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Environmental Aesthetics and "being moved by nature".
Reflections for rethinking the theory of the sublime

Abstract
In the age of Anthropocene, can aesthetics propose a not prevaricating behavioural model towards nature, leading to a new conception of humanity based on our being moved by nature? In this article, we will try to answer this question, exploring how some exponents of contemporary Environmental Aesthetics have examined the significance of human emotional responses to nature. Starting from the assumption that Kant defines the sublime as a motion of the soul, we wonder how aesthetics can reinterpret this concept to affirm not human superiority over nature but his being part of it. To do so, we will turn our attention not only to some exponents of Environmental Aesthetics but also to Schopenhauer's concept of the sublime and the thought of Arne Næss, the father of the Deep Ecology movement.

Keywords
Environmental Aesthetics, *Being moved by nature*, *Ecological sublime*

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1. *Introduction*

The term "Anthropocene", which has now become part of everyday language, is undoubtedly ambiguous, and its introduction into the international scientific debate in recent decades has aroused not a few controversies (Missiroli 2022; Padoa-Schioppa 2021)[1]. The need to emphasise – also by using neologisms – the fact that with his activities human beings have managed to modify the Earth's territory and ecosystem in an increasingly invasive manner, bringing about structural and climatic changes destined to affect geological processes, was already particularly felt in the scientific and philosophical debate of the 19th and 20th centuries (Steffen 2013: 479). To cite just a few of the best-known examples, the Italian geologist and prelate Antonio Stoppani (1824-1891) wrote in his *Corso di geologia* that human activity represented a new telluric force and proposed the introduction of the term "*anthropozoic era*" to define the epoch in which the latter prevails (Stoppani 1871-1873); or the Russian mineralogist and geochemist Vladimir I. Vernadsky (1863-1945) in 1926 introduced the term "*noosphere*" as opposed to the concept of "*biosphere*" (Vernadsky 1994), an expression later taken up by the palaeontologist and Catholic thinker Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) in his posthumously published essay *L'Hominisation* (Teilhard de Chardin 1955) to emphasise the growing power of the human mind in shaping its own future and that of the environment.

The adoption of the term "Anthropocene" – much more recent but destined for success – dates back only to February 2000 and was used for the first time by Nobel Prize for Chemistry Paul Crutzen, who used it in the context of the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme (Cuernavaca, Mexico) to differentiate the current geological era from the previous one. In his opinion, this new era is characterised by a different relationship between the Earth and its inhabitants[2]: according to this

[1] More than concerning the choice of the term, the dispute is about its temporal delimitation. While some scholars think that the "onset of the Anthropocene" coincides with the Industrial Revolution, others have backdated its beginning by identifying a turning point in the Agricultural Revolution, which allowed humanity to interfere in the environment and transform itself into a biophysical force. The geological community still debates the notion of the Anthropocene, but an undoubted interest in the term characterised the first decades of the 21st century.

[2] See Carruthers 2019, in which the author points out that Crutzen was impatient with his colleagues who kept using during the conference the word "Holocene" and exclaimed: "Let's stop using the word Holocene. We are no longer in the Holocene.

scholar, the present age is marked by the devastating impact of human activities on the Earth's ecosystem (i.e., by the effect that a particular living species has on the whole Earth's System). It is, therefore, an epoch that also needs to be distinguished terminologically from the previous geological epoch, the *Holocene*, which in its very diction indicates instead "the epoch in which the *holon* prevails"[3]: in other words, in the Holocene predominates the totality, in an equilibrium that – paraphrasing Kant's *Kritik der teleologischen Urteilskraft* – we could define as "organismic" because it is based on a peculiar relationship between the parts and the whole and between the elements themselves in their systemic interactions (Kant 2000: 242).

The concept of the Anthropocene was undoubtedly productive for the humanities, which in recent decades have critically questioned how the effects of human action condition the Earth's habitat (Aloi 2018; Ballard 2021; Coughlin, Gephart 2020; Davis, Turpin 2014; Gilbert, Cox, Osborne 2019; Hedin, Gremaud 2018; Holloway 2022; Reiss 2019; Weber 2016). With their peculiar expressive strategies, the Human Sciences have reflected on issues such as pollution, global warming, and industrialisation, allowing for an *experiential perception*[4] of the environmental problem, trying to awaken consciences with the power of images and words to limit the current practice of unconditional exploitation of environmental resources and pursue an ecological transition. As Horn and Bergthaller warn us,

> When an "aesthetics of the Anthropocene" is invoked at exhibitions, seminars, and public discussions, it generally refers, in a broad-brush fashion, to "ecological crisis", "global warming", "the human footprint", or to more specific problems such as pollution, species extinction, or issues of coexistence with other species. Yet such references hardly add up to a coherent aesthetic program. (Horn, Bergthaller 2019: 96)

We are in the... the... the... the Anthropocene!". Crutzen was not the first to use this term: in 1980, the American biologist E.F. Stoermer had already informally used the term in his university lectures; therefore, the two scientists published together the scientific article marking the beginning of Anthropocene studies in 2000 (see Crutzen, Stoermer, 2000).

[3] Charles Lyell coined the term in 1833 to indicate the post-glacial epoch, whose beginning is calculated to be between 12,000 and 9,000 years ago. The International Geological Congress formally adopted this term in 1885.

[4] "As the vehicle of aesthesis, [art] is central to *thinking with and feeling through* the Anthropocene" (Davis, Turpin 2015: 3).

Except for sporadic voices, Human Sciences have operated more on the side of *praxis* than on that of *inclinations,* suggesting that human beings should modify their behaviour[5]; nevertheless, "a genuine aesthetics for the Anthropocene […] cannot be satisfied with thematic references and the rhetoric of political mobilization" (Horn, Bergthaller 2019: 97). In our opinion, the Human Sciences have not yet adequately analysed the theoretical assumptions that have determined the imposition of the latter over the centuries, i.e. the human/non-human, subject/object, whole/part relations that have hitherto characterised the hidden theoretical substratum of the relationship that human beings have with nature (especially in Western culture, as evidenced by the fact that some authors of contemporary Environmental Aesthetics, such as Arnold Berleant and Yuriko Saito, call to pay more attention to the relationship between human beings and nature typical of Far Eastern religions and cultures; see Berleant 2014; Saito 2010), connections that the concept of the Anthropocene requires us to rethink instead.

