

## 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 delegitimizes 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

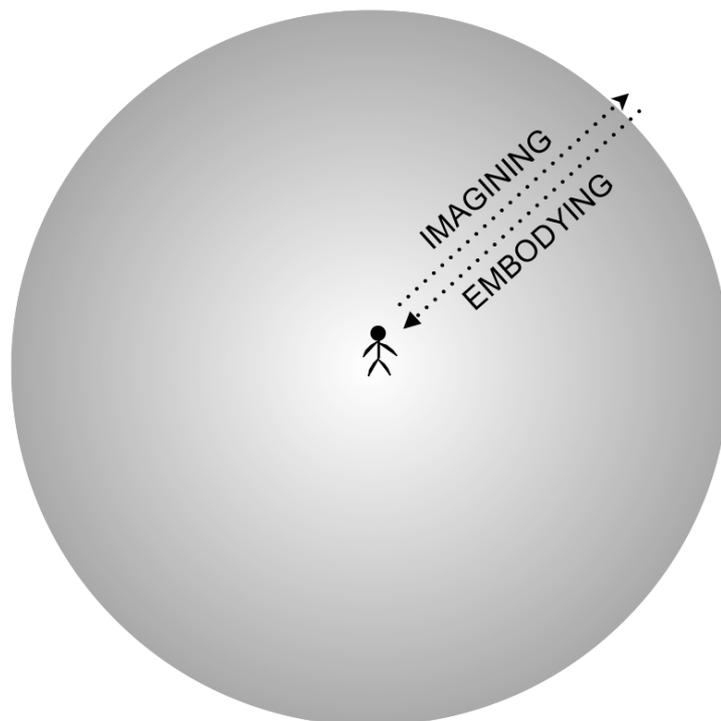
worldview: it occurs through complex personal journeys in which a different kind of relationship is gradually imagined and embodied within the lifeworld. The practical and experiential aspects of this change are not reducible to a set of universals but the quality of the space of inquiry is a deciding 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.

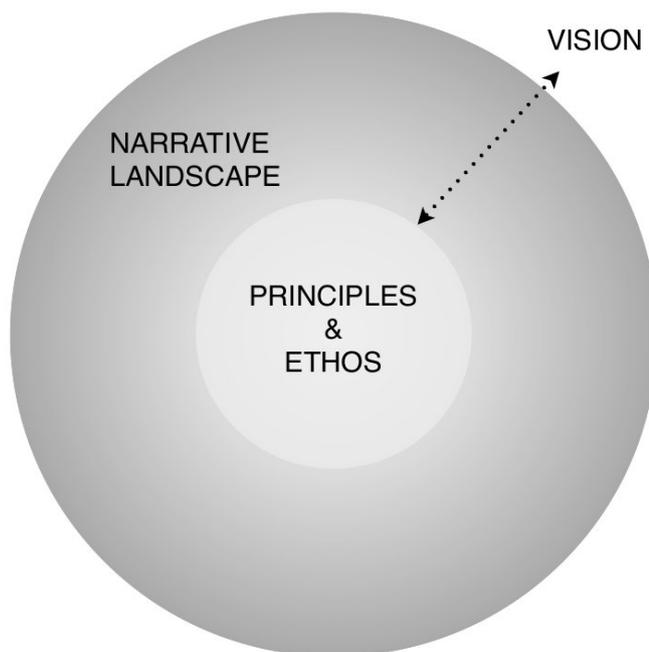
Enabling the re-storying of a life through developing an imagery of journeying that is appropriate to each individual lifeworld can in this way bring awareness to the way that certain sets of assumptions, habits and relations are reproduced – and new ones made

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.