opening a space, as you say, for having a different kind of conversation we are also becoming able to re-story and re-narrate not just the collective story but our own life stories as well. If we stop using the old concepts and language of growth and development, there arises some kind of momentum, a kind of conceptual vacuum, where we can begin building new meanings. I experienced that in something Andrew has said about the end of

the career, for example. I thought "actually yes, I'm probably not going to have career in that way". It doesn't really make sense to think about my future in terms of pursuing a career. And suddenly new possibilities arise. It's interesting to observe that Dark Mountain is sometimes able to create this kind of space where old concepts can be challenged and where we are able to collectively come to new meanings together.

CL: It is, for want of a better word, a delicate process that you find a kind of reciprocity with and it takes an incredible generosity towards first of all yourself and then towards others. Not to be impatient with the 'not knowing' of that open enquiry. Or the process you describe of re-telling the story of your life, which is an incredibly hard thing to do. You can't believe the new thing that you are trying to open up. And so a sense of support is important to be able to maintain the conversation.

JDG: I came to Dark Mountain through an environmentalist or activist path. And what was really refreshing about coming to the Uncivilisation festival was finding other people who just had a similar kind of heartache. Being allowed to ache in order to heal and come to terms with that feeling of heartache around these issues and what's going on at a planetary scale. That it's OK. I mean, activism can easily fall into a sentiment of "just toughen up and get on" or "we can't give up". So when you actually do give up and sit down and look at it, it is pretty overwhelming.

CL: I've always been, through most of my adult life, fairly close to a sort of left-wing milieu where a lot of people are political activists of various kinds. But I've just never found an activist in myself to connect to. To commit to that way of being. I guess I've always had a wariness of exactly that kind of attitude you're describing, that the ends justify the means so we must keep pushing on regardless. There is a set of behaviours that goes with activism that can be incredibly useful and powerful in some circumstances but then there's a lot that it is repressing.

The ability to just take a reality check and say "are we actually achieving the goals that we say we are achieving?" is really important. Sitting down and taking the blinders off. What comes out? What else do we find?

JDG: There is a spiritual aspect to that mixture of heartache, meaning-making, and taking off the blinders, I think. At least to me. Although 'spiritual' is such a loaded word. I've always been interested in Buddhism and was very inspired by Alan Watts early in my life, so that's where I come from in that regard. But the experience I've had over the last year has been that some of my daily practices of yoga, meditation, small prayers, there's seems to be a greater depth in that aspect of my life. Which has come as a bit of a surprise, really. I wonder if this has to do with having all these conversations and engaging in a mode of communication where I don't have to have answers all the time. People have mentioned spirituality in different ways as an aspect of Dark Mountain. Is that related to your interaction with Dark Mountain and your writing, or the creative aspect you mention?

CL: I think it is connected. This feels like quite an odd thing to say, but there is something about being at the Uncivilization festivals where there are just these powerful energies or serendipities that go through them. In terms of the people you just meet or run into, or happen to sit next to in a session. And you find these new connections. And other people you just walk past and you don't see. Also, something really important for me this year at Uncivilization 2012 was making a connection with the land of the Sustainability Centre where the last two festivals have been held. I wrote a blog post about this: about asking for, and receiving, help from the land itself, from the being(s) of that particular ecosystem. You're on these pathways that I would say are to do with energy, spirit and following intuition, even if what you're bringing is a very secular, or rational, mind frame or thinking.

I don't know how to describe this well, but it is as if there is a bigger purpose trying to realise itself through these gatherings, that brings people together seemingly at random, and they find these deeper connections together. And I notice things like people I think of as "the Dark Mountain

Elders" who are just often not doing very much that is visible, like speaking out in q & a sessions, for instance, but whose presence just seems incredibly reassuring. And then there is a little contingent of children. So different generations are present. And it's just this sort of feeling that it's a community that is re-finding ritual, that is making a ritual even without consciously intending to do so. Or, there is some kind of intention there but there is something bigger going on with it. Does that sort of make sense?

JDG: I think that makes a good deal of sense. As you say, it is hard to talk about, really. What are those dynamics and processes? Other people have also mentioned a sense of synchronicity, serendipity, and how things pop up at the same time and bring people together. It isn't something you can plan out but something that emerges out of what first appears as random encounters.

CL: It's the sort of things that you can't really predict or plan for. Like with the Liminal performance, which I participated in in a small way in 2011. And on that basis I became part of the Mearcstapa clan, who were involved with decorating the festival space and doing weird and wonderful things around the edges at this year's Uncivilisation. There's an intention to create something that's quite edgy – liminal means on the edge or at a threshold. But it is not deliberately creating magic, it is more about crafting, and then stepping into, a space where magic might just happen, if you have crafted well, if you're lucky, if the spirits are pleased and want to come out to play.

The thing about serendipity is very strong. People meet it when they are going through that process of emotional questioning of progress. It is when you stop and take a breath, when you stop pushing for results, that it comes up. That seems to be when people find connections. And it hits people at different times and in different ways but it puts something in the ground that is there as long as it is needed. The thing about serendipity is that it can take you where you need to go, and that is not necessarily where you might have planned to go. It opens the doors you weren't expecting to find.

JDG: That whole process is really interesting! It is actually reflected in how Dark Mountain developed and how it grew. The emergence and the coming together. It wasn't planned for.

CL: I suppose it's the beginning of being in that kind of cultural movement where there's a lot of disparity or dissensus to use that word. You know, you don't have to all agree and don't have to all follow the same programme. But there are resonances and differences that are echoing across this kind of space. And then it is very interesting all that happens within this space and the different networks of people who are drawn to it.

I remember at the 2011 festival being conscious that there were hackers, geeks, steampunk folk, Transition Town folk, permaculture folk, artists/makers, poets, smallholders, people living wild in the woods, different environmental activist groups, and more. All these different tribes that you wouldn't normally expect to see at the same event, all finding some kind of resonance with Dark Mountain.