Therefore, this article aims to investigate some dimensions of the emotional experience of ecological crisis and elaborate conceptual tools within the aesthetic perspective that may represent the foundation for a different interpretation of our relationship with nature. On the other hand, due to the contemplative attitude that is peculiar to it, Aesthetics can propose a behavioural model that does not overwhelm the environment. As Martin Seel underlines 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" (Seel 1991: 9); it 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 form of participation that cannot be separated from *emotional* and *sensory* involvement*,* in other words from our "being moved by nature". Interpreting the contemplative character of Aesthetics

[5] They suggest that human beings should modify their everyday behaviour to promote the preservation of the Earth, but not that we should radically question the cultural assumptions that have historically determined the emergence of those erroneous behaviours towards the Earth's ecosystem. On the other hand, some contemporary theoretical movements, such as Deep ecology, propose to start precisely from this latter point, emphasising that becoming aware of these cultural assumptions and revising them can lead us to act in an ecologically correct manner, not through legal obligation, persuasion, or external imposition, but through spontaneous inclination (see, for example, Næss 2015: 97).

in this way, we understand why, according to some promoters of Environmental Aesthetics, the Kantian concept of disinterest cannot be the base of an aesthetic reflection on nature and why it implies an immediate reference to ecological issues: contrary to what is suggested by the Königsberg philosopher in his third Critique, we cannot be disinterested in our experiential relationship with nature because we are bodily involved in it, inherent in it, an expression of it[6].

Based on these assumptions, we will attempt to outline how we can today "being moved by nature", articulating our reflections in three stages:

1. Firstly, we aim to understand – admittedly limited to a few particularly significant examples – how some authors of contemporary Environmental Aesthetics (namely Allen Carlson and Nöel Carroll) have faced this issue, attempting to examine the significance of human emotional responses to natural phenomena[7].

2. Secondly, starting from the assumption that Immanuel Kant in §24 of *Kritik der Urteilskraft* defines the *sublime* as a "movement of the mind" (Kant 2000: 131) – or to be closer to the German diction used by the philosopher as a "motion of the soul" (*Bewegung des Gemüts*) – we propose to make a brief reflection on this concept[8]. In this second moment, the question underpinning our argument will be: what kind of relationship with nature does the Kantian concept of the sublime presuppose? And in the age of the Anthropocene, can we still conceive the sublime as an aesthetically valid category[9]? Emily Brady argues:

[6] For a criticism of the notion of aesthetic disinterest, see Berleant (1994) and Saito (2017).

[7] In 1998, the "Journal of aesthetics and art criticism" dedicated a special issue to Environmental Aesthetics. This latter is defined in the introduction as a relatively new movement that "has only recently begun to attract scholarly attention". For a general definition of the movement and its characteristics, see Afeissa 2018; Berleant 1998; Brady 2000; Carlson 2001 (2020); D'Angelo 2010b; Feloj 2018; Fisher 2003; Iannilli 2020; Toadvine 2010.

[8] For a summary of the various meanings of the sublime that have followed in the philosophical debate since Boileau's translation of the Pseudo-Longinus, see Giordanetti, Mazzocut-Mis 2015; Franzini, Mazzocut-Mis 2000.

[9] The French historian of science, environment, and technology J.-B. Fressoz was the first to invoke the concept of the Sublime to understand and reinterpret environmental crisis. As Fressoz (2016: 1) writes: "The strength of the Anthropocene idea is not conceptual, scientific, or heuristic: it is above all aesthetic. The concept of Anthropocene […] emphasizes that the geochemical processes that humanity has set in motion are so inertial that the Earth is leaving the climatic equilibrium characteristic

> In the last centuries, the opportunities to appreciate the natural sublime have declined, presumably because many cultures and societies seem now to be even less awed by nature. We appear to be less fearful, having developed technological means to control or manage much of nature. For many people, great mountains and the vast sea may no longer evoke that edgy feeling of the sublime and the anxious pleasure it involves. (Brady 2013: 185)

Therefore, the question we will ask ourselves is the following: how can we grasp the sense of grandeur and, at the same time, of astonishment, ineffability, and inexpressibility of nature in an age in which the latter appears to us as an object of our dominion and no longer as a great and mysterious entity, superior to us and eluding all attempts at subjugation?

3. Thirdly, we propose to interpret the "being moved by nature" (to which the concept of the sublime is thus already closely linked in the Kantian definition) as a peculiar form of *aesthetic resonance* that can connect (rather than separate) human beings to non-human entities and nature in its totality[10]. So, to answer the question reported in the second item, we will turn our attention to one of the "variations on the theme" that the concept of the sublime has undergone after Kant: we will briefly analyse the conception of the sublime expressed by Arthur Schopenhauer in *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*. The concept of the sublime outlined by Schopenhauer could be of extreme interest for establishing solid theoretical links with some current aesthetical theories (such as Godlovitch's theory) and ecological philosophies, for example, the *Deep Ecology movement,* which found in the Norwegian philosopher and well-known environmental activist Arne Næss (1912-2009) one of its leading exponents.

of the Holocene. The Anthropocene designates a point of no return. A geological bifurcation in the history of the planet Earth. We do not know what the Anthropocene will bring (Earth system simulations are uncertain); however, we can no longer doubt that something important on the scale of geological time has recently occurred on Earth." He adds: "The concept of Anthropocene is interesting, but also very problematic for political ecology, as it reactivates the springs of the aesthetics of the sublime, a western and bourgeois aesthetic par excellence, vilified by Marxist, feminist and subalternist critics, as well as by postmodernists". Following the French historian, it is possible to juxtapose the notions of the Anthropocene and the sublime because they have three common characteristics: magnitude, time depth, and the sovereign violence of nature.

[10] The Anthropocene indeed calls into question the theoretical foundations of the relationship between human and non-human beings, a thesis already argued by multiple authors (Haraway 2003 e 2007; Krogh 2021; Tsing 2015).

