

## Introduction

This essay addresses the creative process as set out by John Bennett in the book 'Creative Thinking'. It also analyses the creative process in the recording of music taking, as an example, a small process and a larger process. The small process is the recording of the vocal lines of David Bowie's song "Heroes"; the larger process is Nigel Godrich's experience as a producer making albums. The aim of the essay is to give an insight into the functioning of the creative process, as a beginning point for successful endeavours.

## The Creative Process

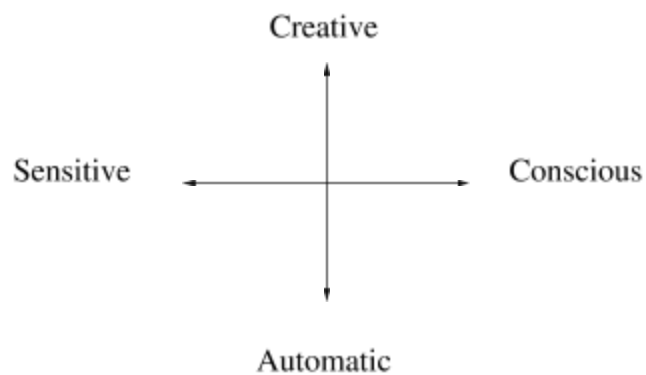


John Bennett

### The Tetrad of Energies

Bennett explains the creative process as the interaction between 4 forces or 'energies': Automatic, Sensitive, Conscious, and Creative.

Figure 1. <sup>1</sup>



Automatic energy is what keeps our basic functioning working. It is also the one able to store what has been learned from past actions. A practical example for an engineer would be the difference between a good sound or a bad sound according to previous experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> (Bennett, John G; Creative Thinking: 26)

*“The automatism is like the counter from which we go and buy everything that we need, where you can get both what comes from outside and also what is stored in the shop.”<sup>2</sup>*

Creative energy is the opposite pole of this one and is the ‘glue’ that makes the experience be perceived as a whole. It is direct contact with the process and has a sense of unity, Bennett points out that there is not much we can intentionally do to get this energy; rather, that it sets the terrain for what is to come; because one of its characteristics is that of supra-consciousness - beyond the conscience. In Bennett’s words, this is the energy that gives the power to:

*“manage to see what is really needed and try something that would not occur to anyone else”<sup>3</sup>*

This kind of insight comes as a flash.

An example of this is that of Tony Visconti’s approach to the recording of the vocal for David Bowie’s song “Heroes” This is further explain in the next part of the essay.

Sensitive energy takes care of our awareness. All the impressions that enter our body are part of it. We cannot be aware of this process until ‘consciousness’ comes in. The real separation between Sensitive and Conscious energy is achieved when we ‘see’ what we are experiencing.

*“In order to see you have to stand away, otherwise you will not see the woods for the trees”<sup>4</sup>*

For Bennett, this is a form of ‘self-remembering’ or an authentic observation.

Conscious energy gives clarity and understanding to what we are experiencing.

*“You can observe with your sensitivity or else you can look at your sensitivity. The first kind of observation tells what is going on; the second puts you in contact with what is going on. The first is what we ordinarily call “conscious experience”. The second is the only genuinely conscious experience.”<sup>5</sup>*

In the studio, this awareness is in perceiving the situation with the musicians and in confronting the questions: what shall I do? which way to go? Conscious energy

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<sup>2</sup> (Bennett, John G; Creative Thinking: 24)

<sup>3</sup> (Bennett, John G; Creative Thinking: 29)

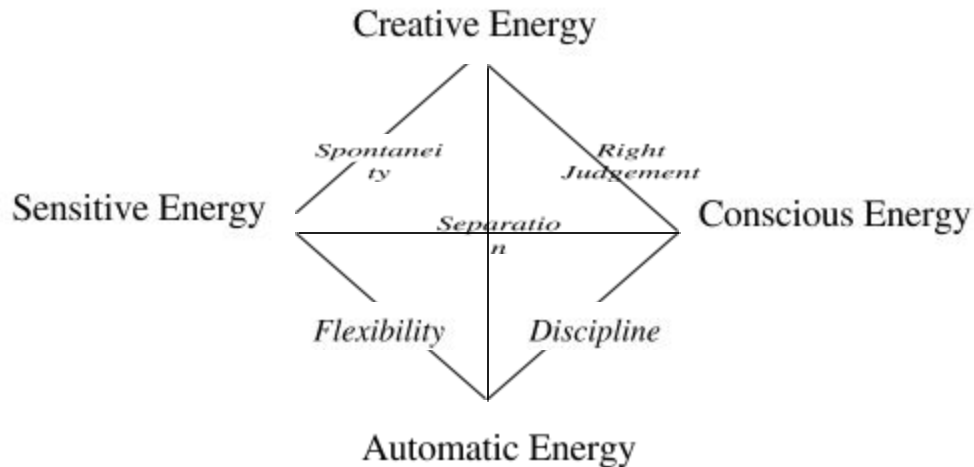
<sup>4</sup> (Bennett, John G; Creative Thinking: 25)

