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Vertigo and Fragility.
Toward an Ecological Sublime in the Age of the Anthropocene

Contents

1. The Experience of Nature and Aesthetic Disorientation in the Anthropocene 1
   1.1 Sensing the Rupture: Aesthetic Vulnerability in the Age of Anthropocene 1
   1.2 Figures of Disorientation: Romantic Imagery and Philosophical Revision of the Sublime 4
2. From Crisis to Critique: Rethinking the Kantian Sublime in Environmental Aesthetics 7
3. Towards an Ecological Sublime: Schopenhauer and the Sublime as an Experience of Unity with Nature 11
4. From Schopenhauer to Næss: The Ecological Self and the Sublime 14
Bibliography 16
Image Index 21

1. The Experience of Nature and Aesthetic Disorientation in the Anthropocene

1.1 Sensing the Rupture: Aesthetic Vulnerability in the Age of the Anthropocene

In the Anthropocene era[1] – where humanity emerged as a geological force, reshaping the planet's future and often doing so in destructive ways – the aesthetic experience of nature has taken on a

[1] The term "Anthropocene" was first introduced publicly in 2000 by Paul Crutzen, an atmospheric chemist and Nobel Prize winner recognized for his work on the ozone layer. Crutzen proposed this term during the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme conference in Cuernavaca, Mexico, to distinguish the current geological era from previous ones, which he believed had a different relationship between the Earth and its inhabitants. As Carruthers (2019) recounts, Crutzen's remarks at the conference expressed his impatience with colleagues who continued to refer to the current era as the Holocene: "Let's stop using the word Holocene. We are no longer in the Holocene. We are in... in... in... the Anthropocene!" (Carruthers 2019). Interestingly, the term had been informally used as early as 1980 by Crutzen's friend, US biologist E.F. Stoermer, during his university lectures. This led the two scientists to publish a pivotal article that marked the beginning of Anthropocene studies (Crutzen, Stoermer 2000). Two other significant articles further contributed to the establishment of the term: Crutzen (2002) and Steffen, Crutzen, McNeill (2007).

profound tension. The alarming consequences of climate change, biodiversity loss, desertification, and pollution compel us to rethink how we experience the natural world.

Traditionally, nature was perceived as a distant ideal, as "the entirely unattainable topos of that which lies outside of society [Topos des Außergesellschaftlichen]"[2], as T.W. Adorno articulated in his Ästhetische Theorie[3]. He depicted nature as a serene realm or counterworld [Gegenwelt], a refuge that could counterbalance the social tensions of modern civilization[4]. However, considering current environmental crises, this perception has become increasingly obsolete. Today, we are compelled to confront nature not as an idyllic escape, but as a fragile entity deeply impacted by human activity. Nature is no longer simply a neutral backdrop to human life; instead, it is a network in which we are involved, altered and wounded by our actions, and at risk of being lost. The urgent recognition of these changes challenges us to reassess our relationship with the environment.

As G. Böhme – a commentator on Adorno – notes, this shift in perspective underscores the necessity of redefining our understanding of nature, urging us to acknowledge both its beauty and vulnerability. He points out that

> the present topicality of an aesthetics of nature is not the result of "suffering from society" [*an der Gesellschaft leiden*] as in Adorno's or in the classical aesthetics of nature before him, but of "suffering from nature", inasmuch as humans begin to experience firsthand and in their own body the consequences of what they did to nature; this is the core of the so-called environmental problem.[5]

In this context, Aesthetics must confront a nature that exceeds, disturbs, and questions our understanding because it is now recognized as *sensitive*, meaning it can detect and respond to the slightest changes, signals, and influences. In other words, Nature – intended as *Gaia* according to the hypothesis formulated by J. Lovelock and L. Margulis in 1979, i.e. as a synergistic and self-regulating system in which organic and inorganic components interact for the self-maintenance of the whole[6] – is not a metaphorical return to a mythic Earthmother, but a conceptual device that challenges the modern separation between subject and object, nature and culture. *Gaia* represents a power that has become *vulnerable*[7] and, as B. Latour points out, this vulnerability translates into a profound crisis for humanity: it marks a crisis in our *perception* of nature and our *imagination*. He remarks in this regard:

> Nature, the Nature of yesteryear, may well have been indifferent, dominating, a cruel stepmother, but She surely wasn't touchy! On the contrary, her complete lack of sensitivity was the source of thousands of poems, and it was what allowed her, in contrast, to unleash in us the sensation of the sublime: we humans were what She was not – sensitive, responsible, and highly moral.[8]

Latour's ironic tone masks a deeper epistemological shift. The Nature he refers to – distant, indifferent, morally neutral – belongs to a modern scientific worldview grounded in objectivity and separation. In contrast, the Gaia concept, signals a new relational ontology, one in which na-

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2 Böhme (2016): 125.

3 Adorno (1970): 88 where the author indicates that the powerlessness experienced by human beings in industrial society, seen as a "second nature", serves as a "springboard for escape' into what is perceived to be "first nature". See also Matteucci 2012.

4 Cf. Böhme (2016): 125 where the philosopher points out that "Adorno's aesthetics appears as a late version of a bourgeois aesthetics in which nature was considered as a 'counterworld' (*Gegenwelt*), as that which is situated 'out there', outside town, beyond civilization and, particularly, beyond technology". For an analysis of Adorno's text carried out by contemporary nature aesthetics see also Tafalla (2011).

5 Böhme (2016): 126.

6 Lovelock (1979).

7 Stengers (2009).

8 Latour (2015): 141.

ture is responsive, affective, and inextricably entangled with human actions[9]. In this framework, environmental crises are not external events, but symptoms of a broken feedback loop between humans and the Earth system. This reversal of roles, in which nature emerges as sensitive and humans as dangerously destabilizing agents, calls for a radical rethinking of the sublime because the sense of vertigo and disorientation she now evokes stems not from her transcendence, but from our *shared vulnerability*.

To clarify this point, it should be noted that the concept of sublime has historically been associated with distance, transcendence, and the overwhelming grandeur of nature as radically *other* than us: it has evoked feelings of wonder and vertigo in the face of nature's vastness and power[10]. However, in recent decades, the concept has gained renewed relevance in contexts that differ significantly from its original association with natural landscapes. One notable area of focus is the so-called *technological sublime*, which reinterprets the overwhelming sensations of excess and disorientation, viewing them through the lens of rapidly advancing technical capabilities, computational complexity, and expansive global infrastructures. In this context, aesthetic admiration no longer arises from encounters with superhuman nature, but from reflections on the extraordinary power of contemporary technological systems, including global computer networks, intricate algorithmic structures, space engineering, and the digital simulation of reality[11].