JDG: You mention dissensus which is something I've come to use more as a way of thinking about Dark Mountain. It seems to describe accurately a kind of unspoken agreement on the form of the conversation rather than the content. The ambiguity within Dark Mountain seems to be a real strength because people can connect to their own life and their personal circumstance and don't have to, like you say, subscribe to a programme of action. It seems we can kind of agree on the core stuff. Whatever that is! It is quite hard to describe what Dark Mountain is. The boundaries are blurry and there are no hard edges. I've been thinking about those edges. It seems like they only really appear when we come up against some limit of what Dark Mountain is not or when we hit on some really sensitive issue. People can quickly become divided into 'for and against', and 'right and wrong', when the conversation turns on deep emotional and personal stuff. Then the form of the conversation all too quickly breaks down.

I was trying to make sense of this thing about edges when I read your essay from Dark Mountain 2

[based on the blog post Wandering Around Words], which is dealing with how language sometimes becomes an obstacle for the deeper interaction that goes on within our conversations. I found that really interesting because I feel like we easily trip when we talk about more emotionally charged ideas or topics. Then people seem to get into fixed positions and the conversation breaks down into an argument much quicker.

CL: My interpretation of that is to do with the cultural fear and entrenchment we bring from a society that values certainty and holding your position. Which would rather try to be strong than say "I don't know", or ask "can we look at this differently". In many of these situations you are dealing with a shadow, in a Jungian sense, a part of yourself that is so repressed that when it emerges, it emerges very violently. And one of those things, I guess, would be violence. Living in a society where most of us privileged people are pretty uncomfortable with and removed from direct physical violence, we don't meet violence in our day-to-day lives, yet our civilization is built on incredibly deep violence. We practice violence indirectly through non-physical forms, through intellectual violence or emotional violence or by projecting the source of violence onto somebody or something else. I've begun dipping into Marshall Rosenberg's work on Non-Violent Communication, and just the fact that he identifies most of the normal, taken-for-granted ways that we speak and converse with one another as violent, and then explains why they are violent, is itself a revelation. Subliminally you think of yourself as being a nice person and not being violent. Yet that violence is still there within oneself and it doesn't take much for it to surface and overwhelm a conversation. And then it is not possible to have that kind of dialogic space anymore.

JDG: Yes, that describes it well! In *Wandering Around with Words* you ask:

"what happens if we act in the name of certain words without questioning them? They might, for a while, set hard enough to make a crust to stand upon, to rally around. 'Sustainable development', 'uncivilisation', 'stop the war'. But underneath, molten questions and challenges are moving all the time; sooner or later the pressure of what has been left unsaid and unexamined will break to the surface and demand attention."

The importance of the language we use has become a central theme to my research. Not in the sense that we need to analyse everything or be pernickety about every word we use. But in the sense that we need to recognise language as a dynamic flow, a continual stream, where it is implicit that the words or categories we articulate are useful only insofar as they allow for emergence and avoid closing down meaning.

As you say, it seems really important that we pay attention to this. And refrain from just regurgitating words and phrases because we feel they signal something we can identify with. That too easily leads us into a use of language that makes the world appear static and dead. Which ends up reproducing the unspoken power relations that plague our social interactions. I almost want to say that if stories open new possibilities, language can make or break them. How do we deal effectively with our 'encultured inability to engage with complexity', as you call it, and begin to embrace the openness and uncertainty of language?

CL: One of the things that's begun to interest me is how English, and many other languages, are predominantly oriented towards nouns. So our entire language drives a habit of dividing the world up into discrete objects which are supposed to stay put, to be what they say they are, to have labels stuck on them. I wrote a blog post recently which was about being weary of this kind of language, the last line of which ended with the phrase "hand the power of nouns over to rich, ever-unfolding variations upon verbness." I had in mind languages like Navajo, which famously place much less emphasis on nouns and use a lot more combinations of verbs, and how this nurtures in speakers a much more dynamic sense of being-in-process-within-a-world-in-process, if I can put it like that.

Daniela has also been looking into this aspect of Navajo and also a similar tendency in Inuit

languages. Adding to this – more synchronicity! – I got around to reading the second part of your conversation with Tony Dias, and the passages where you talk about not reducing things to labels, which is about setting them up as fixed things outside yourself that you then have to subjugate yourself to, but staying in more fluid relationship with something like Dark Mountain. That was the best articulation I've found so far of trying to understand this kind of dynamic.

There's also a question for me of nurturing the kinds of spaces where people can have these kinds of conversations, because they are about learning, experimenting, and taking risks, so it's important that people feel safe, that trust is built and maintained. That judgement is put to one side, that those involved will practice generosity and compassion towards one another. It's worth emphasising 'practice' because most of us aren't automatically good at these things, so it is very much about practicing and learning to do them better. Although it's not appropriate to every circumstance, for me the Way of Council is a good starting point, a good container, for this kind of work, because it has forms and ground rules that promote that kind of trust, safety and openness – speaking and listening from the heart.

The Rise and Root session that I helped co-host at Uncivilization this year, along with some of the other members of Mearcstapa (the other hosts were Allie Stewart, Daniela Othieno, Tom Hirons, Steve Wheeler and Rima Staines), was a first attempt at creating that kind of space for the whole Unciv community to encounter each other, to speak and listen deeply in a place where all voices are equal. Allowing for things that could be done better next time, many people seemed really to appreciate that session, and for me helping to hold that space was a very powerful and instructive experience, and a real honour as well.

Coming back to the point you made earlier: if a conversation hits on something really sensitive and the people participating don't feel safe (which might not be a conscious awareness), if their sense of reality is threatened, then everyone starts clamping down, retreating to very entrenched positions and hurling insults at one another, which boil down to 'you're a so-and-so' (forcing a label onto them). In my experience, people often have a certain tone of speaking, or certain words or catch phrases they use, or a little routine that they go through, or they start talking faster and blocking their interlocutors out, if they're feeling insecure or threatened or under pressure, and these are always very clammed up and defensive ways of using language. I know I have these habits myself.

The psychologist Wilhelm Reich saw people as having 'character armour', that they store emotional pain and repression and the effects of social moulding within their bodies as a kind of rigidity and tightness (the classic English stiff upper lip, which is about men especially not showing emotion, is an example), which is hugely detrimental to their physical, emotional and spiritual health. I wonder if it's possible to talk about a parallel phenomenon of 'language armour'.

JDG: That's an interesting idea! So we could say that we need to remove our *language armour* before being able to engage in this kind of conversation. I guess that is another way of saying that we are vulnerable when we open up to 'not being right'. And that's why trust and support is so important. It helps us move beyond that initial feeling of exposure into a deeper sense of mutuality.

