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# SOSTENIBILITÀ TRANSIZIONE ECOLOGICA

Giovani ricercatori: innovazione e sostenibilità







# Sostenibilità e **T**ransizione **E**cologica

Serie scientifica multidisciplinare per lo studio del cambiamento dei paradigmi di sviluppo e della transizione ecologica / Multidisciplinary scientific series for the study of changing development paradigms and ecological transition

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Young Researchers: Innovation and Sustainability

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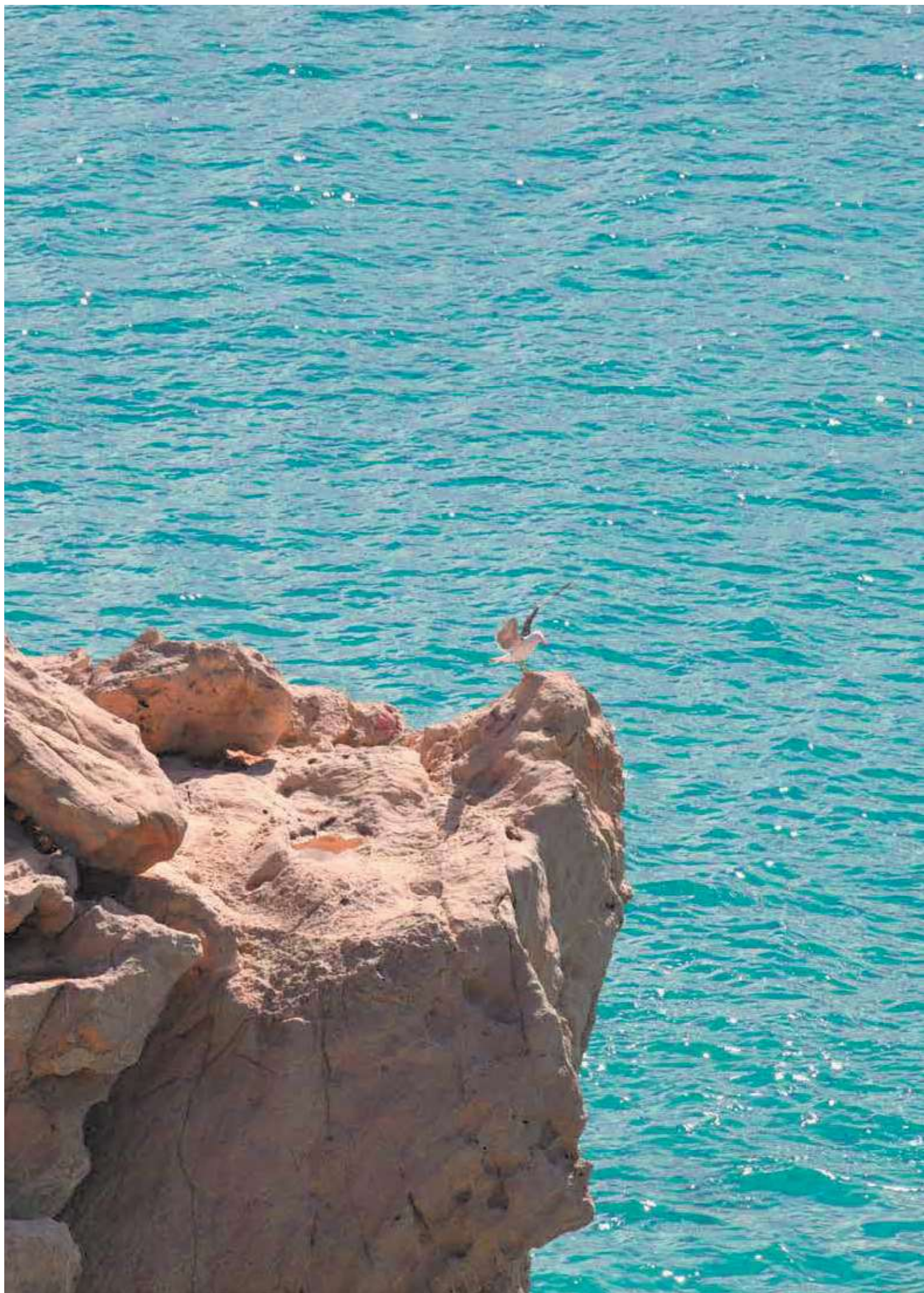
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# Toward an ecological aesthetics. Theoretical connections and social impact of the relationship between aesthetics and ecology

