

Ode To My Fence : A work in progress

Norman Jackson

This narrative explains and interprets the video artefact I made during the #creativeHE 'Creativity in the Making' conversation March 6-20th 2018¹ which can be found on my blog <http://www.normanjackson.co.uk/creativehe>

Introduction

Award winning photographer Dewitt Jones talks about creativity as 'seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary' while James Fox uses the idea that 'great art makes the familiar seem totally unfamiliar'. Perhaps we might democratize these ideas and offer the general proposition that we are all creative beings with the imagination and capability to see the extraordinary in the ordinary and make the familiar seem totally unfamiliar.

I particularly like the way artist David Hockney expresses these ideas in terms of searching for the poetry in something, while Hans Zimmer - the composer of numerous movie scores, expresses the same idea as searching for and finding the story through his music.

I wanted to engage with these ideas in the making of my artefact and also the idea of 'Art made from nature' and 'turning nature into culture', which James Fox introduced me to through an inspiring BBC programme <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q262DGh6QeM>

These were some of the thoughts going through my mind when I was thinking about the artefact I would make when I hit upon the idea of using my fence as a subject for my *creativity in the making* project. Timing matters, and the reason I thought my fence could form the subject for my creative attention was that today (Monday March 12 2018), after many weeks of delay, is the day when our old tumbled down fence is being taken down and a new one constructed.

My tumbled down fence converted to a digital painting using

<http://www.snapstouch.com/Painting.aspx>



Apart from helping to shift the wood, dig up roots on the fence-line, maintaining the fire that burnt the fence, and keeping the two makers topped up with tea, I was not directly involved in the making of the fence - which is a job for craftsman as far as I am concerned. It's about 100m long and it has to not only look good but last for 50 years. However, this event is certainly part of the current circumstances of my life so I decided to use the opportunity to create artefacts (this narrative, a digital story and an artistic work) that celebrate the story. One of the key themes of the #creativeHE conversation about creativity in making was how

making is connecting. During the conversation I began to see that connecting, particularly when it involves stories told in text and images, is a process more akin to weaving than to constructing a wall.

Background to making

We make marks in and on the landscape with the things we make. Some of these things serve a function and some are made just for their beauty and some of these manmade objects become the landscape they are in. The geologist in me has always been fascinated by stone walls not only do they reveal the geology of the underlying rocks but they are an expression of human effort and a manifestation of creativity of the makers. Drystone walls are deeply cultural with craft skills handed down from generation to generation. Wall makers choose and place stones from the immediate environment in such a way that the wall performs not only a functional role but also an aesthetic one. Drystone walls have captured my attention twice on trips I have made this year to India and Madeira.



I don't have any walls to build or maintain but I do own a lot of fences much of it in need of repair. One fence in particular is definitely a mark on the landscape: it separates my garden from a field. The fence was made from chestnut and oak trees growing in the landscape over half a century ago.

I love the way Tim Ingold helps us to see the story in the landscape and to project backwards and forwards in time from what we are able to perceive in our current present. The wood for my fence might have begun its life over 100 years ago I know not where. The trees were felled and sawn into posts and rails and used to make my fence in what was then a new landscape as my house was being built and my garden was being created



in what was once an orchard 50 years ago. It was made by men laboring as these men labored now.

Over the decades my fence has grown into and became part of the landscape. Battered by storms and winds, chilled by frosts and snow, embraced by the grasses that grow at its feet and the saplings that were protected by its presence. It has witnessed the life events of three families who have lived in this place, heard the laughter of children as they hunt for Easter eggs in the garden and watched over the Canada Geese as they return each spring to raise their chicks.



But like a person the fence has grown old and frail. After every big storm another bit falls down. Weakened by the elements and the rabbits, the posts rot away, the beetles get to work, the creepers and brambles entangle it. The time has come to return it to the earth from whence it came over a century ago to participate in a new cycle of biological renewal. In writing this I was struck by the parallels with my own mortality and place in the world- except of

course, my fence does not pass on its genes.