I'm trying to get to grips with how people express the Dark Mountain narrative in their lives and how to talk about that. You mentioned being attracted to the creative and poetic in Dark Mountain. How do you engage with Dark Mountain in a creative way?

CL: It's interesting because it's not that I don't think I do, it's just that if I do it is not intentional. When I try to have intentional engagement with some kind of mental construct of what I think the Dark Mountain Project is about, things like local living, storytelling, reconnecting to land and, eco-poetry, I don't actually do any of that stuff. And it doesn't come to me, or through me, in any sense.

Yet in the last year I've done a series of photography-related projects for Dark Mountain: I wrote

an illustrated post for the blog, and curated a photo-essay of my own work and that of three other photographers (Bridget McKenzie, Tony Hall and Andy Broomfield) for Dark Mountain 3, and with Bridget and her husband Brian I put together the Light Leaves installation for this year's Uncivilisation. And when I see these things finished there are definite resonances with Dark Mountain concerns: with re-wilding the self, for instance, with the complicated place of photography and more broadly digital technology in a declining civilization; but those are not like ingredients that I set out to put consciously into those projects.

It links back to the question we were just talking about, and again your conversation with Tony Dias really helped my understanding of this. If I try and relate to Dark Mountain as a set of fixed concerns which I'm 'supposed' to be engaging with, paralysis ensues. But if can let go of my preconceptions enough and just make something, I look back at what I've done and can and see that it definitely fits with, or adds to, Dark Mountain's preoccupations. Also, it's worth stressing that all of these projects are in some degree collaborative, they're 'conversations' involving the work of a group of people, not just me.

I guess Dark Mountain has also prompted me to ask bigger questions, about how to live well in a world in which economic and ecological certainties are unravelling. How to make sense of really drastic changes to the world's climate, if you happen to be in a place where the impacts are indirect, and have to be inferred from quite abstract data? How to you make sense of, and live with, the myriad layers of what is happening and what is changing? What are the right choices for me to make, in the context of where I'm at now?

For me, writing and art aren't about responding with the kind of urgency and immediacy that on one level those kinds of questions seem to demand. Or, to be specific, I can't do the kind of writing that I do and feel it is any good if I submit myself to those kinds of pressures. It is much more about a longer rumination, an I-don't-quite-know-what's-going-on process of responding to things in the world which I am not even consciously aware of. It changes the time of reaction. Although you are living in a civilisation which is in the process of decline, materially or culturally, you don't suddenly wake up one morning and see the end result of that process. Even in fifty years, you could only see a fraction of things changing. So how do we live in that much longer scale? It's made me think about that process of adjusting life to that kind of temporality. And be honest about that.

JDG: Wendell Berry, in his recent Jefferson Lecture, says very succinctly and powerfully that sustainability is really about developing cultural cycles that map back onto fertility cycles of the planet. That has condensed what the whole sustainability issue is about for me. And I think that is directly related to what you are saying about time and how time is constructed in our civilisation and that sense of urgency and hurry. When you look at the development of the mechanical clock, for example, it's apparent that over the last thousand years cultural cycles have been increasingly pushed out of sync with natural cycles by a tendency towards speed and efficiency created by clock technology itself.

In Norwich you still find a few churches which have sundials. That was how you measured time and that was all that was needed until you had railroads when you needed to be there on time for the train. It ties in with the development of industrialism all the way up to computers and network time. Today time seems to be just an abstract. We've abstracted time from actual physical process as well as extracted space from physical place.

What seems to be a kind of cultural task is to start paying more attention to natural temporalities, getting used to thinking in different, slower or much longer time-scales. I think that relates to what you are saying about looking ahead and saying it is not just about the next five years, or a small window in which we can deal with climate change or something like that. We actually need to think deeper about how we want to live and how we re-inhabit longer temporalities.

CL: I think that's right. I was thinking about indigenous temporalities as well – although that's a very generalised way of putting it. I recently read Rebecca Solnit's book *A Book of Migrations* where she goes travelling in Ireland. She was talking to people in Southwestern Ireland, which is a rural area where things move slowly, and heard a story about a local guy in a pub nearly getting into a fight with an English visitor, because the local guy was raging quite seriously about an episode that happened during Oliver Cromwell's invasion of Ireland – that's around 350 years ago! And that really made me stop and think, about how there are cultures where people still carry a much deeper, denser sense of historical time, of ancestral time, than we in our speeded-up lives do. What then counts as 'recent' history, or 'too far' in the past to be worth getting into a fight about? Where are past, present and future? Who gets to make those kinds of decisions and judgements? Even my saying 'time moves slowly in Southwestern Ireland' feels like me imposing my assumptions about time on that place – I actually haven't a clue how fast people there feel themselves to be moving!

Going off at a tangent from that, I've been thinking recently that you can also get into the same pattern of linear narrative thinking that the growth society isn't going to continue. What if it actually does? What if it does so for the next twenty years in the part of the world where you find yourself? It almost becomes a challenge of not how you deal with things falling apart but how you deal with things not falling apart! Although the bigger picture is decline, growth could continue in some places, just serving smaller and smaller fractions of society. A number of things brought me to this point where I felt the need for a reality check about the story of the end of growth as much as the story of growth.

I've been haunted on and off by a comment that a guy posted after one of the Dark Mountain blogs, going back a while now so I'm paraphrasing this instead of digging out the source. He was a teenager in the early 1970s, and had heard Teddy Goldsmith speaking at his school, basically saying that within 20 years, industrial civilization would have completely collapsed and the survivors would be subsisting off the land. So the guy decided to go live on the land and become an organic farmer in Devon. He'd raised a family there and it sounded like in every sense he'd lived a beautiful, valuable life, helping to heal the land where he was. Yet he was now finding himself having to face up to his adult kids, who felt that he'd been crying wolf all those years about a terrible future that just didn't materialise, so rather than following his path they want to go live in the city, drive cars, have conventional jobs, that kind of mainstream life. Lots of similar stories dog the environmental movement: over-precise predictions of calamity that didn't come to pass as anticipated.