Verso un'estetica ecologica. Connessioni teoriche e impatto sociale della relazione tra estetica ed ecologia

The New European Bauhaus makes Aesthetics, along with Sustainability and Inclusion, one of the three values on which to base the society of the future; a role that is also reiterated in Articulation 3 of the PNRR dedicated to the Great Field of Research and Innovation "Humanistic culture, creativity, social transformation, society of inclusion" and in the UN 2030 Agenda. Building on the awareness that the environmental crisis indicates a rupture in our perceptual/emotional relationship with Nature, this paper aims to show the central role of Aesthetics in promoting green culture in our society. We will highlight the potential of Aesthetics to inspire and motivate, as it can help address ecological issues related to the current environmental crisis. Secondly, we will explore how Aesthetics may contribute to affirming not the superiority of human beings over Nature but their being an integral part of it. In this contribution, we will try to answer these questions, exploring not only the contribution that contemporary Environmental Aesthetics can make at the academic/theoretical level but also the vital role it can play at the community level, or, in other words, the concrete impact it can have, particularly at the high school level.

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Environmental Aesthetics, Ecology,  
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### The contribution of Aesthetics the emergence of ecological feeling

In one of the key texts of contemporary Environmental Aesthetics, titled *Für eine ökologische Naturästhetik*, contemporary German philosopher Gernot Böhme states that the fundamental question of any philosophy of Nature, namely “What is Nature?”, is motivated today by the fact that human beings have once again realized that they are *part of Nature* and must live *in and with Nature*. This contemporary realization underscores the relevance of Böhme’s work, as the question “What is Nature?” is posed by philosophy in a *transcendental* way, i.e. from the perspective of the *relationship between human beings and Nature*. Based on these assumptions, in the context of the tasks posed by the environmental problem, philosophy is therefore incumbent on undergoing a thorough revision of human beings relationship to Nature, primarily to the Nature that we are, the human body (Böhme, 1989, p. 8).

Therefore, the role of Aesthetics in reappropriating our felt naturalness is inescapable because this discipline has qualified since its eighteenth-century origins as a knowledge that equally invests the bodily and emotional dimensions (Aa. Vv., 1998; Amoroso, 2000; Baumgarten, 1999; Id., 2000; Id., 2020; Reiss, 1997; Tedesco, 1998; Id., 2000). To understand why Aesthetics can be interested in ecological issues (in complete coherence with its theoretical intentions) and helps to promote the formation of mentalities and emotional *habitus* more respectful of the environment, it is first necessary to clarify what is the sphere of interest of this discipline and what are its main areas of investigation (Franzini, Mazzocut-Mis, 2010).

Aesthetics, with its potential to contribute to promoting environmental consciousness, extends beyond the traditional boundaries of art and philosophy. Referring to how we make daily use of the noun “Aesthetics” (even in its adjectival function), we realize that the term is used in very different conceptual spheres: in Italian we commonly speak of *chirurgia estetica* (cosmetic surgery, i.e., of that branch of plastic surgery that deals with the reconstruction of the integument and the structures immediately below for the correction of blemishes), but also of *aesthetic practices* (i.e., all those practices related to the sphere of appearance or well-being). Finally, the term Aesthetics is undoubtedly used in the artistic sphere. This latter is the meaning that (for philosophical reasons that

are beyond the interests of the present analysis) has historically imposed itself to the point that the discipline is commonly identified by the uninitiated as that branch of philosophy that is primarily concerned with analysing the mechanisms underlying the production and enjoyment of artistic works, focusing on concepts such as beauty, creativity, form, etc. (Tatarkiewicz, 1996) However, already from the simple terminological analysis carried out here, we realize that defining Aesthetics only as a *philosophy of art* would prove to be reductive, because all the other spheres of interest of the term, related to the body, the well-being, and our being in the world would not fall within the scope of the discipline’s investigation, generating a *terminological short circuit*.