2. *Environmental Aesthetics and "being moved by nature"*

To attempt to outline the first of the three points indicated in the previous paragraph, in this argument, we have chosen to start from a famous article published in 1993 by the contemporary American philosopher Noël Carroll, entitled *On being moved by nature: between religion and natural history* (Carroll 1993). A paper with a polemical tone, in which the philosopher responds to famous articles written between the 1970s and 1980s by the Canadian analytical philosopher Allen Carlson, one of the most influential voices in contemporary Environmental Aesthetics (Carlson 1979a, 1979b, 1981, 1995)[11].

To understand the importance of this criticism, we must take a step back and briefly turn our attention to the *environmental model* proposed by the Canadian philosopher, well-known also as *scientific cognitivism* (see D'Angelo 2001, 2010a, 2010b). This latter suggests a model of the aesthetic relationship between human beings and nature that has met considerable success in the international debate despite the apparent shortcomings we will attempt to highlight in our argumentation. In purely analytical terms, the question underlying Carlson's entire argument is: "Can we exercise a judgement of taste in the naturalistic sphere just as we can in the artistic sphere? Moreover, if so, why can we appreciate nature aesthetically?" This question is only somewhat original for those familiar with modern aesthetic reflection. Still, Carlson's answer is undoubtedly innovative and, in many respects, contradictory to the fundamental analogy between art and nature that governs the entire Kantian architecture in *Kritik der Urteilskraft*.

[11] In recent decades, many scholars in the international debate have been interested in rethinking the concept of the sublime, given the environmental crisis. See for instance Borsari 2022; Brady 2013; Fressoz 2016; Hitt 1999; Willingston 2016. See specifically Caracciolo 2021. In this article the author starts his argumentation from the concept of "being moved by nature" elaborated by Nöel Carroll but presents a different perspective from that outlined in our article. Starting from the debate between Carlson and Carroll (synthetically analysed also in the present article and by now considered an object of broad discussion in the field of Environmental Aesthetics), Caracciolo proposes to return to the concept of the sublime delineated by Edmund Burke, distinguishing it from the idealistic and transcendental notion outlined by Immanuel Kant. Burke proposed a physiological definition of the sublime that, in the author's opinion, would allow us to reinterpret Carrol's "being moved by Nature" as a material emotion, establishing a link between the concepts of "motion" and "emotion" that winks at the phenomenology of the American philosophers David Abram and Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, whose reflections are central to the author's argument.

In fact, in articulating his reflections, Carlson starts from the analysis of specific characteristics of artistic appreciation: he realises that when we formulate a judgement on the compositional structure of a work of art, we know what to appreciate and how to do so because we are guided in our estimation by historically imposed artistic categories, learnt through the exercise of our taste and frequentation of museum spaces. For example, by understanding what Cubism is and what the theoretical assumptions of this artistic movement are, we are led to estimate "beautiful" the painting *Guernica* (1937) by Pablo Picasso. This artwork might instead appear unusual in its composition, bizarre or even unpleasant to the eye of a viewer who does not possess such basic knowledge (in other words, to a viewer who has no theoretical knowledge of the conceptual assumptions of the Cubist movement or who is unaware of the wartime events during the Spanish Civil War that led to the bombing of the Basque city of Guernica and inspired the work). In Carlson's view, Picasso's work is appreciated negatively, not for *sentimental* reasons or the subject's *internal* inclination, but only because the subject needs to possess the necessary art-historical knowledge to appreciate that work *properly*.

The theoretical consequences of this position lead the Canadian philosopher to move away from Kant: the author intends to identify some knowledge that can perform, in the naturalistic sphere, a function analogous to the role of *guiding judgement* that art history performs in the artistic sphere. This knowledge can *objectively* orient the judgement of taste, considered as "necessarily valid" and no longer "subjectively universalizable", as Kant suggests in the second moment of the judgement of taste of his third *Critique* (Kant 2000: 96-104). Furthermore, the Canadian aestheticist seems to have no doubts about the discipline (or instead, the group of disciplines) that can perform this task: the natural sciences, whose knowledge is *added to vision* to make possible the *only* correct aesthetic appreciation of nature[12]. The author exemplifies that concept by stating: "This knowledge, essentially common sense/scientific knowledge, seems to me the only viable candidate for playing the role in regard to the appreciation of nature which our

[12] See Carlson (1978: 273), where we read: "What I am suggesting is that the question of *what* to aesthetically appreciate in the natural environment is to be answered in a way analogous to the similar question about art. The difference is that in the case of the natural environment the relevant knowledge is the common sense/scientific knowledge which we have discovered about the environment in question".

knowledge of types of art, artistic traditions, and the like plays in regard to the appreciation of art" (Carlson 1979a: 273).

As Carroll then summarises in the introductive paragraph of his article:

> Carlson's view of the appreciation of nature is that it is a matter of scientific understanding; that is, the correct or appropriate form that the appreciation of nature – properly so-called — should take is a species of natural history; appreciating nature is a matter of understanding nature under the suitable scientific categories. (Carroll 1993: 244)

By emphasising the focus on scientific knowledge and its role in directing our appreciation of nature, Carlson distances himself from Kant's reflection (which, in our view, he sometimes reads simplistically or even misunderstands). Moreover, he does not give due consideration – as Carroll points out in his article – to a much more common type of experience, "less intellectual and more visceral" (Carroll 1993: 245) towards nature, namely the *emotional response* that nature evokes in us, in other words, the *being moved* or *emotionally stimulated* by it. *Being driven by nature* is a mode of natural appreciation that we could define as *pre-theoretical and pathetic* (meaning the term "pathetic" in its original sense as derived from the Greek word *pathos*) and that Carroll calls the *arousal model* or *emotional stimulus model* because it is based not on what we "know" about the living being or the landscape we are observing, but on the emotions communicated to us by the size, energy or form of the natural spectacle. As the author highlights in one of the examples that form the thread of the article (Carroll 1993: 250, 251, 258), to admire a waterfall, you do not need any knowledge of the physical characteristics of water (you do not need to know what elements the water molecules are composed of or how fast the mass of water tumbles); it is enough to *feel* the force and majesty that nature displays. Carroll writes:

> I conjured up a scene where standing near a towering cascade, our ears reverberating with the roar of falling water, we are overwhelmed and excited by its grandeur. People quite standardly seek out such experiences. They are, pretheoretically, a form of appreciating nature. Moreover, when caught up in such experiences, our attention is fixed on certain aspects of the natural expanse rather than others – the palpable force of the cascade, its height, the volume of water, the way it alters the surrounding atmosphere, etc.
>
> This does not require any special scientific knowledge. Perhaps it only requires being human, equipped with the senses we have, being small and able to intuit

the immense force, relative to creatures like us, of the roaring tons of water. (Carroll 1993: 250-1)

Carroll's essay is undoubtedly a successful example of how American Analytical Philosophy has dealt with the theme of aesthetic appreciation of nature, constructing a heated debate around the theses sustained by scientific cognitivism; however, if we read the text carefully, we realise how some assumptions, although attractive in their premises, are not dealt with in-depth or are left deliberately indeterminate. What stands out the most is the fact that Carroll proposes an argument that, in its assumptions, claims to be based on the community of feeling, in other words, on human sensibility conceived as something *a-conceptual* and *evolutionarily universal*[13], making use, however, of examples (such as that of the waterfall just cited) closely linked to Western literary history: "standing under a thundering waterfall and be excited by its grandeur" (Carroll 1993: 245) may evoke in us well-known literary examples – from a famous scene from Goethe's *Faust* (Goethe 2014: 245) to a passage from Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* (Mann 1992: 122) – that inevitably contribute to the construction of our imagination and our relationship to such a naturalistic element, unconsciously influencing our feeling[14].

Moreover, Carroll does not deem it necessary to explain the concept of "nature-able-to-move-our-feeling" in his text, suggesting that both the philosopher and the less experienced reader know "instinctively" what natural elements can "activate" an emotional awakening in us. From the terms and examples he uses, however, he seems to refer only fleetingly to what Kant would include in the concept of "beautiful nature", a peaceful and harmonious nature, with which the human being feels – in a eurythmic perspective – to be in *accordance*[15]; most of the examples he uses to support his argument (the waterfall, the Grand Teton or the being

[13] See, for example, Carroll (1993: 251), where the author states: "That is, we may be aroused emotionally by nature, and our arousal may be a function of our human nature in response to a natural expanse".

[14] In the course of the argument, however, Carroll (1993: 252) seems to realise the *impasse* he has fallen into and states: "Admittedly, not all of our emotional arousals in the face of nature should be ascribed to our common human nature, rather than to what is sectarian in our cultures, but there is no reason to preclude the possibility that some of our emotional arousals to nature are bred in the bone".

[15] For example, Carroll (1993: 245) cites, without dwelling particularly on such examples, the positive emotion of "standing barefooted amidst a silent arbour, softly carpeted with layers of decaying leaves" or the act of observing "the grace of a group of deer vaulting a stream" (1993: 260).

frightened by a tiger) refer instead to the idea of uncontaminated and wild nature, a grand, powerful nature untouched by civilisation and that stands as a counterpoint to human society. This conception entails two orders of problems, apparently distant but intertwined. Firstly, Carroll seems to deliberately neglect the reference to the concept of the sublime, which remains in the shadows in his argument[16], but on which European philosophical modernity has based its interpretation of the complex emotions generated by recognising the power and majesty of wild nature.

Secondly, it overlooks that the separation between humanised and unspoilt nature, especially in Europe, is hard to delineate since the territory is greatly humanised. In other words, it is a *landscape* because the nature we are used to dealing with is a nature in which – in a more or less direct way – the hand of the human being is always present (we can cite, for example, the centrality of human decision in the creation of national parks or the policies to avoid overpopulation in some regions of particular species). In an article entitled *Twenty-two theses on nature*, the American philosopher Steven Shaviro underlines all this, stating in his first thesis that "We can no longer think of nature as one side of a binary opposition […]; it makes no sense to oppose nature to culture, or a state of nature to human society, or the natural to the artificial. Human beings and their productions are not separate from nature; they are just as much, or as little, natural as everything else" (Shaviro 2012: 205).

We argue that these two sets of problems are, in fact, closely intertwined because the notion of the sublime, as it is usually understood and in particular in Kant's interpretation, rests on a binary opposition between human beings and nature, contraposition that, as the French philosopher Alexandre Billon suggests, can be compared to a *mental match*, in which nature wins the first round, but in which human being ultimately manages to prevail thanks to the power of his reason (Billon 2022: 5).

[16] The only passage in which Carroll (1993: 259-60) refers to the sublime concept is the following: "There is no reason to suppose that being moved by nature constitutes a shallower form of appreciation than does appreciating nature scientifically. The Kantian apprehension of sublimity – and its corresponding aesthetic judgment – though it may last for a delimited duration, need not be any less deep than a protracted teleological judgment".

3. *The category of the sublime and the aesthetics of the Anthropocene*

In an article entitled *Le cosmos des brindilles. Une sublime pour notre époque,* Billon (2022: 4) emphasises that four elements are involved in the Kantian experience of the sublime as traditionally understood.

The first one is *the natural object* since the experience of the sublime arises from the confrontation with natural entities, objects considered ontologically different from human beings and which prompt in us a form of helplessness and terror because they are immensely large or extremely powerful. In other words, they are natural objects our imagination cannot grasp[17]: inaccessible mountains and frightening storms, starry skies and tidal waves are examples of a nature that *surpasses human beings* in scale or strength.

The second constitutive element of the sublime is *humiliation*: the experience of the sublime is, in fact, an *oxymoronic* experience that leads the human being, in the confrontation with immense and powerful non-human entities, to feel "brought back to his humility", "lowered in rank". Linked to this is the third characteristic element of the Kantian sublime listed by Billion: the *mixed pleasure*. This kind of pleasure is what Edmund Burke defines in his *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful* as a *delight* "which arises from the modifications of pain" (Burke 1990: 33). This latter is the "pleasure, which cannot exist without a relation, and that too a relation to pain" (Burke 1990: 31), and which Kant instead refers to as "a sensation in which agreeableness is produced only using a momentary inhibition followed by a stronger outpouring of the vital force (*eine Lust ist, welche nur indirecte entspringt, nämlich so, daß sie durch das Gefühl einer augenblicklichen Hemmung der Lebenskräfte*)" (Kant 2000: 80-81) or as a "negative pleasure (*negative Lust*)" (Kant 2000: 129). The experience of humiliation, which constitutes the first moment of the sublime, is immediately mixed with a feeling of pleasure that arises from the awareness that our rationality leads us to overcome nature or at least to be as immense as nature itself.