Several things come out of this for me. Many of the stories in circulation about how collapse will happen seem to mirror the narrative of progress in that they are extraordinarily simplistic – they presume that things will unfold in predictable ways with large-scale general effects. It's curious: in many ways John Michael Greer is one of the most subtle, historically-informed thinkers about peak oil and collapse: he points out over and over again that it's not about a one-hit apocalypse, but a process of slow and uneven contraction and decline, punctuated by brief periods of consolidation, over long stretches of time. But I've started to wonder (although I'm nowhere near an expert on these issues) whether he underestimates some of the ways that current technology might, at least in some places for some segments of the population, complicate or speed up that overall process. It's knowing that the overall picture is correct, but the devil is in the detail, and it's in the detail that each one of us has to work out the best way for him- or herself to live!

It always puzzles me how few people, even extremely smart people, really seem to take to heart that the world is composed of many multiple, discontinuous realities. How often big, general, global consequences get confidently extrapolated from a comparatively narrow set of experiences and perceptions. One of the really hard things to confront about the current crises is how the impacts are extremely uneven, the reactions to those impacts often seem totally counter-intuitive and counter-productive (well, at least from a liberal, left-leaning perspective they do: I guess if you are one of the tiny percentage of financial beneficiaries of the crises, you want to wring as much from the Earth

as you can while you still can), and there seems to be no connection or even mutual recognition across the increasingly sharp divides.

Why is it the overly-simplistic story memes that seem to float around and hold people's attention and belief, rather than the more complicated but more probable versions? Why is there this sense in someone like Greer's writings that he has to keep on repeating certain core premises about the long and uneven descent, to reign in some tendency 'out there' to reduce future events to a one-dimensional collapse? It's like we're telling ourselves stories to try and stay in control of a process of unravelling that actually we can't control to anything like the extent we believe we can, because there are so many variables, and so many uncertainties. Like – this comes back to a point you made earlier – trying to fit events into the mathematical, decimal time-frame that the culture of our modern minds is comfortable with: ten year chunks, fifty year chunks, things that will happen in the short, medium and long term. But again, how does a particular modern (Western) human social notion of 'the short term' map onto unfolding, not directly predictable, patterns of climactic instability caused by global warming? Or onto the natural planetary cycles you talked about earlier? Put it another way, how do you keep in your mind at once the 'slow violence', the little incremental changes that are impossible to see, the fact that these can add up to sudden tipping points of rapid and very drastic transformation, and the eventualities covered by neither of these?

I've been thinking quite a bit for various reasons about stories and credulity, which comes back to the Devon farmer. About the risks of believing someone else's version of reality – especially someone who has authority as a figure of power, an expert or leader – letting it carry you along to the point where you lose your own bearings, and then it turning out that they were not quite as right as you'd believed them to be. Again, Tony Dias's distinction between following your inner compass and following an external pilot is a really helpful metaphor for this. Funnily enough, these thoughts always end up with me recalling the story of the Pied Piper of Hamlyn, who spirited all the town's children away with his beautiful music and shut them up in the mountainside – all except for the little crippled boy who couldn't keep up with the rest, and so was able to raise the alarm. In this light, it intrigues me no end that Rima Staines happened to choose the Pied Piper for her extraordinary painting for the cover of the second Dark Mountain book!

JDG: Yes, it seems like we have a set of deep habits to overcome in breaking away from the one-size-fits-all, quick-and-ready answers we find for ourselves. It's such a difficult process because it involves giving up our sense of control and security, getting comfortable with being vulnerable and being held by others, not seeking salvation in technology and not having solutions! It involves a deeper and longer rumination, as you say, that really doesn't feel very comfortable in the beginning. And we are so used to having our attention taken away by political slogans, economic master-plans, advertisement and propaganda that it is hard just to hold our focus. At the heart of this is something that Tony talks and writes about so well, the fact that our attention is all we have. When I first noticed how often my attention wandered, I was discouraged. It is all too easy for some seemingly brilliant idea to capture our imagination without the slightest resistance.

I am by no means adept in holding my attention but it undeniably gets easier. In those longer moments of rumination we can begin to see how senseless this dissipation of attention is. I'm beginning to think that this lies at the core of every move towards brutality, fascism and cruelty (and the fact that these things are hard to watch makes it all the easier to turn our attention elsewhere). As soon as we lose our attention we are projecting or filling in the gaps with past observations. We miss an opportunity to see what usually falls in between the cracks. And we certainly can't grasp this thing you mention about the diversity, multiplicity and complexity of reality. Which is the very source of any beginning to feel ok in this world!

And it seems plausible to me that we can only begin to make sense of what a non-linear narrative or perspective is, when we have some kind of experience of it. It is there, readily available, all the time

in our being present. There is a moment in David Abram's *Spell of the Sensuous* where he goes out into a field and has an experience of past and future coming together into the present. It is that kind of presence I'm alluding to. If we can hone in on that, we may begin to become more attuned to the astonishingly diverse realities we exist within. The way we are so deeply intermeshed with the rest of the world that surround is undeniable when we let go of our projections and really step into the present.

CL: Yes, I think you're right. Coming back to choosing where to place one's attention, coming back to the present and learning to observe what is there without the baggage of preconceptions and labels and without rushing to classify and extrapolate, this is the beginning of a capacity to approach these matters in fresh ways. As you say, it's not an easy thing to do: it's practicing and failing and trusting yourself to pick it up again, and that you can get better at it, and that then your sense of what the world is does gradually begin to shift.

Appendix I

Example of an initial analysis of the first interview-conversations, 28.02.12.

This text is based on six conversations I have had with people involved in the Dark Mountain Project (DM). In it I try to unearth the different meanings that people infuse the project with as well as grapple with how and why it started, how people see or explain DM, and how [sic] could be analysed as a grassroots innovation. As such it is intended as a pilot study which will allow me both to test my methods and draw some initial conclusions which will help inform and structure my further fieldwork. It is a rather rushed text and should be seen only as an attempt to begin making sense of the interviews which were long (on average between 1-2 hours) and deserve a more in-depth analysis.

Two of the interviewees are founders of the project (Paul Kingsnorth (PK) and Dougald Hine (DH)), while the others (Andrew Taggart (AT), Daniela Othieno (DO), Roger Barnes (RB) and Anna Boyle (AB)) are participants in one way or other. I have also included some of my own statements (JDG) from the conversations and reflections. Here, I have given each statements equal weight in an attempt to create a higher level view of the Dark Mountain Project and I have written this text as a linear story. It is structured under the headings 1) How did DM begin?; 2) What is DM?; and, 3) Initial reflections on DM as a grassroots innovation.