The idea of narrative artefacts in text and audio-imagery

So here are a set of coincidences coming together in my world and being connected by me to create meaning, reason and motivation for my making project. I wanted to make an artistic artefact that was grown from and in the circumstances of my life while the #creativeHE conversation was in progress. By coincidence, and after many weeks of delay, the conversation coincided with the replacement of our fence. Two weeks before this, in the preparatory work I was doing for the conversation, I came across a BBC TV programme called 'the art of nature' presented by James Fox. In it he described art making in the landscape using the materials of the landscape. His perspectives opened my eyes to the possibilities of art making in my own landscape. I had already decided that you can make an artistic artefact out of almost anything that held meaning so the coming together of these things created a unique set of circumstances in my life (never before and probably never again).

What I did

The story naturally unfolds in four parts - an appreciation of the old fence in the landscape, the demise of the fence as it was uprooted from the landscape and cremated, the making of the new fence and the new fence in the landscape. It's a story of creative destruction in the sense that in order to make something new we may have to destroy something that exists.

Having thought about and decided what I was going to make during the #creativeHE conversation, I woke up a few weeks ago and the sun was streaming through the window. I thought this would be a good time to take some photos so I jumped out of bed and shot them. Later, on that sunny day, I took some more photos and these provided me with my opening scene in my film. One in particular (right) came to symbolise my appreciation of the old fence and I used it in several posts, my opening and closing scenes, and several digital paintings including the one I used to present my Ode.



ODE TO MY FENCE

For five decades you have marked a
boundary in this gentle landscape
Three families have been thankful
for your presence
The once straight line now bent and
broken
punctured by saplings and overgrown
with weeds
The time has come to return you to the
soil
to begin again the perpetual cycle of
renewal



Then the day came to take the fence down. Appropriately, it was a grey, wet miserable day and the two men who were replacing the fence were repeatedly soaked. I chatted to them about their fence work, made them tea, helped carry the wood from the truck to the fence and took photos and video of the destruction of the fence, the burning of the fence and the making of a new fence. Although I didn't actively participate in making the fence I did participate in work that was connected to the making of the fence. I labored for most of the first day taking out the roots of the small trees that had grown into the fence line.

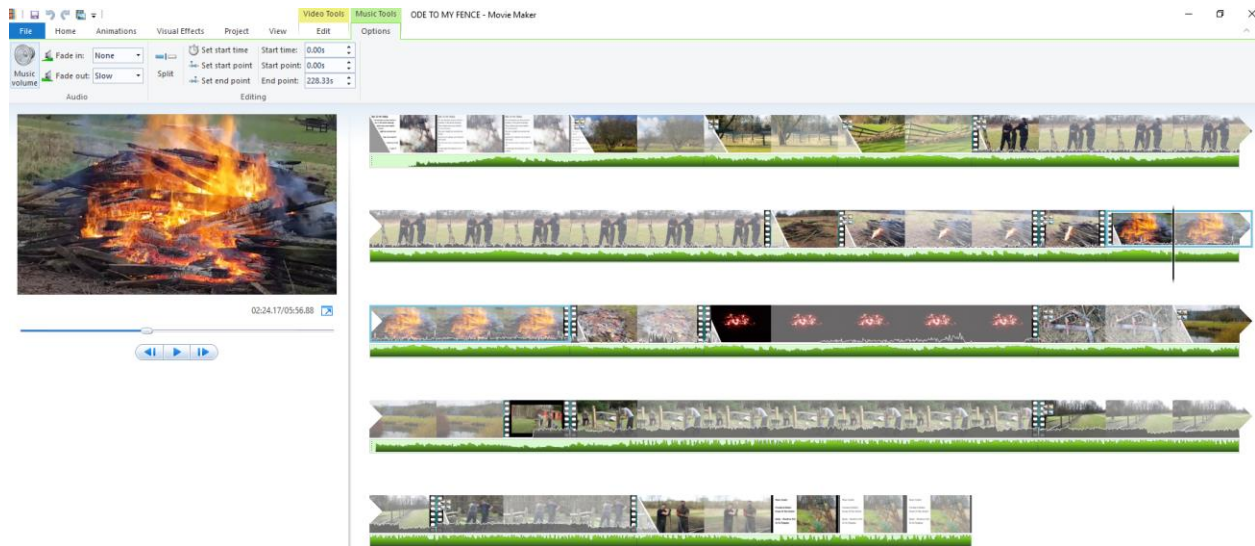
My presence in close proximity to the fence making, together with the ample supply of tea, helped me develop a friendly relationship with the fence makers during the four days they worked on the fence. I was able to watch and listen to them and appreciate their techniques to survey the levels and maintain the line of the fence, dig the holes for the posts, and then set the posts and rails. Digging the post holes in the wet clay soil was hard work and the two of them worked a team to get the job done efficiently and effectively.