However, this form of the sublime – rooted in the awe of artificial mastery over the world – will be deliberately set aside in this investigation. Instead, we aim to focus attention on the relationship between the sublime and the natural world in the context of the Anthropocene. Our goal is to propose a renewed concept of the *ecological sublime*, one that emerges not from a vertical sense of domination over nature, but from the deep, entangled, and often unsettling intimacy we now share with a vulnerable and responsive planet. As T. Morton notes, the contemporary sublime is no longer *very high* but *dark*: it is no longer the snow-capped mountain but global warming, no longer the rushing waterfall but the imperceptible rise in sea level. This sublime does not exalt but disturbs; it does not confirm order but destabilises it; it does not separate, but immerses. It is, in other words, an environmental sublime that forces us to rethink the aesthetic relationship as a form of ontological responsibility[12].

This perspective emphasizes our interactions with a wounded environment: in contrast to the technological sublime, which reinforces anthropocentrism by emphasizing creative human pow-

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9 Echoing Latour's words, in the essay *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Nixon 2011), Rob Nixon also highlights that satellite images of the ozone layer's depletion, continent-wide fires, retreating glaciers, and advancing deserts are manifestations of a natural otherness that is no longer distant from us; rather, it has become internalized as a collective trauma. This otherness eludes traditional ways of perceiving and understanding, necessitating new categories for representation and thought. It is no coincidence that Glenn Albrecht has proposed new *emotional lexical terms*, such as "solastalgia" (nostalgia for a lost environment while still in it), to name this new experience of the environment (see Albrecht 2019).

10 The concept of the sublime has a long and troubled history, characterized by theoretical shifts and important changes in the areas of use of the term. For more information on the genesis and development of this aesthetic category from the treatise *On the Sublime* (*Perì hýpsous*) by the anonymous rhetorician of the 1st century A.D. known as Pseudo-Longinus up to modern times, see Brady (2013); Doran (2015); Franzini, Mazzocut-Mis (2000): 289–299; Lombardo 2011; Panella 2012; Saint-Girons (2006); Ead. (2025)[2]. For a detailed bibliography on the ancient and modern sublime, see: Lombardo, Finocchiaro (1993); Costelloe (2012): 275–294; Longino (2022)[4]: 259–279.

11 In his insightful postmodern interpretation of Kantian sublimity, Jean-François Lyotard already pointed out that the sublime can articulate the unrepresentable dimensions of technology (cf. Lyotard 1984). In more recent discourse, authors like Vincent Mosco have illustrated how the discussions about technology frequently utilize the sublime rhetoric to create a mythical aura surrounding the internet, artificial intelligence, and the cybersphere (Mosco 2004). Moreover, thinkers such as Benjamin Bratton and Yuk Hui have introduced notions of a computational or cybernetic sublime, where feelings of disorientation and loss of measure arise from the vast scale and autonomy of post-human technical architectures (Bratton 2016; Hui 2019).

12 Morton (2016).

er, the ecological sublime offers a different perspective. It immerses us in a *web of vital relationships*, confronts us with our vulnerabilities, and introduces an ethical sensitivity towards our surroundings. The ecological sublime is the feeling that accompanies our awareness of our being *within* the world, rather than above it; at the same time it is connected to an *Aesthetics of fragility* because our focus shifts from nature's vastness to its exposure and potential demise. This shift generates an *existential disorientation*: not the "rational" mastery of fear found in classical sublimity, but a radical *experience of vulnerability*. In this sense, the ecological sublime no longer celebrates nature's power as a *transcendent spectacle*; instead, it reveals its *wounded intimacy and suffering*: nature is no longer seen as a superhuman "other" to be distanced from, but rather as the "vital fabric" within which we exist, interconnected and co-vulnerable. It is, therefore, a form of sublime connected not to an *Aesthetics of power* (*heroic sublime*) but to a *poetics of interdependence*, where greatness is no longer separate from us: it passes through us, involves us, and destabilises us.

The theoretical foundation to understand the development of this concept is based on Contemporary Environmental Aesthetics[13], a multifaceted movement that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, primarily in the United States and Northern Europe, especially in Germany and Scandinavia. This movement represents both the culmination and the integration of various philosophical perspectives that have significantly influenced these geographical and cultural contexts, where wilderness areas still exist and the traditional appreciation of *friluftsliv* (open-air living) is notably strong[14]. In this paper, we do not aim to outline the fundamental characteristics of this diverse theoretical movement, nor map the most widely shared positions or analyze its current trends in detail. Instead, we will explore how contemporary environmental aesthetics, through emphasizing a direct, contextual, and immersive aesthetic experience of the environment, has revitalized the discussion surrounding the theme of the sublime and the experience of *being moved by nature*, a concept that is closely linked to Kant's definition of sublimity[15].

1.2. Figures of Disorientation: Romantic Imagery and Philosophical Revisions of the Sublime

The affective responses to ecological disruption explored in the previous paragraph (marked by disorientation, awe, and vulnerability) invite us to reconsider the philosophical tradition of the sublime. Once associated with the grandeur and radical otherness of nature, the sublime now appears in tension with a world where nature is no longer distant and indifferent but intimately entangled with human fragility. To clarify the topics, authors, and aspects we will analyze in our research, we invite readers to consider two images.

The first is a well-known painting by the German Romantic artist C.D. Friedrich (1774–1840), titled *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer*[16] and housed in the Kunsthalle in Hamburg. This artwork is frequently associated with the concept of the sublime and it is a classic example

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[13] See Fargione (2016): 113–128. On Environmental Aesthetics see: Carlson (2001): 423–436; Id. 2020; D'Angelo (2010); Feloj (2018); Fisher 2003: pp. 667–678. Cf. also the following collections of texts: Nasar (1988); Sadler, Carlson 1982. More generally on the relationship between aesthetics, environment and ecology see Brady (2000): p. 142–163; D'Angelo (2001); Fel (2008); Iannilli (2020); Kemal, Gaskell (1993); Maggiore, Tedesco (1991).

[14] Norwegian term used to describe outdoor life. On the concept of *friluftsliv* and its philosophical and pedagogical implications see Beery (2012); Breivik (2020); Gelter (2000); Gurholt (2008); Id. 2014.

[15] In §24 of the *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, titled *Von der Eintheilung einere Untersuchung des Gefühls des Erhabenen*, Kant defines the sublime as a "motion of the soul [*Bewegung des Gemüts*]" (Kant 1790: 83). He describes it as a feeling of "shaking" that arises when we confront Nature, which is seen as both vast and powerful, standing in opposition to and superior to human beings. This experience is characterized by two forms: the mathematical sublime, which relates to the enormity of size, and the dynamic sublime, which pertains to the sense of power.