While I acknowledge that each statement does not carry equal weight within DM and that my chosen headlines are arbitrary, I don't think this runs counter to the purpose of this text which is solely to provide a testing ground for my approach and an overview of DM itself. Further, it should be kept in mind that each of the seven narrators have a unique view of DM and that their statements cannot be synthesised into one single story. The aim is to draw out some of the key, underlying strands in order to examine the three section headings in terms of narrative. This means the focus here is the narrative aspect of each of these questions and that both the materiality and sequential nature of stories fall into the background.

This analysis is based on six interviews or 'structured conversations' for most of which I read a lot of the interviewee's writings before approaching them for an interview (the interviews with RB and AB where conducted during the festival so they were more spontaneous). The interviews themselves were open-ended and based on questions or themes

that I had drawn out from the texts or made up in order to answer my overarching research questions. All of the interviews were transcribed and during a re-reading of them I highlighted specific comments and themes. Based on reflections on these statements I selected some of the quotes in order to answer each of the questions posed in the sections headings of this text. My analysis is based on reflections on the interviews, reading DM texts, being a participant at the festival, and my research diary. I briefly reflect on this process and provide a detailed plan for my fieldwork at the end of this document.

1. How did DM begin?

This question can be answered at two levels. One tells the story of how PK and DH met, describes the conversation they engaged in, and recounts the events that led to the formation and take off of DM. The other describes the underlying thoughts and emotions that DM emerged from and this is the story I am concerned with here. First of all, DM has its root in PK's work as an activist, journalist and author. His second book 'Real England', which was published in 2008, deals with 'the death of place-based culture'. During travels around England he documents the advance of consumerism and the demise of local distinctiveness. There is an underlying sadness in the book and it leaves the reader with a sense of loss. The DM manifesto, published in 2009, is partly a reaction to having researched and written Real England.

PK: I was on a bit of a downer for a while after it. Because it's... At the same time you're meeting all these inspiring people doing good stuff but you can see that in the face of what is happening, you know, they can do... they can do good things, but they're not going to hold off the whole... I mean, doing that book was one of the things that brought me up to Dark Mountain in the first place ... [doing Real England] brought home the scale of what is going on. And... like, the importance of being honest about how much I'm not going to stop in this country now.

This connects to two themes in my conversations which captures PK's 'honest analysis of what we can do' as well as his sense of loss. One is the view of the present as a time of collapse, what DH and others have termed 'collapsonomics', and the other is the emotional response to that, namely despair. To begin with collapse, the overarching theme of the DM manifesto and the project itself is that modern civilization is no longer able to sustain itself because its institutions, resources and ability or operate are declining. The consequence is that Western countries are getting poorer and that many of the modern concepts with which we previously made sense of the world are breaking down. This basic analysis, that the way things are at present cannot be sustained and that things are going to change, underpins all of the conversations I've had. The interviewees have different view [sic] on how it is going to play out and what an appropriate response might be but there is a shared sense of living in a time of collapse. However, 'collapse' is clearly understood as a longer historical process rather than a one off catastrophic event:

PK: it is almost like we're stepping down, and this could go on for a hundred years or two

hundred years. And he [John Michael Greer] kind of traces it, compares it to the decline of the Roman empire, which is that kind of thing happening. And at the time, no one was there saying 'oh my god, it's an apocalypse, everything is falling apart', you know, they're just gradually realising that their parents were richer than them.

DO: I don't think it will be sort of a Big Bang kind of end of the world, I don't think so. I think it will be much more by stealth. Which is actually more dangerous on some level.

This underlying sense of danger connects with the emotional response to facing collapse. This is another recurring theme in the conversations and part of the conversations people have in DM is around how to deal with this. PK expresses that there is [sic] side to DM which is about dealing with despair and tells about how DM to him was also part of 'stepping back from an activist mindset'.

PK: there's an element of Dark Mountain which is almost like a kind of therapy group [laughs] which was entirely unintentional but a lot of people get together and start talking about how they are dealing psychologically with all these things.

But the therapeutic aspect of having such conversations doesn't end with simply coming to terms with collapse. On the other side of despair lies the challenge of how to take that realisation and that consciousness with you into your everyday life. For example, DO talks about the need to accept collapse and 'get on with it':

DO: this idea of acceptance, that there are certain things that are just going to happen whether we do our thing or not, they are just going to happen. And some of the things in collapse might be like that, they just might happen. I have a bit this thing about just get on with it. Whatever happens we just need to get on with it somehow.

PK relates to this as a process of 'stripping yourself of your illusions' and simply asking what makes most sense to do in a the world of collapse:

PK: It's just saying 'come on, actually you're not going to change the world'. But you have to be able to do it without giving up on everything. There has to be a way of balancing that out. Which is what, sort of, Dark Mountain sort of came from. It's saying 'this stuff isn't working and there's no point in pretending that it is', and we're committed to certain things which look like they're are going to happen now. And we're not going to stop that either. But that doesn't mean that we just give up and die. It just means we have to reconfigure our relationship with... with what's possible.

This is where the creative aspect of DM comes in. All of the interviewees expressed a sense that the best response to despair and collapse is to try and nurture new ways of seeing the world and finding creative ways to live that are appropriate in times of collapse. This seems to be at the heart of DM. Here, DH gives his version of what this process is like:

DH: the game is almost over and it is time to remind ourselves that it was a game, and that

we are the players rather than the pieces we've been playing with. The game in a sense is what we've known as capitalism, it's the way of viewing the world and the actions that follow from that when you tweak reality as made up of things which can be counted, measured, priced and once you agree to that rule then certain kinds of behaviour become almost inevitable. And a lot of the stuff we've said about human nature is really about the nature of humans when playing that particular game. And history and anthropology have a lot of other material for us which shows that there are other constellations in which we can be human together than the ones which are normal under the rules of this particular game. And as this unravels then things are likely to be useful or not useful to the extent that they have an awareness built in that there are other games that humans are capable of playing.