By the third day, sufficient fence had been constructed to appreciate its aesthetic appeal. Thanks to the care they had taken to level the rails on gently sloping ground, it became a thing of beauty - something I wanted to look at. Spontaneously I started to prune the trees between the house and fence to that we could see and appreciate it from the kitchen. I suppose I was trying to *create or make* 'a better view'.



I began writing my narrative on the first day of fence making and finished it after the fence and filming were completed on the fifth day. But I know I will tinker with it long after it has been written. I imported the photos and videos I had taken into windows moviemaker and edited them to make the story I wanted to tell. In the best Hans Zimmer tradition I selected music that expressed my feelings drawing on two of the composers I am regularly listening to at the moment. I chose 'Fractals in Nature - Dream 13' by Max Richter to convey my sense of loss at the destruction of the old fence and 'Bardo' off the Humdrum Star album by Go Go Penguin to signify the optimism in the making of a new fence. I added the soundtracks through moviemaker. It was the first time I had made such a film connecting and editing video and audio clips. Through making it I learnt how to use movie maker through a trial and error process.





As I started to make the film in movie maker I realised for it to be a stand-alone artefact I needed to provide a context in the opening scene so I wrote a short poem. It was in the making of the poem that I hit on the idea of calling my artefact 'Ode to my fence'- an ode being 'a kind of poem devoted to the praise of a person, animal, or thing. An ode is usually written in an elevated style and often expresses deep feeling'². I think names and titles are very important in the labelling of an artefact, for example I think a lot about the titles of any article I write and usually change them many times before I let go. In thinking that my artefact was an 'ode'

ODE TO MY FENCE

Five decades you stood marking a boundary in this gentle landscape

three families have been thankful for your presence

The once straight line now bent and broken

punctured by saplings and overgrown with weeds

The time has come to return you to the soil

to begin again the perpetual cycle of renewal

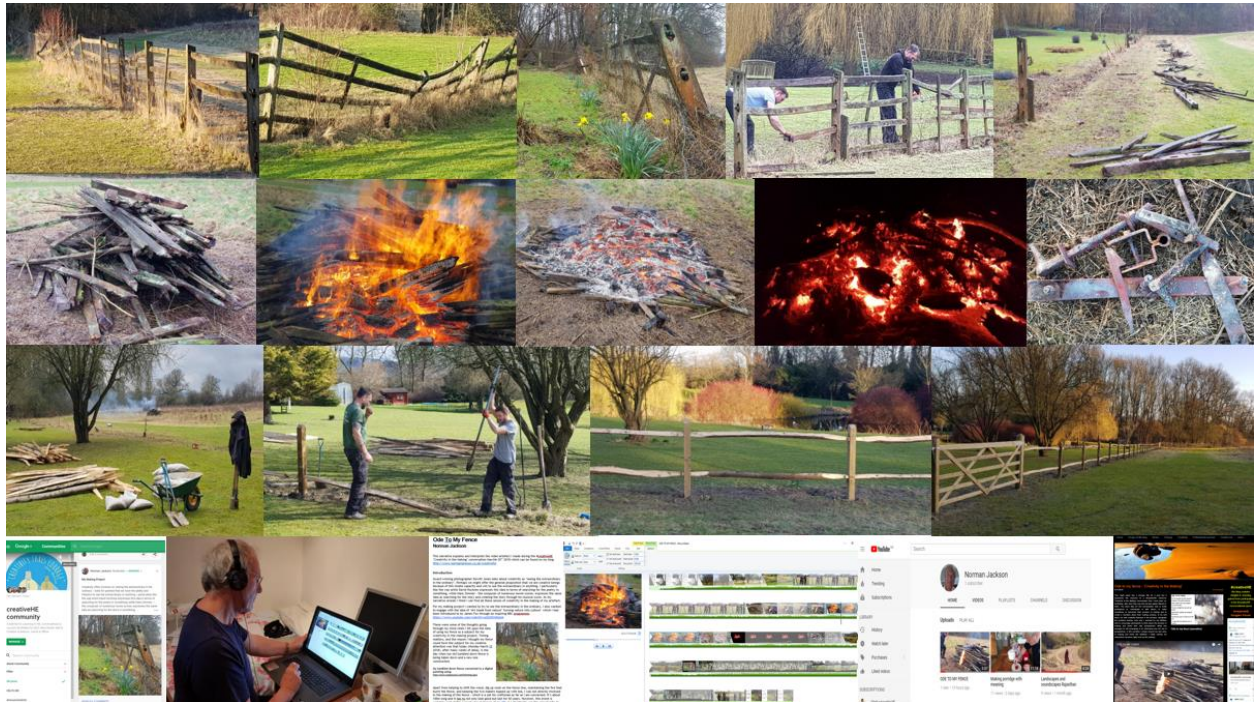
Jones.