<sup>5</sup> (Bennett, John G; Creative Thinking: ?)

connects this experience with techniques and the stored experiences that will give the 'right' answer.

## Interaction between forces (Operation of energies)

Figure 2. <sup>6</sup>



For Bennett, the mind is normally filled with a host of sensations, impressions, thoughts, reactions and memories. To an extent, these need to be 'quietened'; that is their level of activity reduced. He achieves this through a series of exercises; less meditation than a way of organising and structuring the various mechanism of our brain. Once a quietened state is approached, he sees a 'sensitive screen' onto which 'real thinking' is projected. This real thinking is indeed the product of creativity revealed in the separation of sensitivity and consciousness.

The level of organization of our 'sensitive screen' will determine its effectiveness. The kind of training that can be done to achieve more receptiveness and organization needs to be done intentionally; as opposed to the Automatic, that can only be trained by repetition. The awareness can also be trained by 'de-conditioning'; that is, practices that generate in ourselves non-automatic responses, such as meditation or divisions of attention exercises. The connection between the Automatic and Sensitive is then, the flexibility in which the Automatism can be trained by repetition and the sensitive by de-conditioning; and the sphere in which both can act together positively.

The interaction between the Consciousness and the Automatism is what brings the skills and techniques to bear so that we are able to keep track of the process. The need for discipline is underlined in this aspect to keep the connection flowing. For an audio engineer, this will be the constant learning and updating of new techniques and technologies.

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<sup>6</sup> (Bennett, John G; Creative Thinking: 30)

Bennett suggests that the connection within the Conscious and the Creative is connected with the confidence; that is 'to make judgements on what is permitted'. For Bennett, when sensitivity and consciousness interact, a whole lot of images and connections are thrown up. For creativity to 'work', it is not enough to record all of these, or even to make a selection of these based on personal choice or preference. The 'right judgement' has to be made; that is choosing which particular form is objectively 'correct'. For this to occur, consciousness and creativity (Conscious energy and Creative energy) must interact.

## The Conditions for Creativity

*“What are the conditions for creativity?”*

One of the most important aspects of creativity is that the individual must be in touch with the creative medium he is working on. Bennett explains it as being ‘grounded in the subject’. This grounding is the selection of the material and to know how one is going to treat this material. Put everything together in the mind.

The individual needs to have a clear question in front of them, so that it is easy to state whether the answer is the appropriate one or not, and whether there are any doubts.

Spontaneity is an important factor in this process and is something that cannot of course be controlled. Bennett suggests that it does not come without certain conditions being satisfied. The need ‘to create a vacuum’ in the mind for spontaneity or insight to come is necessary; by not thinking on the matter we want to resolve and by having the strength of rejecting any answer that is not complete or clear. There is an unintentional way of producing this vacuum by fatiguing the mind. The fatigued mind will stop thinking on the solution because it is exhausted. This could explain why after long recording sessions something may still happen.

Nevertheless, the musician needs the necessary skills and techniques to realise what has been ‘seen’. In other words, techniques are the skills the individual will need to understand a creative insight and to be able to communicate it. Here, there is the:

*“determination of bringing the moment of vision in a workable form”<sup>7</sup>*

Therefore, to sum up, there are three steps for the creative process:

- Being grounded in the subject we need a creative step to ‘come out’.
- Being receptive: to have the insight
- Being able to communicate it, translate it.