However, the poetical definition of Aesthetics by Argentine writer Jorge Louis Borges in the poem *La muralla y los libros* seems more accurate and theoretically interesting. Borges writes: “Music, states of happiness, mythology, faces belittled by time, certain twilights and certain places are trying to tell us something, or have said something that was not meant to escape us, or are about to say something; this imminence of a revelation that does not take place is, perhaps, the aesthetic phenomenon” (Borges, 1963) In evocative terms, Borges points out that Aesthetics is a discipline *in need of theoretical space* and, making use of a series of synecdoche (i.e., rhetorical figures that figuratively use a word of broader or lesser meaning than its own), he asserts that Aesthetics is interested in the arts, emotional states, literary narratives, bodies, space, and, more generally, in our being connected with the world. In recent decades, this magma of interests has led some well-known scholars of Aesthetics to define this discipline as *a not specialized philosophy* precisely because this discipline does not specialize itself in the study of an exclusive object (Böhme, 2010; Garroni, 1995; Griffero, 2010; Welsch, 2023), but – as indicated already in its original definition – it constitutes *a peculiar look* at the world. Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, the eponymous father of the discipline, in his *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* of 1735, coined the Greekism *Aesthetica* to indicate a new branch of thought that was to deal extensively with *sensitive knowledge* (Baumgarten, 2000): it is thus the sphere apt to investigate our *perception of the environment* (i.e. everything exerts some influence on us and which we, in turn, influence), but also the sphere relating to our *inner perception* of it,

to the most intimate dimension of our emotions. Thus, perception is associated with the idea of “introjecting” the world, of welcoming it and making it part of ourselves: so, we can say that the noun “Aesthetics” resonates with the sense of *inhaling* something of external reality, of *putting it into circulation* within us and, in a cyclical metabolic path, of *giving something of us back to the world*. Therefore, referring to this etymological reconstruction, the term “Aesthetics” resonates with the *breath of the living* (Desideri, 2004). Because of its innermost etymological meaning and its structural openings to investigations of the body and its relationship of metabolic interchange with the world, Aesthetics can thus play a key role in today’s ecological debates: it can foster the emergence of what is not coincidentally called *green sensibility* that is, an *environmental feeling* based on the intimate recognition of our being *total participants* in Nature and not subjects opposed to it, a presupposition that constitutes the foundation of the theoretical framework apt to encourage the green transition in our society (Fel, 2008; Iannilli, 2020; Maggiore, Tedesco, 2023; Perullo, 2020; Perullo, 2022).

Such a role has already been recognized for Aesthetics in the New European Bauhaus ([https://new-european-bauhaus.europa.eu/about/about-initiative\\_en](https://new-european-bauhaus.europa.eu/about/about-initiative_en)), a creative and interdisciplinary initiative that aims to connect the European Green Deal to lived spaces and everyday experiences, creating a bridge between the sci-

entific/technological and artistic/cultural worlds to jointly address complex social problems, with a view to cooperation and co-construction of knowledge. The New European Bauhaus aims, in particular, to inspire widespread ecological sentiment to facilitate and guide the transformation of our society by identifying three inseparable values as the cornerstones of change: *Sustainability* (understood as both the defence of biodiversity and the fight against climate change, as much as the pursuit of the goal of zero pollution and as an incentive for the adoption of a circular economy), *Inclusion* (understood as the enhancement of diversity, but also as a guarantee of accessibility and convenience) and, precisely, *Aesthetics* (understood as the pursuit of the quality of experience, the defence of environmental, living and cultural “form” beyond the mere principle of functionality). Based on these premises, it is well understood why humanistic culture (in general) and Aesthetics (in particular) can also become fundamental tools to give life to a sustainable society: first of all, it is, in fact, necessary to modify the conception of the relationship between human beings and Nature that we usually consider traditional in the history of European thought from modernity to the present day, emphasizing the weakness of the Cartesian conception of reality, based on contraposition between subject and object. Conversely, opening the way to an integrated vision of Nature is necessary.



### Aesthetics and Ecology: a close theoretical relationship

As was pointed out in the essay *Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty* – a seminal work for environmental aesthetics, published in 1966 by Scottish philosopher Ronald W. Hepburn – the characteristic image of contemporary man is that of a “stranger” surrounded by a Nature that is indifferent to human being or even its enemy (Hepburn, 1966). According to this attitude – which seems to persist in the Anthropocene epoch albeit in a changed guise (Missiroli, 2022; Padoa-Schioppa, 2021), Nature would thus be our bitter adversary, the source of those forces that conspire to subvert human purposes with disease, natural disasters and the ultimate ignominy of death. To curb such opposition, therefore, Nature should be “tamed,” its forces “kept in check” and “harnessed” to serve the purposes humans assign to it, turning Nature in its entirety into an object of human action, empowering us to shape our environment. Philosophical thought can play an indispensable theoretical role in subverting this image by promoting the idea that human beings are wholly internal to the environment (Afeissa, Lafolie, 2015; Berleant, 1998; Id., 1992; Brady 2000; D’Angelo, 2001; Sadler, Carlson, 1982; Seel, 1991).