Figure 1 captures the main elements of my story of the making process.

I was present throughout the process firstly to record in photos and video's the story of the fence, secondly as a peripheral participant in the taking down of the fence - the removal of roots from the fence line and the shifting of posts and rails, thirdly I was present as the writer of this narrative documenting the whole process and composer of the artistic representations, fourthly I was present as the maker of the film and finally I will be the distributor and

animator of the artefacts by posting them on my blog, on YouTube and in the #creativeHE forum. And who knows in what other ways I will be present in the future?

Figure 1 Photo collage of my making project



Simultaneously, in a lifeworld sense, I was present in the #creativeHE online conversation and in numerous other situations involving family during the week, all of which contributed to my thinking and my making. I even managed to visit one of the contributors and recorded him making an artefact.

I already mentioned the post by Joy Whitton which influenced my thinking about what I had done and why I had done it. In fact Joy had invited me to read a pre-publication copy of her new book 'Fostering Imagination in Higher Education' in the run up to the #creativeHE conversation and I had adapted the articles I had produced for the conversation to incorporate some of her ideas which she had taken from Paul Ricoeur.

One important thing I learnt during the #creativeHE conversation was via a post made by Joy who was commenting on the video I made (mentioned above) of Chris Tomlinson making porridge with meaning.² In her post Joy drew attention to the place of honouring, celebrating and gift-making in individuals everyday creative practices, and of using social media to make gifts of creative acts available to anyone who might find value in them. The idea goes to the heart of the purpose and value in engaging in everyday creativity and it provides a useful perspective to interpret the production and dissemination of these artefacts.

Yet another influence on my thinking involved anthropologist Tim Ingold who I had emailed a few weeks before the #creativeHE conversation to seek his perspectives on an article I had written. His encouraging response while I was writing this narrative, included a copy of an

article he had written on ‘creativity as undergoing’. These ideas provided me with new cognitive tools to enable me to understand my process of making (see below).

I refer to these things to show you that a project like the one I am describing is undertaken from a life that is being lived through all the spaces and affordances a complete life holds. The creative mind creates new opportunities for learning while it makes and identifies and uses new resources as they emerge in the whole circumstances of their life, not just those that are set aside for making.

My ecology of practice for making

The purpose of the ‘creativity in making’ conversation was to make something that was grown from the circumstances of our life and to think about the process of making and try to make sense out of it using the various cognitive tools we had discussed in the #creativeHE conversation and any other concepts we considered to be appropriate.

The artefacts I made were grown from an event in my life that was happening while the #creativeHE conversation was unfolding. I believe that we can be creative with almost any situation and my film and narrative artefacts aim to reveal my appreciation of the extraordinary in the ordinary (Dewitt Jones) namely a fence in my garden. The film and narrative artefacts seek to finding the poetry in a subject (David Hockney) and telling a story (Max Zimmer) in a way that connects me physically, intellectually and emotionally to an unfolding event in my everyday environment. I see the whole as a sort of gift making and gift giving process. So what is the nature of my ecology of practice⁴ through which I accomplished these things?

I believe that the process of making is fundamentally an ecological process involving me interacting with my environment and coming to appreciate the value in what I am making, and to gradually know what to make and how to make it. It involves the growth of knowing by doing. My making of these artefacts emerged through the particular circumstances of my life (circumstances I have influenced but not controlled) in the manner envisaged by Carl Rogers³ - the creative process is, *‘the emergence in action of a novel relational product growing out of the uniqueness of the individual on the one hand, and the materials, events, or circumstances of their life’*.