[16] https://online-sammlung.hamburger-kunsthalle.de/en/objekt/HK-5161.

of a *Rückenfigur* (figure seen from behind), a technique that Friedrich himself developed in 1808 to encourage the viewer to identify with the protagonist of the painting[17].

In the background, the landscape is shrouded in mist and depicted with quick, barely sketched brushstrokes. In the foreground, we see the striking figure of a *Wanderer*, a solitary traveller silhouetted against a rocky precipice in which one can recognize the mountains of Saxon Switzerland, specifically the Rosenberg and the Zinkelstein. Facing this "sea of fog," the man stands on a rocky ledge, which serves as a sort of pedestal, with his back turned to the viewer. We do not see the face of the man, only his imposing silhouette clothed in a bottle-green velvet suit, which serves as the focal and spiritual centre of the painting. Majestic like a statue, the figure gazes out at a gloomy, grey landscape, which makes it difficult to clearly distinguish the background and conveys a sense of boundless, almost infinite space.

The second image is a lesser-known masterpiece by Friedrich, created a few years before the painting we've just analyzed. Titled *Der Mönch am Meer*[18], this artwork presents a strikingly different iconography. In this evocative scene, a solitary monk is depicted from behind, standing on a desolate beach. The viewer observes him contemplating a vast landscape rendered in dark, tempestuous tones that evoke a sense of sublime. Unlike the earlier painting, the emotional resonance here is starkly different, due to three pivotal elements.

Firstly, the relationship between the human figure and the natural surroundings is dramatically altered. In *Der Mönch am Meer* the canvas is oriented horizontally, utilizing a wide-angle perspective that dramatically expands the sky, which occupies nearly three-fifths of the painting. This sky, shrouded in clouds, looms ominously overhead, while the sea stretches out, dark and foreboding, across one-fifth of the work. The final fifth features the bleak sandy beach, where the slender monk stands, shadowed by the overwhelming, boundless nature that surrounds him. His fragile stature serves to heighten the sense of isolation and insignificance in the face of vastness. Secondly, the monk's position is deliberately decentralized, drawing the viewer's gaze away from him: he is not the focal point of this scene and the landscape commands attention, inviting contemplation of the infinite space before him. Finally, the relationship between the figure and the background, which was a dominant theme in the previously discussed painting, is entirely absent here. In *Der Mönch am Meer* every element exists on the same plane, eliminating the sense of foreground.

This effect contributes to an unsettling uniformity, which H. von Kleist (1777–1811) captures in the essay *Empfindungen vor Friedrichs Seelandschaft,* published on October 13, 1810, in the Berliner Abendblätter. In his insightful analysis, he observes that viewers of this painting may feel as though their "eyelids are cut off"[19], a striking metaphor that conveys a profound vulnerability. He asserts that the pleasure derived from witnessing a scene or natural event – one that threatens to overwhelm the observer's senses – can only be experienced when there is a sense of safety. As highlighted in various 18th-century texts, one method to mitigate the paralyzing fear induced by a dizzying view is to close one's eyes or divert one's gaze toward something that provides a sense of foreground[20]. Kleist's violent metaphor of eyelid mutilation illustrates the viewer's vulnerability in the face of the sublime, because, in this painting, the world asserts its omnipotence, dismantling comforting frameworks and leaving the viewer in a state of disorientation.

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17 Cf. Saint Girons (2015): 209–230. It should be noted, however, that figures seen from behind are not uncommon in art history and have played an important role in landscape painting since the 15th century. For further information, see Banu (2000).

18 https://recherche.smb.museum/detail/965511/m%C3%B6nch-am-meer.

19 Cf. Kleist (2011): p. 999.

20 Cf. Ivi: (1286–1387); see also Begemann (1990): 54–95.

The massive silhouette of the *Wanderer* suggests the possibility of resistance, while the small, off-centre figure of the monk appears to submit humbly to a higher power. These two images do not only reflect different aesthetic strategies; they also resonate with the two contrasting philosophical understandings of the sublime: the concept of environmental sublimity that has predominantly characterised Western philosophical thought over the last two centuries and the ecological concept of sublimity that we propose to outline. We believe that the first image represents I. Kant's interpretation of the sublime more accurately, as articulated in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. In contrast, the second image can be likened to Arthur Schopenhauer's understanding of the sublime, particularly in §§39-41 of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*[21]. Schopenhauer's perspective, in our view, helps to address certain problematic assumptions in Kant's concept of the sublime when examined from a contemporary environmental standpoint.

Furthermore, the notion of the sublime that emerges from these passages in Schopenhauer's text can be harmonised with key reflections from contemporary ecological philosophy, for example, with the reflections of A. Næss (1912-2009)[22], one of the most interesting figures in 20th-century philosophical thinking on nature.

So, to clarify the theoretical approach we will take in our presentation, we want to emphasize that it will be divided into three main points. In paragraph 2, we will briefly discuss why the concept of the sublime, which was prominent in aesthetic literature during the 18th and 19th centuries, has been less appealing to environmental aesthetics in the 20th and early 21st centuries than other key concepts, particularly beauty[23], which has become a central concept for contemporary environmentalism, making it a cornerstone of environmental protection. For example, A. Leopold (1887–1948), a key environmental activist of the 20th century, identified beauty as one of the three pillars of environmental protection, alongside integrity and stability. He famously stated in his best-known work, *A Sand County Almanac*[24], that "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community"[25]. This explicit reference to beauty has almost become a "slogan" for some proponents of contemporary environmental aes-

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21 Schopenhauer (1819).

22 Arne Næss (1912–2009) was a notable figure in philosophy and ecology. He was born as the youngest of four children in the suburbs of Oslo and his childhood home, which featured a garden blending into the wilderness, fostered his deep connection to Nature: his relationship with the natural dimension, from childhood onwards, takes on a mythopoeic and highly personal value, particularly with the mountains. This early relationship shaped his worldview and influenced his later work. Næss pursued higher education in philosophy, mathematics, and astronomy at several prestigious institutions, including the University of Oslo, the Sorbonne in Paris, and the University of Vienna, where he was active in the philosophical circle of the same name. At twenty-seven, he returned to Norway to become the first full professor of philosophy at the University of Oslo, a role he maintained until 1954. His tenure significantly impacted the reception of philosophical themes across the Scandinavian countries (cf. Hartnack 1967: 301). Although Næss's contributions to philosophy are substantial, he is predominantly recognized for his work in ecology. His influence in this field, particularly in Italy, often overshadows his philosophical endeavors. As Luca Valera notes: "The importance of the work of Arne Dekke Eide Næss [...] has perhaps not yet been fully recognised, particularly within philosophical academic circles. Næss's name appears inextricably linked to ecology, rather than philosophy, even though he devoted much of his research to issues ranging from epistemology [...] to metaphysics, philosophy of language, psychology and ethics" [Valera, *Il pensiero di Arne Næss*, in Næss (2015): 8]. In this, Italian thought stands in contrast to a growing interest in this author worldwide: the Scandinavian philosopher has lectured at the world's most prestigious universities, he was one of the founders in 1958 of the prestigious journal "Inquiry", and the collection of some of his writings, entitled *The Selected Works of Arne Næss*, consists of approximately 3000 pages and is divided into ten volumes. See in this regard: Næss (2005).