The concept of the environment as external to the human organism is comforting. Still, it is now “completely discarded by both ecological studies and post-Cartesian philosophy” (Berleant, 1992, p. 5). Simple metabolic notions allow us to easily challenge such a conception by testifying that our body is no *other* than the environment but an integral part of it: to limit ourselves to two undeniable examples, the oxygen we breathe inflates our lungs and enters our bloodstream, just as the food we ingest becomes part of our body (Iovino, 2004; Næss 2021) A “gestalt shift” (Næss, 2015) that testifies to the fact that the environment, one of the last survivors of mind-body dualism, is a distant place that we think we contemplate from a distance, but which dissolves into a complex web of relationships, connections and continuity of those physical, social and cultural conditions that describe my actions, my responses, my awareness and that give form and content to my own life (Casetta, 2023). Because there is no external world, there is not outside. At the same time, there is also no inner sanctuary to take refuge from inimical external forces. “The perceiver (the mind) is an aspect of the perceived (the

body) and *vice versa*; person and environment are continuous” (Berleant, 1992, p. 4).

This is why Aesthetics can relate to Ecology: it concerns the human being, his being in the world, his *relating to* and *feeling emotionally connected* to everything around him. However, the movement of *rapprochement* (a French term meaning “reconciliation” or “coming together”) between the two disciplines is reciprocal. We have to underline that in appealing here to the term Ecology, we do not intend to refer, in a narrow sense, to the biological discipline that arose around the 1960s in response to the environmental crisis related to air pollution and the progressive erosion of natural resources (Worster, 1989; Varela, 2011); we propose instead to refer to the original meaning of the term, coined by German zoologist Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919) in 1866 and first used in the second volume of his *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen*, a mighty work in which the naturalist attempts to mediate between Goethean morphological theories and evolutionism. Here, we read that ecology is the whole science of the relations of the organism to the surrounding external world, in which we may number all the conditions of existence in a broader sense. These are partly organic and partly inorganic; both are of the most significant importance to the form of organisms (Haeckel, 1966, p. 286).

Ecology is thus the study of the adaptive interaction of organisms with the environment in which they live, the science of the relationships that enable a given entity (be it a human being, an animal or a plant) to feel part of its surroundings, to *feel at home* in a particular context, as moreover evidenced by the very etymology of the suffix *eco* present in the word, derived from the Greek *oikos*, meaning precisely “home.” A term that, unlike its synonym “house,” is strongly emotionally connoted. Ecology is, therefore, the discipline that sets out to study the relationships between living things and the environment in which they live, understood both as the set of chemical and physical factors that surround living things (light, type of soil, climate, nutrition, etc.) and as the set of biological factors that can affect the life of these organisms. These biological factors include, for example, *parasitism*, a relationship between two organisms where one benefits at the expense of the other, and *symbiosis*, a relationship between two organisms where both benefits. These relationships allow that entity to perceive that it is in its place in the world and to feel part of something larger. Thus, “ecology is the study [...] of the

world that leads us *into the world*, therefore [...] it is the study (and discourse) *with the world*," where the term world – repeated in this passage several times – is to be understood as "what happens, that is, what *happens insofar as we co-inhabit it, being immersed in it and, at the same time, unceasingly contributing to its making*. The world is this making, this continuous production where everything is interwoven: we, *homo sapiens sapiens*, are part of this interweaving which we do not dominate but which we describe and, at the same time, co-transform" (Perullo, 2022, p. 20). The world is thus not a *tabula rasa* on which humans must exercise a design faculty, nor is it a "container" given a priori to which humans must adapt. Instead, it embodies an immense network of activities and contexts of development from which no living being – including human beings – can abstain since each organism is always actively involved (Borgnino, 2022). Therefore, the human being who sets out to take a genuinely ecological stance should not only (and not so much) attempt to *argue* in favour/defence of other species or inorganic Nature in its entirety but also *correspond with it* (Ingold, 2021). Perullo noted that to correspond with bacteria, pigeons and bees, and even more so with minerals and plants, is to establish a communicative relationship with them. "Correspondence is a form of coexistence, a communication that is upstream of knowledge" (Perullo, 2022, p. 11): it should not be trivially understood as *living next to each other* sharing the same space of existence, but rather as *living together with* other natural entities, *thanks to* other natural entities, *for* other natural entities,

because our forms, functions and activities acquire *meaning* only in a constant interchange with everything that (positively or negatively) contributes to shaping our existence.