Anthropologist Tim Ingold offers two perspectives on the idea and process of making namely^{5:20-2}: *making as a project*, ‘we start with an idea in mind, of what we want to achieve, and with a supply of the raw material needed to achieve it. And it is to finish at the moment when the material has taken on the intended form’, or *making....as a process of growth*, ‘the maker from the outset [is] a participant .. amongst a world of active materials. These materials are what he has to work with, and in the process of making he ‘joins forces’ with them, bringing them together or splitting them apart, synthesising and distilling, in anticipation of what might emerge.’

This narrative reveals that my making was both a project (I started with an idea of what I wanted to achieve within a particular time frame and for a particular purpose) and a process of growth - working amongst a world of active materials (including physical materials like the fence and intangible materials like feelings and ideas). This creative process of growth is what Ingold calls ‘undergoing’^{6:124}

every practitioner has to improvise his or her own passage through the array of tasks the performance entails..... the wellsprings of creativity lie, not inside people's heads but in their attending upon a world in formation. In this kind of creativity, undergone rather than done, imagination is not so much the capacity to come up with new ideas as the aspirational impulse of a life that is not just lived but led. But where it leads is not yet given. In opening to the unknown – in exposure – imagination leads not by mastery but by submission. Thus the creativity of undergoing, of action without agency, is that of life itself.

These profound words are so true for the experience I am documenting here.

I see my making in the landscape of my garden and office, and all the other landscapes I travelled through and thought about what I was doing, as an ecology that enabled me to connect and weave, many things into my making project (Figure 1). It involved my purpose, my desire to create new artefacts in line with the goal of the #creativeHE conversation within a fairly constrained time frame. It involved me connecting contexts including 'me', 'my life' and 'my home environment'. It involved me physically, cognitively and emotionally, in relationships and interactions with my garden, my fence and the craftsmen I had employed to make the fence. It involved me documenting the process through images (photos and video) and text. It involved me using a range of resources and tools (gardening tools, mobile phone and video camera for recording images and video, laptop with software for writing and movie making), and music extracted from YouTube posts. It involved me perceiving the possibilities for productive action (seeing affordance) in the evolving situations, and in particular things like the materials and tools (including technological tools like camera, computer and software) I was using. It involved me in making sense of my experience and connecting concepts that explained the experience and the outcomes from experience. It involved me in conversational interactions with peers via the #creativeHE site and email. And many more actions and connectivities.

My video artefact includes imagery that tells the story, words that provide a context and music that conveys feelings. My narrative artefact brings descriptive and interpretive language and abstract concepts into the story. Through the experience of being in the landscape I came to understand and feel a little more of what the fence could mean and it was only through being in proximity to what was happening to my fence that I could record its story. Obviously, my story is subjective - therein lies the poetry. I have chosen to emphasise or not, the things I felt were important and had meaning to me. 'the wellsprings of [my]creativity lie not inside [my] head, but in attending [my] world in formation' (*my customization of Ingold's concept of undergoing*^{6:1}) into the process of making and language can be used to express and explore complex ideas and to connect ideas and theories to the story of reality I have described. Through writing I explore events and experiences and use my imagination and reasoning to bring some sort of order and meaning to them. Through this process of connecting and examining the consequences of what has been connected, I begin to make more sense of complex things - like my experience and my creativity.

Figure 1A Ecological framework for interpreting the practice of making (adapted from Jackson⁴). The framework or model shows key relationships and interactions between the person and their environment. The ecological framework is a heuristic technique to help us imagine some of the complexity involved in acts like learning and making. The labels explain an aspect of the ecology but do not say how they interact. This is revealed in the narrative of the action. The components of the ecology do not stand in isolation. They can and do connect, interfere and be incorporated into each other. The third dimension to this model is the dimension of learning, development, growth and undergoing, together with the tangible outcomes that derive from participation in the ecology of practice and the changes to the environment.

