

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 Monbiot¹, 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.

¹Dougald 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 2010², an ‘Ociviliserat’ festival was held in Stockholm in the spring of 2012³ and a number of local performance and story-telling events have taken root⁴. 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 posts⁵.



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

²See Carrying the Fire’s homepage: <https://sites.google.com/a/carryingthefire.co.uk/carrying-the-fire/home>.

³See Dark Mountain Sweden’s homepage: <http://www.darkmountain.se/>.

⁴Such as ‘The Telling’ which started in Doncaster in 2012, see: <http://forthetelling.wordpress.com>.

⁵July 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:

⁶The 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?



Uncivilisation
2011 THE DARK MOUNTAIN FESTIVAL

19TH - 21ST
AUGUST

THE SUSTAINABILITY CENTRE
 EAST MEON, PETERSFIELD, HAMPSHIRE GU32 1HR

MUSIC
DISCUSSION
WORKSHOPS
CHILDREN'S ACTIVITIES AND MORE
POETRY

set in 55 acres of tranquil woodland

“THERE ARE MORE WAYS OF LIVING AND THINKING THAN WE COULD EVER IMAGINE”
 JAY GRIFFITHS

UNCIVILISATION 2011 | THE DARK MOUNTAIN FESTIVAL
WWW.UNCIVILISATION.CO.UK



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. Dougal 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).

⁷The intention here is not to evaluate this claim but to examine what happens in the shift from one worldview 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).

⁸As 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 reality⁹ 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 preceded 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

⁹Some 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" (Hoggett 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).

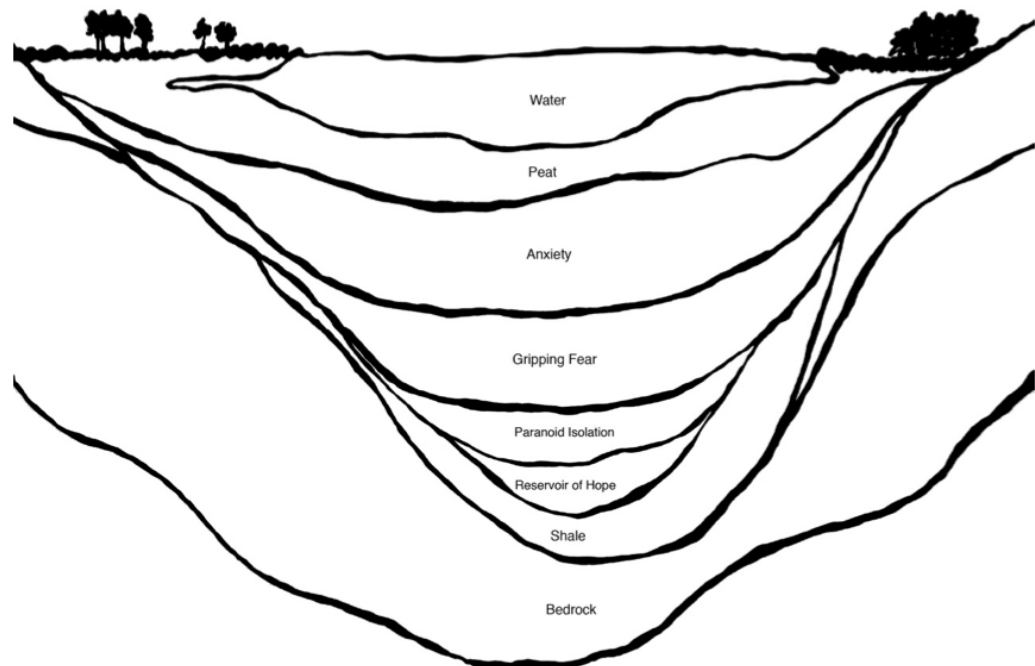


Figure 4.4: Kim Holleman, 'The Layers'. Black ink, 2010.

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, Dougal 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 Dougal 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, Dougal Hine frames cultural change as a subversion and expansion of the 'rules' that define individual behaviour and social interactions:

¹⁰In 2001 Kingsnorth was nominated in the *New Statesman* as one of 'Britain's top 10 trouble-makers'.

¹¹Hine 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 ascendancy 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 *Uncivilisation* 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. Dougal 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 argument¹², 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

¹²E.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. Dougal 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 Hiron's 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, *uncivilising* 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?

¹³Dissensus – 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 Jacques Rancière'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 (Priour 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, supernatural 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.