Aesthetics is thus a crucial point at which environmental concerns intersect with human experience and activity because our sensory involvement in the environment precedes and underlies all other problems (Berleant, 2014, p. 335). We could thus say that the aesthetic experience of the environment qualifies as the perceptual and sensory counterpart of ecology, testifying once again that ecology requires constant reference to aesthetic experience as a guide and criterion for the rise of an authentic environmental sensibility.

### Ecological aesthetic in Italian high schools

If, therefore, as Böhme suggests, "we approach the field of Aesthetics by appealing to the questions of an extended ecology, the door is opened to another Aesthetics, very different from the previous one" (Böhme, 1989, p. 7), an Aesthetics that proves to be increasingly important in responding to the challenges that the Anthropocene poses to us.

Because of the open-ended character of the discipline, we have attempted to outline or, in other words, because Aesthetics is a non-special philosophy and qualifies itself first and foremost as a *contemplative, respectful and non-prevailing gaze* at the world, it must not only engage speculatively in reinterpreting the relationship between human beings and Nature but also make a significant practical contribution to the spread of a green sensibility.

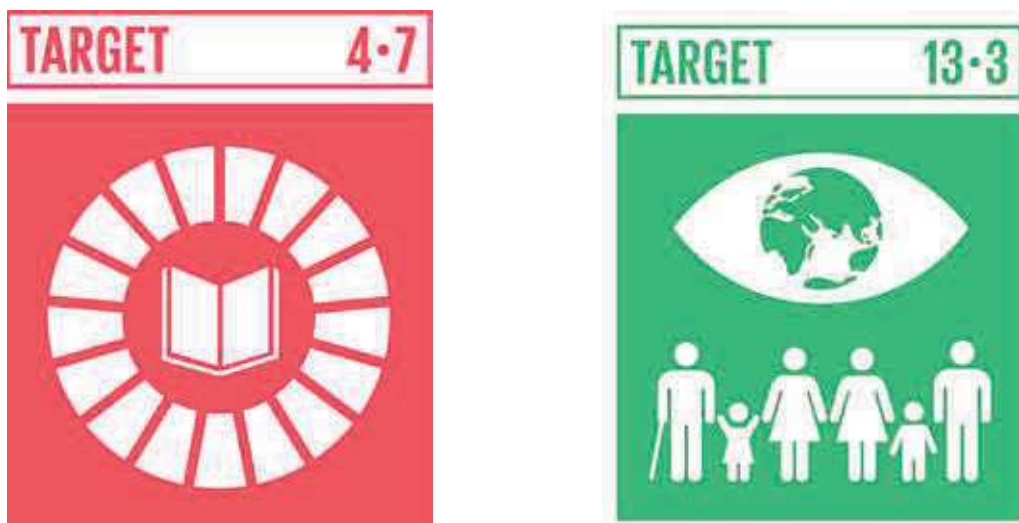


Figure 1 e 2. Goals 4.7 and 13.3 of the UN 2030 Agenda

We are particularly convinced that academic research must take on the burden of “shadowing” the academic world: it is its task to provide teachers and students with the appropriate conceptual tools to deal with the complexity of ecological issues, making the university an *agent of change*, an *engine of experiences* that can be disseminated and an *ambassador of new practices*.

We must recall that the 17 Goals of the UN 2030 Agenda highlight the interdependence between environmental, socioeconomic and cultural issues: Goal 4 (“Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”) and, in particular, the sub-goal 4.7 (“By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and culture’s contribution to sustainable development Indicators”) is shown to be closely linked to Goal 13 (“Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts”),



**Figure 3.** Cover page of the volume “Essere umano e natura nell’epoca dell’Antropocene. Toolkit per affrontare le sfide ecologiche dalla prospettiva delle Environmental Humanities (Plumelia, 2024)”



**Figure 4.** SSDs involved in the publishing project

as evidenced by sub-goal 13.3, which explicitly aims to “Improve education, awareness-raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning”.

Choosing to devote our attention to these sub-goals to make them the driving force for responding to a broader need in our school system – that of increasing the critical capacity of students, fostering intellectual curiosity and the skills of reading, comprehension and active intervention – appears to us strategic, considering the findings of the ASviS Notebook “Target 4.7 - Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship” ([https://asvis.it/public/asvis2/files/Pubblicazioni/QuadernoASviS\\_EducazioneSviluppoSostenibile\\_ott2022.pdf](https://asvis.it/public/asvis2/files/Pubblicazioni/QuadernoASviS_EducazioneSviluppoSostenibile_ott2022.pdf)). The data analyzed in that document are encouraging Italy is on the right track to raise awareness in schools of environmental issues, although the gap between North and South persists.