[17] As Kant points out in his *Analytik des Erhabenen,* such an experience cannot, therefore, be experienced in front of works of art that only in colloquial and not entirely correct language can we call "sublime", since in that case the feeling of the sublime is *represented* and not experienced in its *presentation.* Furthermore, art represents a sublime natural entity in works constructed on a human scale.

A sentiment that is thus closely connected to the fourth characteristic identified by Billion, namely the *cosmic truth*, the metaphysical truth to which the sublime experience allows us to have access: the recognition that we occupy a privileged place in the world as superior beings able to counter nature. As Christopher Hitt suggests in the essay *Toward an ecological sublime* – considered one of the reference texts in the contemporary debate for questioning the possibility of revising the concept of the sublime – "humility is thus transformed into self-apotheosis", validating the idea that the individual can dominate the non-human world (Hitt 1999: 608)[18].

This dialectic of man's transcendence of nature, which lies at the heart of Kant's theory of the sublime, has undergone many variations since Kant, interpretations that Billion dwells on but is not our purpose to investigate here. We only wish to point out that the traditional view of the sublime is based on an idea of a "threatening" and "hostile" nature which, as theorised by the promoters of the seventeenth-century scientific revolution, is comparable to an empire to conquer, a beast to tame, an enemy to torture so that it reveals its innermost secrets in the constraint of the experiment. We can affirm that, in the European philosophical tradition, the relationship between human beings and nature is agonistic and anthropocentric because the human being engages in a bitter struggle with natural forces, only to prove victorious and able to tame them through technique and science.

However, we can ask ourselves: is this still the idea of nature that constitutes the hidden substratum of our *Weltanschauung*? The data disseminated every day by the media and by the supporters of ecological activism movements seem to describe a different idea of nature, a nature that we can no longer identify with the great, powerful and terrifying image that transpires in Kant's pages: a fragile, weak nature, in agony and that only from time to time, in moments of impatience with its weary condition, still shows its devastating power, managing for an instant to channel its forces and resisting a destiny that seems already written. A nature that, operating a personification, appears at the same time sick and restless, and that recalls the words with which Thomas Mann describes in *Buddenbrooks* the last hours of the life of the protagonist's elderly mother: "The movements of the patient increased. This body,

[18] See also Brady (2013: 197), where the author says that "the sublime could be seen as a type of aesthetic experience that humanizes nature, using its greatness as a mirror for ourselves, self-aggrandizing and 'degrading nature to our measure'".

delivered over to death, was possessed by a terrible unrest, an unspeakable craving, an abandonment of helplessness, from head to foot" (Mann 1984: 459).

A dramatic image opposed to the previous one and on which the theorists of the Anthropocene leverage, urging the adoption of new and more ecological practices. An image, however, that forces us to ask ourselves whether it still makes sense to speak of the sublime in the age of the Anthropocene; in other words, are we, 21st-century humans, still able to grasp the meaning of grandeur and power of nature in an era in which the latter now appears to us as a fragile object of our domination?

In agreement with Hitt, we believe that the concept of the sublime represents "a unique opportunity for the realization of a new, more responsible perspective on our relationship with the natural environment" (Hitt 1999: 605) and that a theoretical shift within this concept is possible since the latter has proved to be an *elusive* and *protean concept* over the centuries, undergoing multiple changes and transformations from classical antiquity to the present day. Like Hitt, but following a different path from him, we propose to grasp the positive aspects of the Romantic conception of the sublime and attempt to reconfigure it from an ecological perspective.

4. *Reflections for an ecological Sublime*

As Billion suggests, the second and third characteristics of the sublime (the sense of humility it imposes on the human being and the feeling of pleasure mixed with displeasure) represent two traits that none of Kant's successors during the 19th century questioned. However, the consideration linked to the first and fourth points (namely, understanding what kind of object "moves" our soul and what metaphysical truth the sublime experience allows us to understand) changed.

We propose here to analyse Arthur Schopenhauer's definition of the sublime in *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* because we believe that this definition can be a good starting point for overcoming the anthropocentric vision that the Anthropocene imposes on us, favouring a decentralisation of the human being and opening us up, precisely by the humility set by the sublime, to a form of *resonance* with non-human entities.

Some passages in Book III (§39) particularly interest us. In one of them, recalling the image of the waterfall used by Carroll in his article almost two centuries later, Schopenhauer states:

> But the impression becomes even stronger, when we have before our eyes the struggle of the agitated forces of nature on a large scale, when in these surroundings the roaring of a falling stream deprives us of the possibility of hearing our own voices. Or when we are abroad in the storm of tempestuous seas; mountainous waves rise and fall, are dashed violently against steep cliffs, and shoot their spray high into the air. The storm howls, the sea roars, the lightning flashes from black clouds, and thunderclaps drown the noise of storm and sea. Then in the unmoved beholder of this scene the twofold nature of his consciousness reaches the highest distinctness. Simultaneously, he feels himself as individual, as the feeble phenomenon of will, which the slightest touch of these forces can annihilate, helpless against powerful nature, dependent, abandoned to chance, a vanishing nothing in face of stupendous forces; and he also feels himself as the eternal, serene subject of knowing, who as the condition of every object is the supporter of this whole world, the fearful struggle of nature being only his mental picture or representation; he himself is free from, and foreign to, all willing and all needs, in the quiet comprehension of the Ideas. This is the full impression of the sublime. (Schopenhauer 1969: 204-5)

The reinterpretation of the dynamic sublime proposed by Schopenhauer is supplemented a few lines later by the German philosopher's comparison with Kant's concept of the mathematical sublime. In a passage that we report below, Schopenhauer further clarifies what he says above and emphasises how his concept of the sublime is only in *apparent* theoretical continuity with that one proposed by the philosopher of Königsberg, making himself the spokesman for a vision of the relationship between human beings and nature that differs from that offered by Kant. Indeed, Schopenhauer writes:

> If we lose ourselves in contemplation of the infinite greatness of the universe in space and time, meditate on the past millennia and on those to come; or if the heavens at night actually bring innumerable worlds before our eyes, and so impress on our consciousness the immensity of the universe, we feel ourselves reduced to nothing; we feel ourselves as individuals, as living bodies, as transient phenomena of will, like drops in the ocean, dwindling and dissolving into nothing. But against such a ghost of our own nothingness, against such a lying impossibility, there arises the immediate consciousness that all these worlds exist only in our representation, only as modifications of the eternal subject of pure knowing. This we find ourselves to be, as soon as we forget individuality; it is the necessary, conditional supporter of all worlds and of all periods of time. The vastness of the world, which previously disturbed our peace of mind, now rests within us; our dependence on it is now annulled by its dependence on us. All this, however, does

> not come into reflection at once, but shows itself as a consciousness, merely felt, that in some sense or other (made clear only by philosophy) we are one with the world, and are therefore not oppressed but exalted by its immensity. It is the felt consciousness of what the *Upanishads* of the Vedas express repeatedly in so many different ways, but most admirably in the saying already quoted: *Hae omnes creaturae in totum ego sum, et praeter me aliud (ens) non est*. It is an exaltation beyond our own individuality, a feeling of the sublime. (Schopenhauer: 205-6)

The infinite grandeur of the natural world in space and time reduces us to the point of vanishing, and the power of nature "cancels" our voice, giving us the possibility of hearing the voice of nature itself. As Mikel Dufrenne points out in an evocative article entitled *L'expérience esthétique de la nature,* "it is when it appears sublime that nature imposes itself as nature" (Dufrenne 1955: 206): in other words, it is in this particular experience that nature allows itself to be grasped in its authentic being or *on its own term,* expression often used by contemporary Environmental Aesthetics (see, for example, Saito 1998). As Brady says, "There is something we can call a contemporary experience of the sublime, where we are confronted not with some social construction, but with a material experience of a natural world that resists human appropriation" (Brady 2013: 195).

Schopenhauer bases his analysis of the sublime on the concept of nature's *indifference* to man, an indifference that takes place in space and time and that, precisely for this reason, requires us to partially revise the object that "sets our soul in motion" by evoking in us the feeling of the sublime. We can recall that in §23 of the third *Critique,* Kant asserts that:

> In that which we are accustomed to call sublime in nature there is so little that leads to particular objective principles and forms of nature corresponding to these that it is mostly rather in its chaos or in its wildest and most unruly disorder and devastation, if only it allows a glimpse of magnitude and might, that it excites the ideas of the sublime. Nature elicits ideas of the sublime most in its chaos, or in its wildest and most unruly disorder and devastation when we can discern only greatness and power. (Kant 2000: 130)

The passages from Schopenhauer's text highlight how the fundamental characteristic that a natural object must have to set in motion an experience of sublimity is not so much its formlessness or unruliness but its *radical disinterest* in human beings. This hypothesis allows us to understand why another well-known exponent of current American Environmental Aesthetics, Holmes Rolston III, defines as "sublime", for

example, the aesthetic experience of forests[19]: "confronting forest giants we realize that trees live on radically different scales of time than do we. Trees have no sense of duration, experienced time; they nevertheless endure [...] This deeper sense of time presents an aesthetic challenge" (Rolston 1998: 157) that makes us wince and feel small, confronting ourselves with natural beings that – although "limited", "formed" and in some cases "ordered" – transcends the human time scale. In other terms, we confront ourselves with a nature that lives a life "different from the human one" because it is inscribed in the dimension of the *zoe* (of what the Greeks called "cyclical life") and not of the *bios* (the "linear life" that has a point of beginning and a point of arrival): in fact, nature is able of regenerating itself, surviving even nefarious events (for example, fires, landslides, floods or frosts) and to reborn from its ashes and seemingly conquering death, an ambition that the human being has always nurtured but which is not granted to him (at least in this world).

Faced, then, not only with infinitely large, powerful, chaotic, or formless objects but also with profound and indifferent ones, we have the consciousness of vanishing and disappearing "like drops in the ocean", says Schopenhauer (Schopenhauer 1969: 205). In short, we experience that humiliation and that sense of smallness that forces us to understand our place in the world. Being moved by nature allows the duplicity of our being to emerge. This form of duplicity does not, however, translate itself into the Kantian split between body (the domain of determinate and necessary laws) and reason (the realm of freedom) – which once again reproduces the Cartesian split between *res extensa* and *res cogitans* in a different guise – but rather into the recognition that my *Self* (individual, small, insignificant and destined to vanish) is countered by my being part of the whole. As transient phenomena of nature, we are destined to "dissolve into nothing" (Schopenhauer 1969: 205). However, it is precisely the recognition of our physical smallness that moves us to a deeper metaphysical consideration: we are merely modifications of the

[19] We can see similarities between this conception of the sublime and Lyotard's reflections. In his lectures on the Kantian Analysis of the Sublime, Lyotard proposes an interpretation of the sublime as a model for reflective thought (Lyotard 2021). In the diptych of essays formed by *Le sublime et l'avant-garde* (Lyotard 1985) and *L'instant, Newman* (Lyotard 2010), the sublime is no longer generated by the experience of an exceptional object or situation, by its elevation, size or power. Still, it is closely linked to the precariousness of the aesthetic happening and the terror of deprivation that results from it.

eternal or, as Spinoza would say, modes of a substance without which we could not exist and which, conversely, finds full realisation in us.

Hence, it is precisely from being restored to our place in nature that pleasure arises: the joy of recognising a metaphysical truth different from the Kantian one; the pleasure of perceiving, intuitively and immediately, that nature is not foreign and hostile to us, but is only indifferent to us as "individuals". If we forget our "individualism" and no longer consider ourselves subjects separate and opposed to nature, we realise we are "one with the world". We recognise that we are an expression of nature or, in other words, a way in which nature realises itself and makes itself perceptually accessible.