And, the most important of the factors in order for the creative process to function is that, quoting Bennett:

*“ There has to be an emotional involvement which will produce despair if you do not get the answers”<sup>8</sup>.*

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<sup>7</sup> (Bennett, John G; Creative Thinking: 8)

<sup>8</sup> (Bennett, John G; Creative Thinking: 9)

## An analysis of the creative process in the recording of the vocal takes of David Bowie's song "Heroes"



Brian Eno, Robert Fripp & David Bowie at Hansa Studios in Berlin

The recordings of the vocal takes for this song took place in the frame of 5 hours, in the Hansa Studios in Berlin. In this time lyrics and melodies for lead and backing vocals were written and sung by David Bowie, and recorded by Tony Visconti, the producer/engineer. This section of the essay explains the forces involved in the creative process in this particular event, based on the analysis of the *Sound on Sound* article, 'Recording Heroes' by Richard Buskin.

There was a beginning point in the session, where Bowie decided to write the lyrics for the song "Heroes" and sent Visconti for a break. This event can be interpreted as a vacuum created; one of the conditions for the creative input to come. Visconti began his work by 'not doing', taking a break. Bowie grounding himself in the matter, described by Visconti: "He gets very, very tense,"... "because he's now got to commit. So I could feel it in the air."<sup>9</sup> The Automatic energies for them, where they can pull out previous experience, resides in David Bowie as experienced singer and writer and Visconti as well as an experienced Producer/Engineer. They both know the medium in which they are working and are trained, disciplined to deliver good work.

Regarding the writing of the lyrics, Bowie's sensitive screen, he in the studio, looking through the windows, he caught an image, Visconti 'smooching' with the backing

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<sup>9</sup> (Buskin, Richard; Recording 'Heroes': Accidental Muses)



vocalist, he was able to translate this image into a workable form: The lyrics for 'Heroes'. These flashes of inspiration are described by Bennett as bringing *"the the elements that are not provided by the material we have in at hand for dealing with the problems"*<sup>10</sup>



Tony Visconti

Visconti came to play a crucial role as he comes back from his break. He became aware of the readiness of Bowie to deliver, the limitations of tracks, they had only one left for the lead vocal. Then, his input was the decision to capture in one track, different feels of the vocals for different part of the track by placing three mics at different distances, with two of them opening gates at different levels of loudness. This solution to the situation can be seen as an approach that is not yet being thought. In Bennett words *"manage to see what is really needed and try something that would not occur to anyone else"*<sup>11</sup> This approach to micing, thrilled and encouraged Bowie. It can be seen as the sense of unity in which the creative energy is perceived. Everything falls into place.

The relationship between Conscious energy and Creative energy, as seen on the figure nr. 2 is the right judgement. Visconti having the insight of the way to proceed, saw what it is permitted for the situation. He said in the interview *"and I just thought 'Let's do this live,' because he is a great singer and he could always sing it again if I made a mistake"*.

After the lead vocals were done, Visconti mentions that the album's version is probably take three, there is an spontaneous call from Bowie to Visconti to do the backing vocals together; this is seen as the relationship between Creative energies and Sensitive energies in figure 2: Spontaneity.

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<sup>10</sup> (Bennett, John G; Creative Thinking: 29)

<sup>11</sup> (Bennett, John G; Creative Thinking: 29)

There is a sense of 'unity' in this session, as Bennett described Creative energy; it was one session of five hours where everything fell in place and they were able to translate the creative input into a workable form, "Accidental Muses", as the writer Richard Buskin titled, this part of the article on recording heroes, that were translated to a song by Bowie and Visconti.

## Nigel Godrich and his experience making albums



Nigel Godrich

The following is an analysis of 3 interviews with Nigel Godrich and how he describes his work as a producer. In this case, it is a larger process: the making of albums. It is possible to 'read' from what he says an understanding of the creative process that correlates with Bennett's explanation.

Beginning with the Automatic Energies, the previous experiences to which Godrich had access, he said, *"Everyone was there doing their bit, but my bit completely covered the technical side as well. I've spent lot of time in the studios, and seen records being made a hundred different ways, so when they (Radiohead) were looking for the right way of doing something, I was there to push them in a certain direction."*<sup>12</sup> This is an example of the producer being grounded in the matter, he is in contact with the medium he is going to work with. The first condition described by Bennett for creativity. The Automatic energy is then the techniques available to him to be able to translate the creative impulse, the insight into a workable form.