A cultural characteristic of our educational institutions compounds this gap. In the traditional delivery of educational content in Italian high schools, based on the subdivision into *subjects*, issues related to environmental sustainability are addressed almost exclusively by teachers of science-technology disciplines (STEM) in their curricular program or as part of the proposed pathways for the teaching named “Citizenship and Constitution”. However, we are excited to introduce an innova-

tive path within the Sicilian and, more generally, the Italian school publishing industry.

This inherently transversal and interdisciplinary pathway, supported by the Plumelia publishing house, is designed to broadly involve the *Environmental Humanities*. The volume *Essere umano e natura nell'epoca dell'Antropocene. Toolkit per affrontare le sfide ecologiche dalla prospettiva delle Environmental Humanities* (2024) draws inspiration from the critical values of Aesthetics identified by the New European Bauhaus and addresses green issues from a *new perspective*, both methodologically and in terms of content.

This approach aligns with the principles set out in Articulation 3 of the PNRR, dedicated to the Great Field of Research and Innovation "Humanistic culture, creativity, social transformation, society of inclusion".

As there is no text aimed at Institutes of Higher Secondary Education specifically designed to deal with environmental issues, which focuses on the emotional/cultural/anthropological relationship that binds human beings to Nature, we set out to create a multidisciplinary thematic toolkit to provide teachers of philosophical-literary, pedagogical and historical-geographical disciplines with materials helpful in dealing with environmental issues with a fresh look. The publishing project, sponsored by the University of Palermo *Center for Sustainability and Ecological Transition* (*Centro per la Sostenibilità e la Transizione Ecologica* – CSTE), attempted to "systematize" different knowledge and methodological strategies. After identifying eight keywords (ecology, Anthropocene, landscape, wilderness, environment, biodiversity, sustainability and circular economy), it was decided to divide the toolkit into four modules (*Ecology in the age of the Anthropocene, Human beings and their relationship with Nature, Environmental and animal rights* and *Sustainable development*), each focusing on two key terms. A module devoted explicitly to special education is added to the four modules listed here. Twenty-eight PhD students, researchers and faculty members from the University of Palermo and other Italian athenaeums (belonging to SSDs seemingly very distant from each other such as M-FIL/04, M-FIL/06, BIO/07, L-FIL-LET/04, L-FIL-LET/11, L-FIL-LET/12, L-ART/03, L-ART/05, L-ART/06,

M-DEA/01, M-GGR/01, SPS/07, ING-IND 11, ICAR 04, ICAR 21), have collaborated with local and international artists, bringing together different perspectives and expertise, allowing the publication of a collection of theoretical worksheets, reality tasks, activities and laboratory practices aimed at teachers and learners in the second two-year and final year of upper secondary educational institutions who have an interest in developing activities based on participatory educational methodologies dedicated to the themes of environmental protection, green awareness and sustainable development.

## Conclusion

In the light of the excursus conducted in the preceding paragraphs, we are convinced that Aesthetics can propose a non-prevaricating behavioral model towards the environment and can be of help in the school teaching of ecological issues because, as Martin Seel points out in the incipit of his work *Eine Ästhetik der Natur*, the main reason for the interest in an aesthetic theory of nature lies precisely in the fact that it aims to "defend a non-instrumental approach towards the natural world" [33, p. 9]. This is the reason why we believe that the theory of aesthetics is not only a model of the environment but also a model of the human being's participation in the world. Such a realization leads at the same time to the delineation of a new conception of the human being, based on the *feeling of being part of Nature* and not its *deus ex machina*, a participation that cannot be separated from emotional and sensory involvement, in other words from our *being moved by nature*.

A juxtaposition, then, between Aesthetics and ecological disciplines that intends to pave the way for an integrated view of nature and the idea that human beings, the principal agents of the transformation of our planet, are entirely internal to it. A juxtaposition that leads us to review from within some fundamental concepts of aesthetics itself, but also to consider from a different perspective the very ideas of ecology and the environment, proposing a conceptual revision that is indispensable if we are to be able to trace the speculative framework necessary for a cultural transformation capable of addressing the ecological crisis.

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