23 For example, when examining the *Analytics of the Beautiful* in Kant's third Critique, we realize that most examples of pure beauty derive from the natural world.

24 Leopold (1949). See also Id. 2019. Published posthumously due to the author's sudden death (he died prematurely in 1948 while trying to put out a forest fire), together with H.D. Thoreau's *Walden* (see Thoreau 1854), it has become a classic of twentieth-century environmentalism over the decades.

25 Ivi: 211.

thetics. Conversely, the sublime has not enjoyed the same success and, only in recent years, has emerged again in the contemporary naturalistic debate, after a period of decline. This resurgence has necessitated an internal revision that aims to highlight certain aspects of the Kantian sublime that conflict with current ecological viewpoints. We intend to identify which components of Kant's conception of the sublime have been deemed problematic by environmental aesthetics. While we recognize that his view is just one of many proposed notions of the sublime from the 18th and 19th centuries, we will focus solely on his perspective for practical reasons, particularly relying on his formulation found in the *Analytics of the Sublime* in the third Critique.

Moving on to paragraph 3, we will examine Schopenhauer's analysis of the sublime, focusing on key passages from Book III, §§39-41 of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*. This conception, which Schopenhauer explicitly claims is intended to be in continuity with the Kantian perspective, is, in our view, innovative. It not only addresses the theoretical difficulties identified by contemporary environmental aesthetics in Kant's work but also offers new theoretical insights into the concept of sublimity itself.

Finally, in paragraph 4, we will explore how Schopenhauer's conception of the sublime can be aligned with some key principles of Næss's Deep Ecology.

2. From Crisis to Critique: Rethinking the Kantian Sublime in Environmental Aesthetics

In this paragraph we examine how the concept of the sublime – particularly in its Kantian formulation – has been historically interpreted, why it has been largely sidelined by environmental aesthetics, and how it may be rethought considering the Anthropocene.

The tortuous path that the concept of the sublime has taken from the 18th century to the present day is, in our opinion, well summarised by the words of an Italian aesthetician, S. Feloj:

> the debate on the sublime has seen many changes over the centuries. After its centrality, alongside the beautiful, in the second half of the eighteenth century, interest in the sublime seems to have waned during the nineteenth century, only to reappear in the late twentieth century in reference to the possibilities of art. The natural sublime seems to have been sidelined after its initial eighteenth-century relevance, however, with the emergence of environmental aesthetics, the sublime once again becomes a category to be dis-cussed and redefined.[26]

The decline of the sublime has been widely discussed and attributed to various cultural and philosophical shifts. One notable thinker, the Scottish philosopher E. Brady, has made significant contributions to this discussion. Through her numerous articles in books and journals, particularly in her essay *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*, she offers valuable insights into the topic[27]. Brady identifies three main sets of problems related to *historical*, *metaphysical*, and *anthropological* motivations. Regarding historical arguments, she notes that compared to the 18th-century bourgeois understanding of aesthetics, opportunities to experience natural sublimity have significantly decreased. This reduction is likely due to the increasing urbanization of contemporary society, which has fewer chances to engage with traditional examples of the sublime, such as forests, deserts, and glaciers. When people encounter such wonders today, they often respond with confidence in human mastery rather than with the awe and anxiety central to the sublime. She notes that:

> 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. […] There may still be room for neighbouring categories of response, such as awe, grandeur, and wonder, but not really (it might be claimed) for the complex experience of the sublime, at least if we rely upon a historical understanding of the concept. […] the sublime is no longer relevant theo-

[26] Feloj (2022): 119.
[27] Brady (2013): 183–206.

retically because those very experiences, so prevalent in the past, no longer exist, or if they do exist they are rare.[28]

Concerning the metaphysical argument, Brady contends that scientific cognitivism (one of the current trends in contemporary environmental aesthetics that has gained significant traction in the United States)[29] challenges the necessity of traditional aesthetic representations of nature. This traditional view emphasizes our perceptual-emotional relationship with reality, while scientific cognitivism advocates for an understanding grounded in science and its interpretative capabilities[30]. Furthermore, Brady's anthropocentric argument suggests that the concept of the sublime is becoming obsolete. She argues that humanizing nature through a process of self-exaltation creates a dualistic relationship between humans and nature, reversing the hierarchies between the two[31].

In the essay titled *Paesaggi sublimi: Gli uomini davanti alla natura selvaggia*, Italian philosopher R. Bodei examines the reasons behind the declining interest in the concept of the sublime. He notes that, after reaching its peak in the mid-19th century, theories of the sublime have gradually faded due to the increasing dominance of technological knowledge. This shift has resulted in a reversal of the balance of forces, with humanity (primarily the population of the industrialized West) feeling empowered by advancements in science and information technology. They believe they now possess the tools to control nature, uncover its mechanisms, and subjugate its destructive forces[32].

Latour sheds light on another dimension of this conceptual crisis, which resonates with the ideas previously discussed. He underscores a stark reality: in the Anthropocene era, we all face an imminent risk of extinction. It follows that the essential detachment – an important prerequisite for truly experiencing the sublime as described in Kantian aesthetics – has vanished, leaving us immersed in a world where the boundaries between ourselves and nature have blurred[33]. He states:

> the feeling of the sublime has disappeared along with the safety of the onlookers. It's a shipwreck, to be sure, but there are no more spectators. […] The unfortunate young shipwreck survivor has no more solid shore from which he can enjoy the spectacle of the struggle for survival alongside an untamable wild beast for whom he serves as both tamer and lunch![34]

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28 Ivi: 185.

29 Scientific cognitivism in environmental aesthetics emphasizes the integration of scientific knowledge (particularly from ecology, biology, and geology) into our appreciation of the environment. Advocates, like Allen Carlson, argue that just as understanding the historical context of art enhances appreciation, knowledge of ecological functions is essential for fully enjoying natural landscapes. However, this approach has been criticized for undervaluing direct perception, sensory engagement, imagination, and emotional connections, which are also important aspects of experiencing nature aesthetically. Cf. Hall, Brady 2023.

30 Brady (2013): 188 ss.

31 Cf. ivi: 193 where the author states that "the sublime is inherently anthropocentric given the dualistic, hierarchical relationship that, it is claimed, sublime experience sets up between humans and nature. The first thread of this argument claims that it is humanity that is valued rather than nature, such that the sublime becomes both *self-regarding* and *human-regarding*". For this reason, the author specifies in a passage shortly afterwards, "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" (ivi: 194).