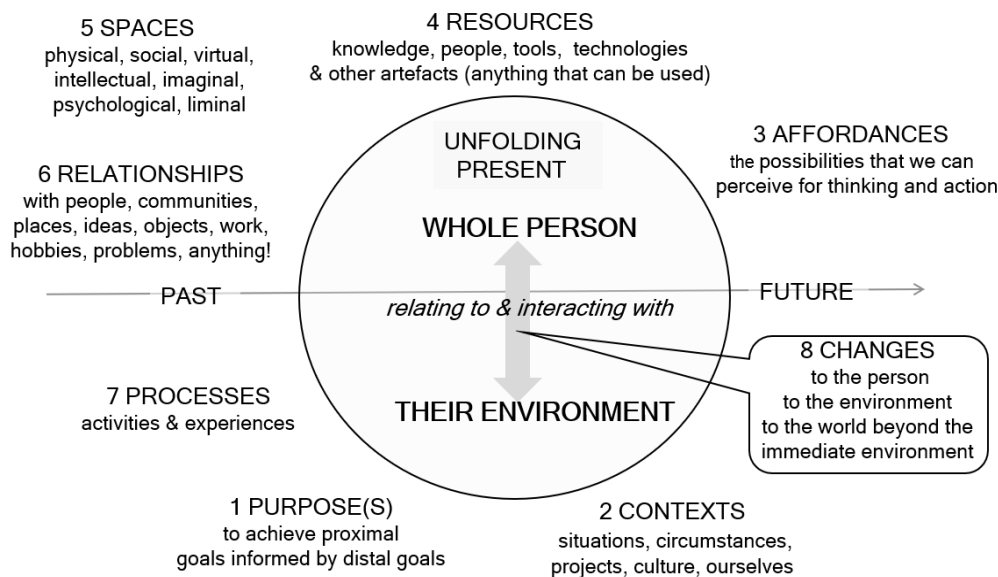
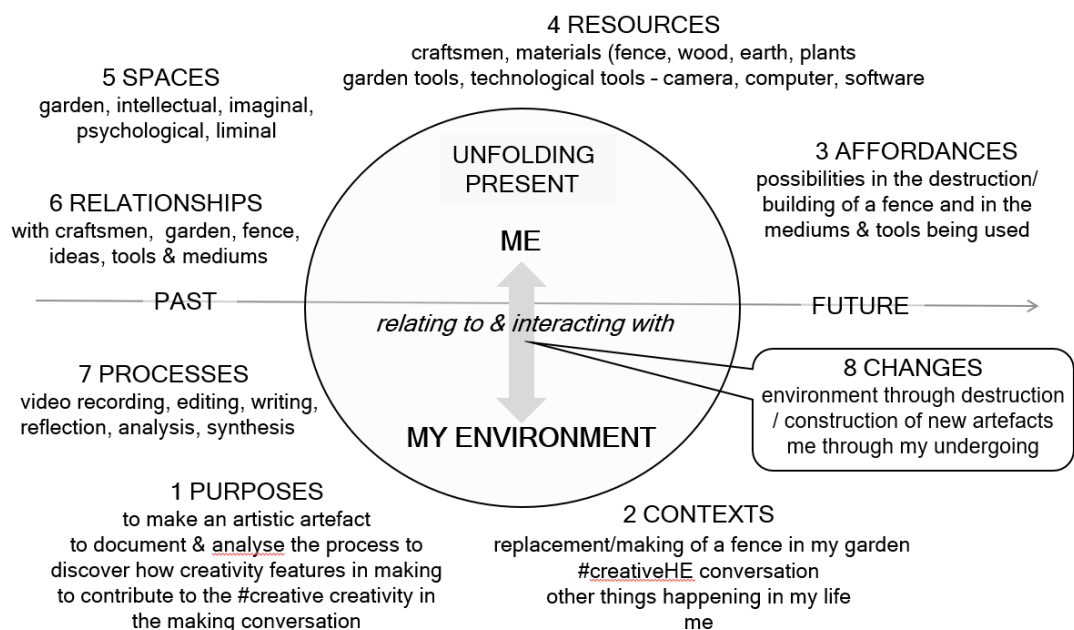


Figure 1B A customized version of the generic framework to reflect the ecology of practice for the particular making project described in this narrative



How does imagination feature in my story?

The short answer is that imagination is needed to see into the future. To see, however vague it might be, a sort of vision or mental picture of what might be which that we can 'evaluate' and relate to emotionally. From this we form, what Ingold calls an *aspiration* which is our internal locus of *inspiration*. These are the driving forces for what Carl Rogers³ would call the self-actualising organism. Ingold^{6:135} provides a wonderful insight into what might be happening here.

humans do not aspire from nowhere. At every moment of life, they reach out from places already held, or prehended, towards the horizons of their present awareness. Thus the movement of human life.....is temporally stretched.....humans – we might say – are constitutionally ahead of themselves. It is not that they are becoming rather than being; rather, their becoming is continually overtaking their being. This is probably what lies at the back of the minds of most of us when we say of our human selves that we do not just live our human lives but lead them. And it is precisely in leading life that imagination comes into play.