Learning to play those other games is part of the process of 'uncivilisation'. I think exploring this process of responding to collapse will shed light on the next question 'what is DM?'. But before going on to explore this in more depth, I want to briefly summarise the qualities that the interviewees relate to the process of dealing with collapse intellectually and emotionally. Here, realism, groundedness and honesty were recurring themes in our conversations about what characterises this process, e.g.:

DO: I think it's the honesty. The fact that people could say... And I get that about Dark Mountain the fact that it's looking at dark stuff but it's not really dark. It's actually really hopeful. Maybe hope is... but if there is something really just... 'Oh my god, finally we can just say it as it is', you know, without anybody erm, wanting immediately a programme for how to change things. That's one of the things that I love, that there is no programme of action that has to happen anytime to... but we can just sit down and take a breath and kind of go 'ok, what is it, what do we do?'

2. What is DM?

The common word that came up in the interviews about what DM is was 'conversation'. This word clearly meant different things to the interviewees which is seen in the kind of words they associated with conversation. Both PK and DH talked about a 'guided conversation' which is perhaps not surprising seeing they founded DM. Other words and phrases that come up in connection to conversation was 'a space' where 'the rules are different' and you 'can come to be confused', a 'place for getting perspective', 'improvising', 'experimenting' and 'being creative'. DM as a place for getting perspective has been a natural point for discussion because it is implicit in the name, as PK says: 'the mountain is a place to go to to get perspective'. As such it is a place which is removed from the processes involved in collapse:

PK: it's just a more elemental, primeval place that you can go to and it was there before the civilization arose and it will be there afterwards. However many turbines you put on top of it, it will always be there. It's this kind of solid rock and it's a place of perspective. You know, that's what Dark Mountain was for me, it's this place of perspective.

Further, this sense of perspective is also related to the sense of the realism of collapsonomics:

PK: in the context of the sixth mass extinction, in the history of Earth, us not getting pensions is actually not very important. It's important to us but it doesn't matter very much. So, I think you have... it's important to lift your eyes off the ground a bit for that.

It is within this place of perspective that DM conversations take place. This provides shared ground for both the process of dealing with collapse and for building creative responses. For DM conversationalists, like myself, this is actually a relief. Having read and thought about the state of the world and coming to the conclusion that things cannot go on is not an easy process. It is not made easier by having to start conversations about the world from scratch by explaining concepts like the greenhouse effect. I've written about that in my interview with DH (http://patternwhichconnects.com/blog/beyond-the-parameters-of-the-game-a-conversation-with-dougald-hine/):

JDG: I didn't feel I could relate to many of my closest friends and family about this. It took a while to come to terms with. When I then encountered a whole bunch of people with whom I could skip the 'is climate change really happening?' debate, and jump straight into 'how are we going to deal with the unthinkable?' I was, needless to say, both glad and relieved. And, despite the gloomy background story, there was nothing doom and gloom about it.

I got a very similar feeling from the interviewees.

DO: when we went to the first festival, I went with two friends, we immediately just kind of found these other people that we just made this little group of about ten people that moved through the whole festival. And I'm still in touch with all of them and doing stuff. It just became like a... just a space that you could sit down, you could really be honest, you could argue as well because we didn't all, you know it's not like... just because we all feel that things are crap, we all think this is what we should be doing or this is why even. So, you could argue. But it was just, there was just a certain level of agreement of some sort. And it did make me feel for the first time that erm.... I'm actually becoming part of some kind of unity which I haven't had, I think, in London. And it is, actually we've' been sitting around a lot of fires since then. Actually. Real fires.

The use of fire, light or a torch as a metaphor for DM is another returning theme. In addition to the image of the campfire this was also used in connection with the metaphor of DM as a point high up where people who saw those campfires would come to. In the manifesto, and elsewhere, the people who participate are often referred to as 'mountaineers' who have somehow found their way up the mountain. And this is very apt because the people who are part of Dark Mountain have all come there of their own accord. There is no sense in which DM is campaigning to recruit people for the cause. The 'torch', which in the context of the next quote is the manifesto, is a kind of signal for people who are seeking that kind of meaningful conversation:

DH: It's actually more just signalling a place where people can converge to see where it goes next. And it was quite important to me that where it went was to return to that conversational quality rather than... erm... yea, rather than a programme to be defended...

People find each other not because they are coming to [sic] together with an agenda for changing the world but because they are seeking people who have had similar considerations about the world and are working on practical, real life solutions to dealing with it.

PK: It is not as if we created those people, they were out there anyway, we just had... we just made a space and they all came into it.

The way people come into it is really interesting and something that needs further exploration. Here's one example of how finding DM is expressed:

AT: There's some kind of intimation, some visionary gleam and it seems like we're groping towards each other and finding not just consummation but some sense of kinship and this is really better than what was going on before. It's hard for me to say in more direct terms how I got in touch with these people, it's more like you find one person, you say hello, you dance around a bit, another person comes in and stops by and you say hello, you find each other.

The kind of conversation that takes place is also very different to conventional forms of debate in which topics around the political, economic, environmental and social state of the world are discussed. There is no need to have the same views (although there is usually a shared sense of perspective) and there is not even a sense that the conversation has to end with agreement. More often than not the conversation is explorative, open-ended and non-linear, and there is a sense in which confusion and puzzlement is valued in themselves.

PK: I think it is also a place you can come to be confused in a way. You know, in a healthy way. We start of with this understanding and acceptance of where you are and what's happening, and you you don't really know what to do, you might not even know how to articulate it. But you want to be somewhere else where people feel the same and talk to them about it and work it out.

It is clear that seeing DM as a conversation means paying attention to the ways in which the conversation is facilitated. A great deal of effort goes into avoiding closing down the conversation and allowing a different mode of interaction to take root. This mode is seen as fundamentally different to the 'planning and control' mode of public and political discourse.

PK: When you actually take the abstract stuff off the page and take your massive intellectually satisfying plan and try and make it work... that won't work. Or at least bits of it work and others bits of it don't work and it never, you know... We can't even plan our own economy. You know, we're not going to plan the whole fucking world. So... and that's...

that's... that's were improvisation then comes in.