32 Bodei (2008): 9.

33 On why and how the concept of the sublime can be considered an interpretative category of the Anthropocene, see: Horn (2019): 1–8; Ray (2020); Williston (2016). Also, particularly interesting are the articles by Fressoz 2016, reprinted in a different form but with the same title in https://mouvements.info/sublime-anthropocene/; Id. 2021, in which the author states that "the power of the idea of the Anthropocene is not conceptual, scientific or heuristic: it is above all aesthetic".

34 Latour (2015): 40.

Given these premises, we wonder: in the Anthropocene era, can we still consider the sublime an aesthetically valid category? In other words, is it still possible to grasp the sense of grandeur and, at the same time, of wonder, ineffability and indescribability of nature in an age in which the latter appears to us as an object of our domination and no longer as a great and mysterious entity, superior to us and eluding all attempts at subjugation? Furthermore, does Kant's conception of the sublime seem to support the idea of human beings in opposition to nature? And if so, is it possible to identify a theory of the sublime that allows us to overcome this impasse by promoting a *feeling of natural unity*?

We will not delve deeply into the mechanisms of Kantian sublimity; rather, we aim to highlight four closely interrelated elements that are essential for understanding the distinctive nature of this mode of feeling Nature in Kant's aesthetic reflection[35].

1. The first element is *the Natural Object*. For Kant, the experience of the sublime emerges from the encounter with natural entities, objects that are ontologically distinct from human beings. These entities can evoke a sense of powerlessness and fear because they are infinitely large or powerful. Examples include frightening mountains, storms, starry skies, and hurricanes, all of which seem to surpass human beings in scale or strength. Due to the conflict between our faculties (particularly our faculties of perception and imagination versus our reason), such natural entities evoke a sense of infinity that we cannot fully grasp, leading to conceptual difficulty in understanding them.
2. *The moment of recognising one's own humility*: The second element is related to what a certain interpretation describes as the "moment of humility" of human beings. According to Kant, the sublime is an *oxymoronic experience*; it first makes individuals feel diminished and limited when confronted with immense non-human entities. This experience forces human beings to confront their own limitations, realizing their physical smallness and intellectual fragility, which fosters a sense of respect for the greatness and power of natural phenomena.
3. *The Negative Pleasure*: The third characteristic of Kantian sublimity connects to the previous element. E. Burke, a significant theoretical reference for Kant, described this as *delight* or *mixed pleasure* in his work *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful,* that is, a pleasure which cannot exist without a relation to pain[36]. Kant, however, refers to it as a *negative pleasure* [*negative Lust*][37], or as "a pleasure that arises only indirectly, in such a way that it is produced by the feeling of a momentary impediment of the vital forces [*eine Lust ist, welche nur indirecte entspringt, nämlich so, daß sie durch das Gefühl einer augenblicklichen Hemmung der Lebenskräfte*]"[38]. The emotionally negative experience of feeling degraded is only the first phase of the sublime; it is quickly followed by a moment – a conceptual but not necessarily temporal one – of human reaffirmation. This moment involves a pleasurable recognition of the potential of our reason: human beings come to see their reason as a weapon and a shield against their fragility, enabling them to engage with Nature on a different level, though no less significant than the physical-perceptual one.
4. *The Cosmic Truth*: The fourth and final characteristic refers to the metaphysical truth that this feeling, imbued with a strong ethical impulse, grants us access to: the recognition of our privileged place in the world as beings able of intuiting the infinite. We stand before nature, if not physically, then at least spiritually. As suggested by American philosopher C. Hitt in

35 Cf. Billon (2022) and Feloj (2013).
36 Burke (2020).
37 Kant (1790): 81.
38 Ivi: 80–81.

his article *Toward an Ecological Sublime*[39], which is a key text in contemporary discussions regarding environmental revisions of the sublime, Kant's argument indicates that the initial feeling of humiliation soon transforms into self-apotheosis, validating the idea that human beings can occupy a dominant position in the non-human world.

This dialectic of overcoming nature by human beings – a core component of Kant's treatment of the sublime in both mathematical and dynamic forms – has undergone many variations in the history of philosophical thought[40]. However, our intent is not to explore these variations here. It is important to note that throughout the 19th century, the sublime was predominantly interpreted as a feeling that positions human beings *in competition* with Nature, defining the relationship between humans and nature as both agonistic and authentically reflective. As M. Dufrenne observes, in experiencing the sublime, the mind recognizes itself in the objects of nature and feels provoked and challenged by them[41]. Through this struggle with natural entities and forces, human beings end up "looking in the mirror and approving of themselves".

Nevertheless, we wonder whether this conception of Nature – as strong, threatening, and the counterpoint to humanity – can still constitute the hidden substratum of our worldview today.

Thanks to this outline and an examination of various positions expressed by environmental aesthetics regarding the traditional interpretations of the natural sublime, we can affirm that Kant's conception of the sublime relates to the *ontological dualism between the subject and nature*. The idea that nature serves merely as the "material" through which humanity affirms its moral superiority seems incompatible today with an ecocentric perspective of aesthetic experience. As we have noted in paragraph 1.1, the context of the Anthropocene calls into question the premises of Kantian sublimity, because the distinction between nature and culture, between what is "external" and what is "human", is no longer tenable. Climate disasters, air pollution and the disappearance of species are not natural events independent of humans, but consequences of their actions. The sublime is no longer produced in the face of untouched nature, but in the awareness of a wounded, contaminated and partly artificial nature. Rather than being a mere backdrop, nature is now understood (as we saw in the first paragraph when referring to the Gaia hypothesis) as a living, interactive entity with intrinsic value.

Furthermore, numerous contemporary theorists have challenged the disembodied nature of Kantian experience. The Kantian observer is portrayed as a universal, abstract, male subject without a concrete location in time and space. In contrast, ecological sensibility emphasises the corporeality of experience, highlighting perceptual immersion and the subject's vulnerability: the Anthropocene requires a sublime incarnate and relational approach, based not on the transcendence of ideas but on the intensity of emotional experience. The self no longer stands above nature but is immersed in it, struck not so much by its immeasurable grandeur as by its fragility, threatened beauty, and the silent power of ecosystems.