From this sense of ambition we derive the will to devote time, effort, energy, and to work in particular ways - juggling and circumventing whatever gets in the way and somehow finding the resources to accomplish whatever emerges from our interactions, doings and undergoing.

The opening passage of my introduction provides a clue of my ambition and what I was anticipating my future [which is now relative to where it was 6 days ago when I began my project properly]. For a variety of reasons I could see that by using the fence as my subject for making I could create the sort of artefacts I wanted to create, without knowing any of the detail of what they would be or the thinking and sense making I am now able to do.

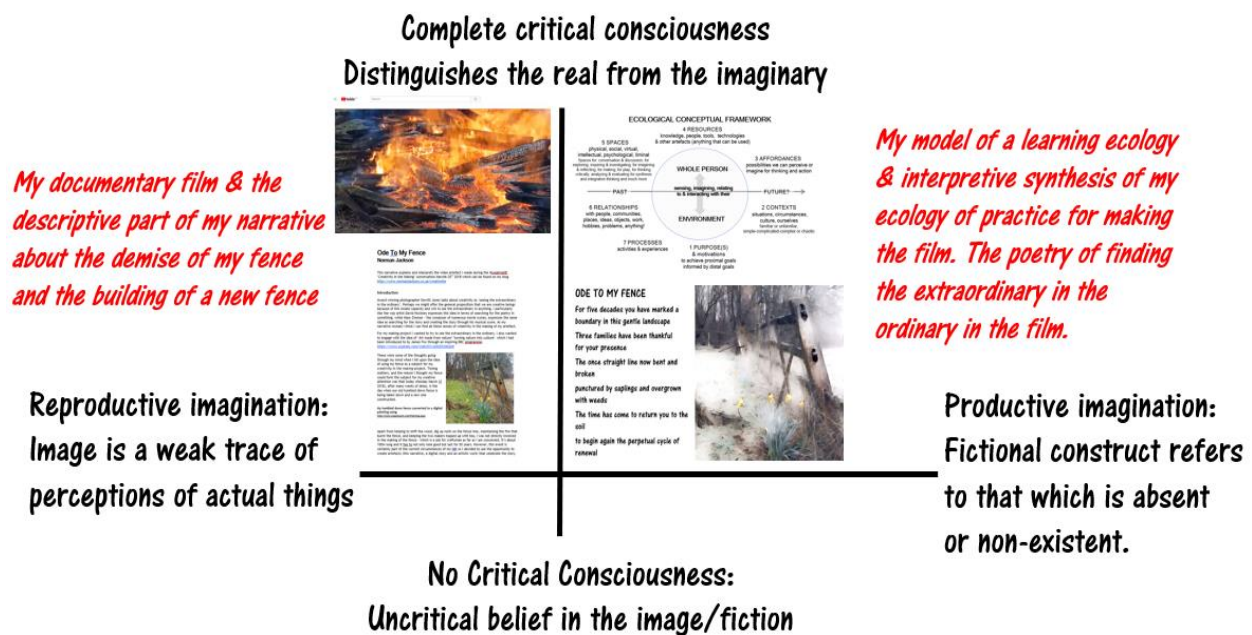
One of the contributors to the #creativeHE conversation -Joy Whitton, introduced the philosophical ideas of Paul Ricoeur⁷ drawing our attention to the distinction between reproductive and productive imagination.

“Ricoeur draws a distinction between ‘reproductive’ imagination, which relies on memory and mimesis, and ‘productive’ imagination, which is generative. He asserts there are two main types of ‘reproductive’ imagination: the first refers to the way we bring common objects or experiences to the ‘mind’s eye’ in the form of an image...The second refers to material representations whose function is to somehow copy or ‘take the place of’ the things they represent (e.g., photographs, portraits, drawings, diagrams, and maps).”⁸ citing 7

I think my digital story/movie draws on imagination in the reproductive sense in the form of a images of something that exists, but in seeking to find the poetry or extraordinary in the ordinary and creating an ‘ode to my fence’, I was seeking to transcend the perceived world of objects (reproductive imagination) and use imagination in the productive or generative sense. I have tried to explain this in my narrative which contains descriptions but also interpretations and the production of a novel synthesis in which my experiences, physical materials and ideas have been woven into a story that enables me to advance my understandings and share them with others.