Improvisation characterises both how DM unfolded, an underlying attitude to the world and a quality of the conversation that takes place:

DH: A conversation, an improvisation. Erm... something that is rooted in being sociable as opposed to instrumental. Erm, so where there is never too much pressure to move to action or to move to answers because there is an intrinsic value [...] another sense of the spirit of improvisation is a kind of openness to unexpected opportunities. Erm, to the thing that matters, the thing that's at the heart of it taking the forms you'd never thought of, rather than being too attached to the form that you happened to start out having in mind.

I will come back to this in relation in considering DM as a grassroots innovation because this is also a core organisational principle underlying setting up and running DM. Improvisation as a mode of being sociable and avoiding instrumental ways of thinking is core to DM conversations and resonates with the felt need to avoid programmatic thinking which easily changes the nature of the conversation:

DO: So, when you kind of step back from the idea that you are in control then maybe you can also step back from this idea that you are right.

Setting that space up and keeping it open requires quite a lot of attention and effort on behalf of the organisers. As I experienced at the festival last year, a lot of people want to bring their own particular agenda into DM and some people find it difficult to get used to a new mode of conversation and 'stepping back from the idea that you are right'. At the same time it is a fine balance between being 'an open space' and maintaining a sense of coherence or direction:

PK: if you just say Dark Mountain is a conversation then it doesn't have a purpose in a way. You know, it has to be a guided conversation almost. Or a conversation with a particular, not an end point, but moving in a certain direction.

That direction is a slow shifting of worldview throughout the conversation – towards an ecocentric worldview where humans are no longer the sole focal point of social organisation. The way in which this is facilitated will be one of the key issues to grapple with in the fieldwork. Currently, I suspect that it happens through having people who have a deep understanding of the issues that are discussed at the same time as they are highly skilled in the kind of conversation that is engaged in DM. Through shared exploration and 'guided conversation' the way in which the conversation unfolds can slowly become a mode of seeing or being in other contexts or conversations. I think this is what DH means when he says:

DH: all of those are manifestations of [DM] that's sort of... at a higher level has a certain coherence as a philosophy. But, not a philosophy in the sense of a complete set of rational propositions, but a philosophy in the sense of an attitude to life and an attitude to reality

and to one's situation.

Facilitating this conversation almost needs to be improvised to a degree because everyone coming into the conversation will have different starting points and different ways of approach. A lot of effort goes into balancing 'openness' and 'direction':

PK: you have to kind of hold onto those [core] principles without telling anyone how to do it. [...] it has to have... it has to have that... that sense of specificity without being too... without being prescriptive.

The elusiveness both of this process and of its purpose is what makes DM difficult to pin down, and often the interviewees themselves find it hard to express exactly what DM is.

DO: So I do ask myself what is it that is Dark Mountain about what I do? But I think what I come back to is that it is something which hasn't got a dogma, there is no, you know, what you where saying earlier about people needing an ideology or people needing to belong to some sort of... some kind of rules of some sort. That just isn't there. So it is almost like what makes it Dark Mountain is the absence of something. Rather than... it is really hard to define what the thing is that is present. I know what it is not, it is not an ideologically bound movement. It is a freer space.

I think DH's statement that DM is 'a cultural movement for navigating collapse' is as precise as it gets. In order to be part of it you obviously have to recognise that there is even such a thing as collapse and this is far from obvious to everyone. In this sense it is 'like a movement of people who have seen the promises broken' (PK), which also goes a long way to explain who is part of it, and how they come to, DM. All of these issues need further exploration and I will need to pay attention to these aspects in my further fieldwork. They are also only half of the story but for the purpose of an initial exploration of the they ways on which the narrators related their experience of DM, this will do.

3. Initial reflections on DM as a grassroots innovation

The sense of DM being a place where people can come to have a different kind of conversation about what is happening in their personal lives and in the wider world is supported by my own experience at the festival. This aspect of the conversation was empowering people to find both the strength and the courage to do their own projects and seek out new ways of things:

RB: sometimes one can feel overwhelmed by the problems of the world, and I go away from this [festival] feeling less overwhelmed, and thinking 'no, perhaps all these ideas I have aren't so silly after all, and I should carry on pursuing them' [...] There are projects which I want to start getting moving which will... coming here makes me feel more like I am going to do them.

AB: For me Dark Mountain is a meeting point where... really, the main point is listening, is hearing other people. Seeing how they do things, and then how that can help me do my

thing.

Personally, I came back from the festival feel empowered but also unsettled because it had been a challenging weekend where a lot of my assumptions about the world had been shaken. It [sic] remember having a feeling that it was important to find a way to express the ideas and thoughts I'd had in my everyday life. This quote is taken from my reflections on the festival written after I came back:

JDG: I don't think that the Dark Mountain Project simply reinforced the stories we all came with, it was challenging and demanding as well. And at different points I had to accept that my version of the world wasn't the most accurate. It gave me new perspectives but it is not always an easy process to find a new view. Perhaps the Dark Mountain Project is like Wittgenstein's slight of hand when he turned the picture upside down and showed the child that to someone standing on the other side of the planet, she was living on the bottom. It is a different narrative of the times we live in, one which favours honest observation over technical answers, and one which says it as it is. Things are not going so well. And if we don't start living differently in the world, if we don't start living by different stories, things are not going to get any better. That is not easy.

To me, it is the 'living by different stories' which is the innovative part of DM. The festival was full of people who shared their knowledge on alternative ways of living, did workshops, skill-sharing, and demonstrations. All of these innovations are already there and they are applied in other grassroots innovations as well, Transition Towns being the most obvious example. It is not the innovation, or even the use, of technologies that is novel about DM. It is the accompanying stories that weave the use of these technologies into peoples lives and create not only new material infrastructures but new institutions and communities as well. This came out in my interview with AT where he likened uncivilisation to becoming settled in life:

AT: perhaps uncivilisation is just an attempt to answer the question of 'what would being a settler today be like?' [...] one could imagine settlement as in part invoking new infrastructures as well [. . .] It could also be, and Dougald speaks of this a fair amount, reinvoking old models that worked in the past but were lost or cast aside a bit by some of our movements of modern civilisation.

The innovation is a creation of a shared imagination and narrative of a world where these technologies make sense and become useful and, importantly, this is a qualitatively different world than the one in which these technologies were made. This is very similar to the kind of innovation that programmers and hackers do when they take chunks of programmes or technologies and put them together to create something entirely new, only this is done by consciously creating a new reality in which people's lives unfold. And the real novelty is that this reality is not in the future but already present and being nurtured into being. It is part of the different kind of conversation and the mode of organisation within DM, which is fostered deliberately:

DH: I distinguish between orchestration as having been the dominant mode of social organisation during the industrial era and improvisation as being another mode which is very ancient, has been marginalised and is becoming increasingly important.