Finally, Kant's conception of the sublime can be criticised for *its Promethean orientation and celebration of human rationality*. In an era marked by ecological crisis, such rationalism has proven not to be salvific, but somewhat complicit in environmental devastation. The assertion of humanity's moral supremacy over nature is precisely what ecological aesthetics seeks to overcome: as we have underlined in the previous paragraphs, the contemporary experience of the sublime no longer generates the elevation of reason, but rather a sense of bewilderment, guilt and responsibility. Images of climate change – melting icebergs, uncontrollable fires, expanding deserts – do not refer to a natural power other than ourselves, but rather to a system we are part of and destabilising. In this sense, the environmental sublime does not confirm the superiority of humans, but instead reduces it, decentralises it, and exposes it to a vulnerability shared with all

[39] Hitt (1993): 608.

[40] For further information on the romantic sublime see: Giordanetti, Mazzocut-Mis (2005) and Pinna (2007).

[41] See Dufrenne (1995): 75.

other living beings. Therefore, if the sublime is to remain a meaningful category, it must renounce the rhetoric of control and embrace an ethics of interdependence.

Framed in these terms, the Kantian sublime appears insufficient to address the environmental realities of the Anthropocene. Rather than facing a threatening but external nature, we are entangled in its fragility, a condition that demands a redefinition of the sublime as an experience of shared vulnerability, not heroic transcendence.

3. Towards an Ecological Sublime: Schopenhauer and the Sublime as an Experience of Unity with Nature

As indicated in paragraph 1.2, it may be beneficial to focus on Schopenhauer, who develops a theory of the sublime that, while rooted in a romantic and idealistic framework, presents characteristics that differ significantly from those in Kant's philosophy. Schopenhauer's aesthetic thought is less centred on the affirmation of reason and is more attuned to emotional experience and the impersonal power of nature. This perspective opens conceptual spaces that can be reinterpreted through an ecological lens because, unlike Kant's view of the sublime, Schopenhauer's perspective affirms the unity of the world, of which human beings are merely a fragment42; at the same time, he defines the sublime not as an experience of moral or rational elevation, but as an intensification of aesthetic perception in conditions of danger, disproportion or natural power. Thus, this paragraph aims to explore the concept of the sublime in Schopenhauer, with particular attention to its potential value for a future environmental aesthetics, an aesthetics that moves away from the domination of the subject and emphasizes attention, compassion, and recognition of the otherness of nature.

Certain passages in §39 are particularly intriguing for our discussion. Here, Schopenhauer acknowledges his debt to Kant's terminology while emphasizing that he will retain the important distinction between the mathematical and dynamic sublime. However, he completely departs from Kant when explaining the intrinsic nature of this impression[43]. I believe there are three key differences worth examining.

The first point concerns *the relationship between the beautiful and the sublime*. The distinction between these two aesthetic feelings, which lies at the heart of Kant's aesthetic judgement, is still present in Schopenhauer. Still, it is not qualified as an opposition: beautiful and sublime are both feelings that derive from a *coming towards us of nature* [*Entgegenkommen der Natur*] and are so continuous that they prompt us to speak, in some instances, of a possible mixture between the two forms of feeling and even to identify *gradations of the sublime*.

According to Schopenhauer, everyday perception serves the Will to live [*Wille zum Leben*]. When our will fills and agitates our consciousness, continually imposing new needs to satisfy, we can never achieve lasting satisfaction. However, when an external object suddenly lifts us out of this stream of will, a feeling of calm overtakes us. This sense of *peace* or *painless state* leads to a sense of well-being. For Schopenhauer, this is the sense of beauty, a pleasure understood negatively, as it allows us to temporarily put aside our selfish urges. In Schopenhauer's framework, the sublime is less distinctly differentiated from the beautiful than it is in Kant's philoso-

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42 Cf. Vandenabeele (2015): 83. For a more in-depth analysis of the concept of the sublime in Schopenhauer's thought see also: Shapshay (2012); Vandenabeele (2003); Vasalou (2013).

43 However, we should remember that, although Schopenhauer's position differs from Kant's, he was one of the first to recognise the value of Kant's theory of the sublime. See, for example, what the philosopher says in the *Appendix Critique of the Kantian Philosophy*: "the best part of the 'Critique of Aesthetic Judgement' is the theory of the sublime: it is incomparably more successful than the theory of the beautiful. Not only does it provide the general method of investigation, as the theory of the beautiful does, but it also goes some way along the correct path, so that even if it does not exactly give the right solution to the problem, still it touches on it very closely" [Schopenhauer (1819): 562].

phy. The distinction arises mainly from their unique origins: we experience pleasure in the sublime when we can contemplate an object that, although it may initially seem threatening to our physical and psychological well-being, allows for a calm reflection. It follows that *beauty can transform into sublimity*, enabling us to perceive the sublime not only in unlimited forms but also in limited ones that are typically associated with beauty.

One significant passage in Schopenhauer's work outlines a progression of transitions from the beautiful to the sublime, identifying three examples before he describes clear and striking instances of sublimity. Many of these instances are subtle enough to be grasped only by those with heightened aesthetic sensibilities. For instance, one slight transition from the beautiful to the sublime can be seen in a harsh winter landscape where nature appears dormant. The rays of the low sun on the horizon, reflected off rocky masses, illuminate without warming. This scene can evoke feelings of beauty; however, if the memory of the sun's lack of warmth intrudes, highlighting the weak presence of life-giving energy, our experience of the moment may take on a timid sense of sublimity.

Another example occurs in a desolate prairie, where no trees or animals are immediately visible. Here, prairies can invoke a feeling of sublimity not because, as Kant believed, their boundlessness is beyond our imagination, but because we perceive these environments as unsettling due to their lack of objects, we need to feel alive and secure. The vastness and isolation of such a landscape create a mix of almost pictorial beauty and an awareness that our Will to live cannot find satisfaction in this expanse.

This experience becomes even more pronounced if we envision ourselves in an entirely barren land devoid of plants, resembling a lunar landscape with only cold rocks. The absolute absence of organic life necessary for our survival makes our fleeting appreciation of the beauty in such a place quickly overshadowed by a sense of *anguish* and *disorientation*. In such inhospitable surroundings, it becomes impossible to envision these landscapes as our home. Finally, we can deduce that the *exaltation of life*, which plays an essential role in Kant's account of beauty, also becomes central to Schopenhauer's concept of the sublime.

Secondly, we can identify an important difference from Kant's conception of the sublime, which allows us to address Latour's criticism: Schopenhauer does not consider the requirement of detachment (so crucial in Kant's argument) essential for experiencing the sublime. In a sublime experience, a person may even find themselves in actual danger (rather than merely observing a dangerous situation from afar). What matters is that the individual can shift their focus away from the direct relationship between the threatening object and their personal safety, allowing them to experience the threat in a visceral way without considering it for a moment. However, by allowing individuals to recognize that this object poses a threat not just to themselves but to humanity, the feeling of the sublime is closely connected to a broader understanding of nature. This perspective encourages us to step outside ourselves and engage with our surroundings in a different way.