In this conception – undoubtedly present in the Oriental traditions as Schopenhauer already emphasises by referring to the Vedas and quoting in Latin the maxim contained therein, "I am all this creation collectively and beside me, there exist no other beings" – it is again the *olon,* the whole, that has a privileged role. For that reason, the point of view of nature is more "detached" from the vision of the individual creatures: it is the "one eye of the world" that is well reconciled with an interpretative model of the relationship between human beings and nature proposed by another exponent of contemporary Environmental Aesthetics, the New Zealand philosopher Stan Godlovitch, who is the spokesman for an alternative aesthetic model to both Carlson's scientific cognitivism and Carroll's emotional stimulus model. This latter is the so-called *acentric model,* proposed by Godlovitch in a famous article entitled *Icebreakers: environmentalism and natural aesthetics* (Godlovitch 1994). To truly appreciate nature for what it is in its totality and not simply for what it is for human beings (mere expressions of it), the author proposes, to distance ourselves from a subject supposed to be a "privileged point of view" and to do it without the sensory perception apparatus peculiar to humans. Godlovitch writes in this regard:

> If we reckon even an insensate nature has value in itself and not just as habitat or as a source of pleasure, that value must flow from a non-moral source. Rock and ice have no point of view. Any environmentalism focussed upon all of nature indiscriminately must be acentric. The nature addressed by this acentric environmentalism is the principal object of an acentric natural aesthetic. Such an aesthetic cannot itself be humanly parochial because our object is something much bigger and less understandable than we are. (Godlovitch 1994: 19)

Only by operating a perspectival decentralisation and distancing ourselves from any human filter (being it cognitive or sensitive) could we attempt to approach the "mystery of nature" in the conviction that "any natural aesthetics must respect the inarticulable which is, after all, the spontaneous voice of wonder" (Godlovitch 1994: 24). The theoretical exercise proposed by Godlovitch shows an undoubted charm in its intentions since it is inspired by the will to suggest a philosophy, as Dufrenne would say, of the *pure presentation of Nature* to the detriment of *any representation of it* (Dufrenne 1955: 99). However, in its concrete application, it shows all its weakness, since access to such an experience of decentralisation of the subject appears very difficult, if not impossible to achieve. Indeed, the author excludes from his model – which he defines as "mystical" (see Brady 2013: 196)[20] – everything that concerns the perceptive and emotional component of the human being. Godlovitch writes in this regard:

> If nature as a whole eludes our science and our affection, the only fitting aesthetic regard for it is a sense of mystery. The relevant special sense of mystery is one which cannot have a solution. There is no 'cracking' this puzzle or following that clue. To do either is to lose the absence of focus without which nature cannot be apprehended acentrically. We match the mystery in a state of appreciative incomprehension, at best an acknowledgement of limits. To grasp the state of mystery one must apprehend the need for a freedom from perspective, sensorial and categorial. This involves appreciating the fundamentally parochial nature of experience, and the invidiously parochial, even incidental, nature of human experience. (Godlovitch 1994: 26)

In doing so, however, he generates a short-circuit in his theoretical articulation, as he effectively invalidates any natural experience since the human being's sense-motor and space-time schemas constitute the only conditions of our perception. In other words, the New Zealand

[20] As Brady points out, to clarify the meaning of the word "mystery" in Godlovitch's thought, we can refer to the concept of "numinous" or "openness to mystery" found in Rudolf Otto's work (Otto 2010). We also point out that Hepburn uses the "indeterminate mystery" category to describe that characteristic of Romanticism that Isaiah Berlin described as "the absence of a world structure to which one must conform" (Hepburn 2003). Stan Godlovitch adopted the idea of "mystery" to characterise his "acentric theory" of aesthetic appreciation of the environment, which commentators have also dubbed "detachment theory". It places the aesthetic subject in radical de-subjectivity, removing all cultural and scientific knowledge. In this position, the subject is perfectly aware of the independence of nature and the fact that this latter lies beyond human understanding.

philosopher completely excludes the aesthetic experience from nature, exercising a radical abstraction that makes it impossible for human beings *to know* and *feel* nature, "to be moved by it".

> To achieve aesthetic aloofness is to disavow any preference for customary surface perception in the aesthetic because it is precisely that avenue of apprehension, which is manifestly a victim of scale, an emphatic expression of culture. Of course, our very human nature works against any such scale-neutral acentrism. We can see only so much, feel only thus-and-so, live only so long. This may make acentric natural aesthetics impossible, paradoxical. (Godlovitch 1994: 28)

Nevertheless, Godlovitch seems to recognise the limitation of his theory in its literal formulation and thus proposes a compromise: to resolve the oppositions between subject/object, whole/part, civilisation/nature that hold up the Kantian conception of the sublime (that constitute, more generally, the conceptual substratum on which our relationship with nature stands even in the age of the Anthropocene), we can at least attempt to observe the world from a plurality of viewpoints, to "grasp it without capturing it"[21]. Godlovitch affirms:

> I offer another scrap, sadly obscure, spun off from the sense of mystery upon which an acentric aesthetic may be built. Related to mystery are the notions of aesthetic aloofness and a sense of insignificance which comprise the adoption of an acentric perspective. From that perspective one experiences the world from any of an infinite number of points of view from which the viewer and, generally by parity, we do not matter at all. This gives us nature as categorically other than

[21] In this regard, it is interesting what Brady says about Godlovitch's theory: "Although I find these ideas interesting for their stance of humility, I worry that 'mystery' is too suggestive of supernatural, even secret, things, and it also seems to carry some cultural baggage. To articulate the way in which the sublime seems beyond our grasp of things, presenting a *limit* to our capacities, I favour a simpler route. In aesthetic situations marked by sublimity, imagination and the senses are challenged, and there are limits to what we can take in and grasp. Those limits, set by sublime qualities, can give us a feeling of things as 'ungraspable'. Certainly, scientific knowledge can enable us to understand many things greater than ourselves, such as the Milky Way, but nevertheless a *feeling* of the ungraspable may remain; that feeling is part of the metaphysical aspect of the sublime experience which goes along with being overwhelmed. Science can provide us with the reasons why we ought to admire great natural phenomena, but we can perhaps get a real sense of this greatness only when it is presented to us through the immediacy and intensity of sublime aesthetic experience" (Brady 2013: 197)

us, a nature of which we were never part, one our appreciation of which acquaints us with the ultimacy of its independence, its autonomy. (Godlovitch 1994: 26)