Regarding the Sensitive energies and the Conscious energies, there is the need for separation between them. *"Part of my role was not to tread on their (Radiohead) toes. It's a funny dynamic when you have something that works. It's a real fine balance, and in a way personality management is quite a big part of what I do. When you have a group of people in close proximity, trying to be creative, it can be difficult"*<sup>13</sup>

In this example, the producer has the role of Separation between the forces in the creative process. He is the one to see the woods for the trees; managing the 'energies', in this case, the bands members. Separation is the key point then as energies needs to interact if all of them are in one pole; for example, all in the automatic area. In this cases the musicians would only do

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<sup>12</sup> (The Mix – Interview with Nigel Godrich)

<sup>13</sup> (The Mix – Interview with Nigel Godrich)

what we know already. So, the band in this example represent the energies, personalities and he had to manage them. In fact, he needed to stand away and act as the separation factor.

Examining his description of the creative impulse he considers:

*“The trick is to do something fast enough and then keep going so you can’t get bored with the thing you’ve just done. You just go and go and don’t stop, and when you go back later and look at what you’ve done, you can say this one doesn’t work but that one is great. The best times have all been really fast, with everyone that I’ve worked with.”*<sup>14</sup>

This quote is a description of Creative energy, and being able to follow and to translate it. The failing in the translation may be the explanation of why, when you come back later and listen to it, it may not work. It is flash that comes, the insight is followed, even if the methods are not standard. In other words, this is the spontaneity, the relationship between the creative energy and the sensitive energy as seen on figure 2.

Moreover, the perception of the creative input as an unity, he explains:

*“My engineering may not be the most refined of anybody’s, but I have learned that that’s not what it’s about. It is not about getting the most Hi-Fi sounding thing, what makes a good record is the vibe, and how just everything falls together”*<sup>15</sup>

Here Godrich talks about the ‘vibe’ in the work. Bennett explains that when there is no creative input the endeavour is a sterile product.

Considering the conditions for the creative impulse to come, Godrich explains how the band, *“decided to put their collective muse out to pasture for a month”*. The band manager rented a country house where they installed the mobile studio for the making of *OK Computer*.

*“It was a great place just to hang out- compared to the sterile environment of a studio.”*<sup>16</sup>

This is an intentional act to create a vacuum, give a place for spontaneity to come, set a frame for the creative insight to come. In Godrich words , *“to set up a space that you enjoy and feel comfortable in, before a project, is very conducive to being creative”* and he continues, *“My technique is to set the environment to make creative accidents easier. And then all I have to do is pick the right whim of fate. One of my magic tricks is a box of mine: if nothing happens in the studio, I plug it in, and thanks to it, I suddenly hear new sounds”*<sup>17</sup>

Summarizing, we can look at a producer that is grounded in the matter. He knows how to make albums, he acts as the separator of the energies of the band, he is the one

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<sup>14</sup> (The Mix – Interview with Nigel Godrich)

<sup>15</sup> (The Mix – Interview with Nigel Godrich)

<sup>16</sup> (Walsh; Karma Policeman)

<sup>17</sup> (Walsh; Karma Policeman)

that has the conscious overall view of the process. In effect, he follows the creative input with spontaneity and, intentionally, sets the terrain for the creative process to happen by, for example, taking the band out to a country house, thus allowing the group to become receptive to the creative input. He is aware of the process, as Ludovic Hunter Tilney explains in his interview with Godrich:

*“There's no mention of overdubs, reverb or other such arid technicalities when he discusses his profession. Instead he talks about the need for producers to understand the creative process and be able to work with people, to have a vision of what a band is capable of doing as well as the expertise to put it in practice”<sup>18</sup>*

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<sup>18</sup> Ludovic Hunter-Tilney meets Nigel Godrich just in time for the producer's 'mid-life crisis'.

## Conclusion

Being aware of the process is the key point to successful activities. Nigel Godrich stresses this in the interviews. How can we achieve this? A beginning point is having and understanding in the forces involved. Finding the relationship of these forces in the reality we are experiencing. Even though we cannot force this awareness to happen, we can have the idea in mind that steps can be made for creativity to come. Being for example in a studio; knowing the equipment that is available; training our ears to be able to respond to produce good sounds; gather all the information and ground oneself in the matter where the creative step needs to be made; rejecting any answer that it is not the right one; making a stop point in the process; where to stop and see what is needed. Do we have a vacuum? Are we setting the terrain for creativity to come? Do we have the techniques available? Do we have an understanding of what we are perceiving?, Can we separate what we experience from what we consciously see?

As we saw in the two examples, we can see these forces in both a smaller and larger process and, hopefully, find a way to approach the recording of as a creative act.

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