Thirdly, Schopenhauer's conception of the sublime appears to have a theoretical continuity with that proposed by the Königsberg philosopher, yet it assumes a fundamentally different relationship between human beings and nature than that suggested by Kant. The philosopher writes:

> When we lose ourselves in the contemplation of the infinite extent of the world in space and time, reflecting on the millennia past and the millennia to come, – or indeed when the night sky actually brings countless worlds before our eyes, so that we become forcibly aware of the immensity of the world, – then we feel ourselves reduced to nothing, feel ourselves as individuals, as living bodies, as transient appearances of the will, like drops in the ocean, fading away, melting away into nothing. But at the same time, rising up against such a spectre of our own nothingness […] The magnitude of the world, which we used to find unsettling, is now settled securely within ourselves: our dependence 243 on it is nullified by its dependence on us. – Yet we do not reflect on all this straight away; instead it appears only as the felt consciousness that we are, in some sense (that only philosophy makes clear), one with the world, and thus not brought down, but rather elevated

> by its immensity. It is the felt consciousness of what the Upanishads of the Vedas repeatedly express in so many ways, but most exquisitely in that dictum already cited above: 'I am all these creations taken together, and there is no other being besides me'd (Oupnek'hat, Vol. 1, p. 122). This is an elevation above one's own individuality, the feeling of the sublime.[44]

This passage is particularly intriguing for two interrelated reasons that challenge the foundations of Kant's first and fourth characteristics of the sublime. Firstly, Schopenhauer seems to hint at a dimension of the sublime that Kant does not explicitly address in his third Critique, suggesting a third mode of the sublime: the temporal sublime, which can be placed alongside the mathematical sublime and the dynamic sublime. Secondly, the cosmic truth that Schopenhauer attains appears to bring human beings closer to nature, rather than positioning them in opposition to it.

Let us explore the first point further. The multiplicity and diversity of natural manifestations we encounter – not only those that are immensely large or powerful, but also the smaller animal, vegetable, and mineral configurations of our daily lives – have developed over time. They serve as testaments to nature's vitality, showcased in its ability to evolve, change, and increase its differentiation over years, centuries, and millennia. However, this transformation does not occur in organic time, but rather in deep time, which encompasses the vast time span that geologists consider necessary to account for events such as the dissolution of Pangea or the formation of entire mountain ranges. These events unfold over infinitely long periods and require complex and elaborate processes. The sheer number of causes, effects, and feedback loops involved makes it extremely difficult – if not impossible – for the human mind to fully comprehend them. Due to its infinite depth and our limitations in understanding it entirely, deep time can only be intuited through the imagination. It generates within us a sense of trembling, smallness, and discomfort stemming from our cognitive inadequacies, leading us to hypothesize the existence of a temporal dimension of sublimity. The infinite greatness of nature in space (the mathematical sublime), in time (the temporal sublime), and its infinite power of action (the dynamic sublime) can make us feel as though we shrink until we disappear.

Moreover, the second aspect of Schopenhauer's conception that I want to emphasize is this: by quieting our own voices, the experience of the sublime allows us to hear the voice of nature itself. As Dufrenne points out, „it is precisely when it appears sublime that nature imposes itself as nature"[45]. In this experience, nature reveals its authentic being, as nature, or, quoting the contemporary Japanese American philosopher Yuriko Saito, on its own terms[46].

Moreover, the passages from Schopenhauer's text quoted here highlight a key idea: for the author, the essential characteristic that a natural entity must possess to evoke an experience of sublimity is not merely its lack of form or its chaotic nature, but rather its profound indifference to human beings. Thus, the German philosopher can be seen as a precursor to contemporary ecological sensibility because he rejects the notion of nature existing solely for human benefit and instead emphasizes its fundamental otherness. Like current ecocritical perspectives, nature is not merely an object to be observed; it is a powerful presence that challenges and provokes us. This relationship with nature can also result in a beneficial suspension of the ego.

In other words, the appreciation of sublime nature, which is free from practical or moral goals, offers an experience of subjective decentralization. In this experience, a shift occurs: one moves from identifying solely with the body and its desires to recognizing a connection to a broader, impersonal, and almost cosmic order because, as Schopenhauer underlines, when confronted with objects that are infinitely large, powerful, chaotic, or formless – as well as with those that are deep and indifferent – we become acutely aware of our own vanity and the reality of "disappearing like drops in the ocean". This awareness prompts us to recognize our dimin-

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44 Schopenhauer (1819): 205.
45 Dufrenne (1955): 75.
46 See Saito (1998).

ished status and sense of smallness, compelling us to understand our decentralized place in the world. The human figure is not central, as seen in the second painting by Friedrich we analysed; instead, it is only partially distinct from the surrounding background. As transient phenomena within nature, we are indeed destined to vanish into nothingness; however, it is precisely the acknowledgment of our physical smallness that drives us toward a deeper metaphysical reflection: we are simply modifications of the eternal or modes of a substance essential for our existence, which, in turn, finds its full realization in us.

The sublime therefore allows us to grasp the duality of our existence to emerge. This duality reflects the recognition that my Self (small, insignificant, and destined to fade) contrasts with my role as a part of, and expression of the whole. So, the power of nature is not solely what frightens or elevates us; it also serves to unite us: we are integral parts of nature, infused with its energy and subjected to its fragility. The sublime, in this context, is not only an awareness of danger but also a recognition of our deep connection with living beings and the interdependence of all forms of existence. In this light, Schopenhauer's aesthetics can be viewed as a theoretical bridge between the modern concept of the sublime and a contemporary ecological perspective. Elements such as contemplative passivity and the suspension of will suggest a reformulation of the sublime as a relational and responsible experience. This approach emphasizes the importance of recognizing the value of the natural world and its inhabitants.

4. From Schopenhauer to Næss: The Ecological Self and the Sublime

The conceptual and emotional nuances of Schopenhauer's analysis of the sublime (its emphasis on vulnerability, contemplative passivity, and the dissolution of ego boundaries) resonate with several key insights of contemporary ecological thought. While Schopenhauer could not have anticipated today's environmental challenges, the aesthetic attitude he describes offers fertile ground for a renewed understanding of the human-nature relationship in the age of the Anthropocene. It is precisely this relational and decentred vision of the subject that finds a powerful ethical and philosophical development in the thought of the Norwegian philosopher and environmental activist Arne Næss[47]. Though writing more than a century later and in a radically different context, Næss shares with Schopenhauer a commitment to overcoming anthropocentrism and promoting an aesthetic and affective openness to the more-than-human world. This historical and conceptual shift – from the metaphysical aesthetics of Schopenhauer to the ecologically grounded ethics of Næss – mirrors the broader movement from modern to postmodern ecological consciousness: Næss's work provides a normative and ecological framework in which the contemplative dimensions of Schopenhauer's sublime can be reinterpreted as invitations to identification, care, and interdependence.