“[Ricoeur] argues that creating a story is an act of semantic innovation. In narrative, the semantic innovation lies in the inventing of another work of recombination and synthesis. The productive imagination ‘grasps together and integrates into one whole and complete story multiple and scattered events, thereby schematizing the intelligible signification attached to the narrative taken as a whole’. ‘To understand the story is to understand how and why the successive episodes led to this conclusion, which, far from being foreseeable, must finally be acceptable, as congruent with the episodes brought together by the story’⁸ citing 7.

Figure 2 My attempt to use Ricoeur’s conceptual framework⁷ as a tool to understand the role of imagination in my making project - inspired by Joy Whitton’s account of Ricoeurs work⁸



If the reader accepts this explanation then perhaps we might go further and suggest that our initial utilization of reproductive imagination to create something we might enjoy and value at an aesthetic level (my attempt to make a film of the demise of my fence), can be used as a foundation for the use of productive imagination by connecting the experience to a reflective and analytical meaning making process that enables us to see and represent experience and that which has been gained from it, in an entirely different way.

In this way my imaginative use of my own experience to create a meaning making narrative that I can share using the social networking technologies of the web enables me to connect to the imagination of the reader and, perhaps, trigger new thoughts, emotions and imaginings in the process ie my artefact intentionally performs the role of mediation and becomes a tool for engaging social imagination at (potentially) a global scale. Thus, the aspiration and ambition I had at the start of my project expands into a universe of infinite possibilities.

Concluding remarks

The author and poet William Plomer once said, *"It is the function of creative people to perceive relations between thoughts, or things, or forms of expressions that seem utterly different, and to be able to connect the seemingly unconnected."* But we are all creative people and my story illustrates that when we create, the things we connect are not really unconnected because they are connected by our very existence and presence, and our relationships and interactions with the real and imagined worlds we inhabit. From all the possibilities for connection we encounter, we select those that have meaning for a particular purpose, context or circumstance, like the desire to make a particular thing or to make a particular thing happen.

The workings of this ecology of practice within which creativity thrives, seem to suggest that it is formed by an intention to satisfy some purpose that has been elevated above other purposes in the mind of the creator, but this is only part of the story. I have learnt through this experience that subtly embedded in this story of intentionality is another story of undergoing in which intentionality is led by aspirations that are fired by imagination : imagination that taps the deeper meanings of our existence and connect to the poetry of life. In my story intention and imagination were entangled: I didn't set out to make something with spiritual meaning but I discovered, almost immediately I began to work with the materials in the landscape, the metaphorical symbolic meanings in what I was perceiving. Namely, the idea that this fence has lived in this landscape and it was now about to face oblivion in its present form, but than once consumed by fire, what was left would be returned to the soil to available once more to participate in living systems.

Once discovered, it was this deeper significance that led the way in the process of making. Perhaps that is how our meaning making mind works from obvious perceptual meanings and their practical implications, to the deeper meanings of our existence and transience that guide our object making. Tim Ingold^{6:137-38} captures this deeper life of an ecology of creative practice, in his notion of *undergoing*.

.....in undergoing, the relation of temporal priority between mastery and submission is the reverse of that which is assumed in the cognitive or intentionalist account of doing. Here, submission leads and mastery follows....Rather than a commanding mind that already knows its will trailing a subservient body in its wake, out in front is an aspirant imagination that feels its way forward, improvising a passage through an as yet unformed world, while bringing up the rear is a prehensive perception already accustomed to the ways of the world and skilled in observing and responding to its affordances.

Such undergoing does not translate from an image in the mind to an object in the world. Rather,..... both the thing and the idea of it emerge together from the performance itself. This performance, moreover, is an act to which you submit: you do not initiate it; rather, it behooves to you.....But where has it come from, this thing you performed? It has no point of origin; it cannot be traced to an intention. What we undergo is not done by an authorial agent with a design in mind. It is rather part of a never-ending process of attention and response in which, as we have seen, all human life is caught.....The creativity of undergoing, in short, is nothing less than that of life itself.

Acknowledgements

I would like to dedicate this article to Gareth and Jessy the two hardworking craftsmen who made my new fence. I would also like to thank Joy Whitton and Tim Ingold for providing me with new cognitive tools to help me understand the nature of my own creativity, and to all contributors of the on-line #creativeHE conversation whose interest, presence and encouragement were a significant factor in helping me complete this project.

Sources

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