Conceiving nature as "the great senseless" and the "ungraspable" brings us back to Schopenhauer's conception of the sublime, once again challenging the anthropocentric vision that permeates the Kantian sublime. In closing his article, Godlovitch himself emphasises the need for a revision of the concept of the sublime imposed in modernity:

The Sublime falls short in its v definiteness. Traditional notions of the sublime incorporated feelings of fear or a sense of being overwhelmed or a discovery of the nobility and complexity of the human mind. Mystery, however, requires nothing of terror or terrible pleasure, of power, or of oceanic vastness. Nor does it promise promotion to high moral consciousness or guide a tour through the infinity of inner mental space. (Godlovitch 1994: 27)

If interpreted from a perspective akin to the one inaugurated by Schopenhauer, the sublime can become a feeling of the "natural mystery". It can be the concept that allows the human being to glimpse a working and living in nature other than the human one or to recognise, in a *Gestalt* perspective, that it is a "connected whole" made strong by its parts. On the other hand, those parts cannot exist without the whole, and at the same time, this latter has peculiar and often "distant" and "incomprehensible" compositional and regulatory principles.

It is an approach that undoubtedly opens up to some of the assumptions of *Deep Ecology*, a theoretical perspective promoted by the philosopher and well-known Norwegian activist Arne Næss. This theoretical movement is based on the decline of human imperialism – of which the Anthropocene constitutes the apogee – and proposes to "redraw the overall framework of human-nature relationship, and learn to see this relationship from a unitary and no longer dualistic perspective" (Iovino 2004: 91)[22].

Strongly influenced in his works, like Schopenhauer, by the Eastern philosophical tradition[23] (as well as by Spinoza and *Gestaltpsychologie),*

[22] For a more in-depth discussion of this author, see Næss (1986; 1998; 2015; 2021). For a critical profile on his thought and the concept of deep ecology, see Della Casa 2011; Hartnack 1967; Iovino 2004; Valera 2015.

[23] See Valera (2015: 12), where it is pointed out that "many of the Norwegian's statements and principles can only be understood, in all their depth and evocative power, in the light of a non-Western paradigm of thought, able of valuing the perspective of the whole over that of the individual; his constant search for a total, all-

Næss advocates an idea of *mysterious* and *relational* nature, in which Schopenhauer's and Godlovitch's theses find further philosophical support. For Næss, the reality is a "pattern emerging from a variegated fabric of relationships. In this web of relations, individuals are moments of an organic whole and cannot fully realise themselves except within that whole" (Næss 2015: 95)[24]. In this conception, the human being loses his central role in the natural world: he assumes the status of the *ecological Self* (Næss 2015: 107) – an expression coined by the Norwegian philosopher to suggest that the form of the Self is here expanded beyond the boundaries of the human individual, and encompasses the whole of nature, with the consequence that it is possible to distinguish an "*i*" (also identified by Næss with the term *ego*) that is individual and linked to the singular person, and an inter-relational "*I*" (with a capital "I"), an all-encompassing subject, in which the boundaries of individual subjectivity expand to encompass (and even identify with) the whole of natural forms. Indeed, the Norwegian philosopher emphasises that:

> We are in – and from – nature, from our origin. Society and human relationships are essential, but our self is much richer in its constitutive relationships. Such relationships are those we have with other humans and that human community [...], and other living beings. (Næss 2015: 20)

The father of the Deep Ecology movement proposed a conception of communicative reality that imposes a revision of aesthetic categories, such as that of the sublime, centred on a logic of opposition and the concept of personal identity and the relationship with otherness. The concept of the ecological self, therefore, "takes shape [...] as the reactive hypothesis to a prevailing atomism, which has made man a monad without windows on the world" (Valera 2015: 28).

Nevertheless, be conscious that one would fall into error thinking of the ecological self as the prelude to destroying identity in favour of a dominant holistic perspective[25], Næss warns us, taking up precisely the image Schopenhauer used:

encompassing vision can thus be re-read as a consequence of this attitude".

[24] See Næss (2021: 15): "Not only are we part of it, but these relationships intrinsically constitute our identity. We are the air we breathe, the food we eat, the environment we inhabit; we are nodes in the web of interconnections of life".

[25] On the holistic conception of nature, see the analysis about pre-Socratic cosmology in Hadot 2004. See also Vidali 2022.

> The expression "drops in the river of life" can be misleading if it is understood to suggest that the drops lose their individuality in this way. It is a difficult equilibrium to maintain: on the one hand, we have the ocean of organic and mystical visions; on the other, the abyss of atomistic individualism. (in Valera 2015: 30)

The notion proposed by Næss, therefore, cannot constitute the end point of our argument but a new starting point for rethinking in "depth" the subjective individuality, which (as we have attempted to highlight briefly and by no means exhaustively) Schopenhauer's concept of the sublime begins to undermine. It advocates the overcoming of the dichotomy between the *ego* and the *alter*, between human beings and nature that still dominates the Anthropocene; an overcoming not in the direction of an indiscriminate fusion of everything with everything but as the recognition of one's own intimate essence in a more authentic manner, through the constant confrontation with what is apparently perceived as other than oneself and which, at a deeper level of analysis, is instead discovered to be closely related to one's self. As Brady argues,

> This shift in perspective can, perhaps, give new content to Kant's ideas of humanity and freedom: in more clearly coming to grasp various parts of nature as sublime, we also see ourselves differently, as deeply struck by it all, but also handling it, synthesizing it, and gaining some new sense of how we fit into a picture much larger than us. (Brady 2013: 199)

5. *Conclusion*

The experience of humiliation that characterises the first moment of the sublime, based on interpretations of this concept proposed in the history of nineteenth-century Aesthetics itself, can thus lead us to outcomes that are very different from the Kantian ones, opening us up to a non-anthropocentric experience of nature, investigated by some exponents of contemporary Environmental Aesthetics. By interpreting the pleasure that characterises the second moment of the sublime as the joy derived from recognising that we are connected (rather than opposed) to nature in a peculiar form of *aesthetic resonance*, we can thus propose a new form of *ecological sublime,* a "feeling of nature" that brings us closer to it, rather than distancing us from it.

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