Improvisation as a mode of organisation (or conversation) attaches no value to instrumental goals but allows experimentation and accidents to occur, examine why they happened, how they work and nurture them if they are useful. Improvisation coupled with and underlying attitude to the world which sees nature and places as having intrinsic value is the guiding the experiments that take place within DM:

DH: If you were to say that the thing at the heart of Dark Mountain is possibly an attitude. A way of being in the world, a way of being together. Erm... and that each of these manifestations, you know, feels like... feels right to the extent that it is a manifestation of that attitude.

The social institutions that spring from this kind of experimentation are not necessarily easy to see and they might remain invisible until they find wider use. But they are often very real and visible to the people taking part in them, e.g. AT has set up his counselling practice entirely as a gift economy. He similarly relates this to an attitude and explicitly calls it a social experiment:

AT: trying to walk nimbly forward in any case is social experimentation, that you also find elsewhere. And what I like is the idea of having small scale, and porous and semi-invisible institutions emerge that are serving a variety of purposes and later on might get scaled up.

This is going back to first principles and saying that the outcome cannot be controlled so what is really important about the process of innovation is the underlying values and attitude that the particular innovation springs from.

PK: we're pretty sure where we stand in terms of what our principles are, and we're pretty sure that everything is falling apart here in some way, but we don't know where it is going to go, and we can't argue any solutions, but what we can do is have a process of working it through. And in that process, you know, things will... things will be created. And writing will be created, art will be created, something new will come, erhm, if you kind of... if you start to do it with that attitude.

The creative aspect of DM is the creation of new narratives which allow for new configurations of people and technology to emerge. This is linked to the idea of DM being a place where 'the rules of the game' are different and a space where people can 'practice different games'. All the interviewees expressed a sense that they had found new opportunities for expression and trying out other ways of doing things:

DO: And then it's opened up a lot of well possibilities around sort of art and creative projects that I'm starting with people that I've met through Dark Mountain. Erm... and me kind of realising that maybe that is... that's the role. You know, it has also given me that whole thing about art and writing as a really valid thing in this whole transformation or

collapse.

At the same time there is a large group of people who are very technology savvy (a lot of the people speaking at the festival were hacktivists). Using the opportunities that ICT opens up to forge new social institutions is an aspect of DM which deserve close attention. There is a whole debate about using virtual platforms to bring new people and institutions into 'first life' within this part of DM, and a lot of people learn how to navigate and benefit from this through DM:

DO: And it is amazing that even online... because before I was involved with Dark Mountain I was hardly ever on Facebook, I just didn't really do... but I was never... I was one of those people who thought that on Twitter people talk about what they have for breakfast, you know. And then, it was actually Dougald who kept saying 'go on Twitter do it', you know, and then I did. I have met quite a few people on Twitter that I now know in real life. You know, connecting. It is even like this fireplace thing in the virtual world. The nice thing is that it then moves, it doesn't stay there, at least not for me. I think there are people who have all kinds of discussions on the forum and stuff and they get very heated and they get quite pointless sometimes. But for me it has moved from online to real life, really.

DM as a cultural movement is set aside from other current movements in its focus on building new social institutions and nurturing different ways of the present crisis. Asked about what makes DM different from the Transition movement DH replied:

DH: Very much the emphasis on deep cultural narratives and choosing to address that while explicitly renouncing a sort of progressive or developmental linear meta-narrative. Because I think that, on the one hand there are lots of places where people tend to be more focussed on, in one sense or another, technical or 'hard ends' of, rather than cultural or 'soft ends' of, the mess we are talking about.

The 'soft end' of creating solutions to social-environmental crisis is providing a new narrative where concepts that are more useful (because they are more accurate in the age of collapse) can emerge for people to organise their lives around. It is as if collapse also creates a conceptual vacuum in which old ideas (such as 'economic growth' or 'the career') become outmoded. This also provides breeding ground for new and better social concepts. This is explicitly recognised in many of the interviews, e.g.:

AT: Well I think that we can begin to see, I use a lot of metaphors in my practise, that when new social conditions emerge or new natural conditions, or some understanding of seeing the world today differently emerges, then we're also going to have an incredible flourishing of metaphors, some of which are going to be useful and some of which are not.

In the context of collapse, DM is therefore also a space which

DH: allows for that kind of coming into awareness of the arbitrariness of the rules of the

particular games that we arrive familiar with whether that is the big game of capitalism, the game of sustainability as we've known it, all of these things that we've known them because they are open to this kind of challenge.

This challenge, and experimentation, takes place in stories and the declared goal is a shift in worldview through their enactment:

PK: So when we were talking about new stories and writing about things differently, for me one of the big things I'm looking for is that shifting of consciousness. It's a very hard thing to do, it's a very hard thing to do, and it will take a long time. It is not like us producing a few book is going to change all that but we've got to start getting that discussion out there, and that debate and those... trying different ways of seeing things.

In this sense, art and writing are ideal media for expressing different worldviews.

PK: if you're going to write a novel you going to do it... to create any successful piece of art, you have to hold open that way of looking at the world where there are multiple ways of seeing. Every character has got a completely different relationship to what is happening. And a different way of seeing it, being, and they've got a different consciousness.

In this way, I think that a further exploration of the DM narrative and how it plays out in the participants lives will make it possible to examine if and how that shift of consciousness occur.

Reflections/pointers for further fieldwork and a provisional plan of study

The exciting aspect of this study, and the potential original contribution to the literature, is that this line of analysis allows me to explore how grassroots innovations could be sites of transition in epistemology and ontology in addition to socio-technical infrastructure. This initial analysis has highlighted certain questions that need further exploration in order to do this, including:

- How people find DM and come into the conversation;
- The ways in which the conversation is facilitated;
- The different expressions the DM narrative take in participants lives;
- How technologies are used and viewed as tools to enable change;
- How improvisation as a mode of social organisation works; and
- What kind of new social institutions emerge within DM.

These are questions which I will seek to address in my further fieldwork.

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