Næss's conception of the ecological self can be fruitfully interpreted as a form of ecological sublimity, one that deepens and ethically reorients the Schopenhauerian experience of aesthetic dissolution and openness. In fact, as we have attempted to emphasise throughout our discussion, the transition towards an ecological understanding of the sublime entails a significant transformation in aesthetic subjectivity. Instead of a detached self merely observing nature as a spectacle, it becomes a Self that acknowledges its integral role within a living and vulnerable world.

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[47] For a biographical analysis of the author, please refer to: Drengson (2005); Fox (1992); Glassner, *Arne Næss – A Wandering Wonderer*: *Bringing the Search for Wisdom Back to Life,* in Næss (2005): xvii–lvii; Næss (1993); Rothenberg (1993). To understand the author thinking, we must highlight that only three collections of essays and articles by Arne Næss have currently been published in Italian; in addition to the aforementioned *Introduzione all'ecologia*, published in 2015, the volume Næss 2021, and the collection edited by Franco Nasi and Luca Valera (Nasi, Valera 2023). We would also like to mention the translation of the Italian volume *Ecosophy: Ecology, Society and Lifestyles* (Næss 1994), currently out of print.

As the founder of Deep Ecology[48], Næss developed an ethics and philosophy centred on the ontological interconnectedness of all living beings. The final paragraph of this article examines how Næss's ideas can serve as the foundation for a new theory of the sublime: an "ecological sublime" that does not elevate itself above nature but is firmly rooted within it, recognizing itself as a fragile and responsible part of the biospheric whole. Deep Ecology emphasizes the importance of addressing ecological issues not just through good practices but also by fundamentally rethinking our relationship with nature[49]. This involves challenging the historical, philosophical, and cultural assumptions that have led to a sense of detachment (and in some cases, opposition) between humans and nature. We do not intend to delve into the details of Næss's theoretical reflections; we want only to highlight his call for a revaluation of some foundational concepts in European culture to promote a genuine ecological revolution. This includes re-examining the relationship between subject and object, central – as we have seen – in the construction of the concept of the sublime.

A key aspect of this revaluation is the traditional notion of *identity*, which is often viewed in a closed manner, suggesting that our identity is what separates us from the rest of the world. Næss, however, advocates for the concept of the *Ecological Self*, intended as an *extended identity*: in his thought, the individual Self expands to include the other-than-self, human and non-human, as a constituent part of its own identity[50]. In fact, he argues that none of us is physically or socially isolated: we are the air we breathe, the food we eat, and the environment we inhabit. In other words, we are *interconnected nodes within the web of life*[51].

This expansion of identity is not merely an intellectual exercise; rather, it represents an emotional, ethical, and aesthetic transformation. It is a process of empathic identification that creates a sense of continuity with all living beings. According to Næss, the realization of the Deep Self coincides with a form of spiritual maturation, in which the ego dissolves in its relationship with the world. From this perspective, the experience of the sublime takes on a new form: instead of *self-assertion*, it becomes *self-expansion*; rather than *domination*, it fosters *deep involvement*; and instead of a *heroic rationality*, it emphasizes the *relational recognition of one's own fragility and sense of belonging*.

This realization of our co-involvement and interconnectedness with the world evokes in us a sense of an ecological and "horizontal" sublime: it suggests a sense of depth that is horizontal, characterized by perceptual immersion, a sensitive connection to living beings, and intimacy. It represents a sublime experience that draws us *inward* rather than upward, leading to an under-

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48 The contrast between a "superficial" and a "deep" approach to ecology is the distinction that has made our author famous in the field of global environmental activism, and which is undoubtedly one of the central aspects of his thinking. It introduces a distinction between two ways of interpreting the relationship between man and nature, which was first formulated by Næss (1973).

49 In distinguishing between shallow and deep ecology, Næss uses the term *shallow* not as an insult, but to indicate an attitude that does not fundamentally question the traditional relationship between humans and nature in Western culture. This traditional view holds that humans are the pinnacle of creation and, endowed with reason, have the responsibility to uncover the laws and mechanisms of nature to use them to our advantage, tame nature, or save it if necessary. This perspective is often highlighted in public discussions about "ecological action," forming the basis of current "green policies." In this context, ecological action aligns with environmental protection, manifesting in practices that, while undoubtedly useful for preserving the Earth's ecosystem – such as using clean energy sources and recycling materials –are considered "superficial". Such actions do not address the core of environmental issues but instead produce only temporary results, merely shifting problems forward in time. In contrast, Næss advocates for a transformation of the overall framework of the relationship between humans and nature (Iovino 2004: 91) and this is the scope of his Deep Ecology. He calls for us to perceive this relationship as unified rather than dualistic, proposing a horizontal model of life that diminishes human imperialism and emphasizes responsibility towards non-human entities. On this topic see also Maggiore (2025a): 293–354.

50 On Ecological Self see: Maggiore (2023); Ead. 2025a: 336–348; Ead. 2025b (in print); Valera (2018).

51 Cf. Cavazza, *Introduzione,* in Næss (202): 15.

standing that every being is a part of an interdependent ecological network. This immersion fosters *ecological compassion*, as we begin to see not only the power of nature but also its vulnerability. We feel a complex mix of admiration and pain, as well as beauty and threat, which creates a sense of *aesthetic responsibility*. As Næss points out, recognizing our interconnectedness with the living world gives rise to a "spontaneous" ethic that emerges from our feelings rather than being imposed by external obligations[52].

In this context, the ecological sublime becomes an immediate ethical experience that transcends aesthetics. What disturbs and overwhelms us is not just the might of nature, but our exposure to it and the ever-present risk of destruction. This sublime experience is not heroic; rather, it is *sympathetic*, shared with all living beings, and it inspires a sense of care.

To conclude our argumentation, we would like to share a passage from an interview with Næss by his friend and philosopher, Christian Diehm. This passage beautifully encapsulates the journey we have explored and returns us to the image of the monk immersed in the storm, as painted by Friedrich:

> When I was a boy, there were no lights along the streets, so you had much more time to look at the stars. In the vastness of this variety, one had the feeling of being a microscopic creature, and that feeling intensified as one contemplated the immensity. It may not be as grand as the stars, but it is still significant. By reflecting on one's own smallness and focusing on the immeasurable greatness of the universe, one becomes greater – not smaller – than one was before.[53]

Much like Friedrich's solitary monk, Næss invites us not to transcend the storm, but to dwell within it: aware, immersed, and transformed. This reflection encapsulates the essence of the ecological sublime: a form of humility that does not diminish but deepens our participation in the world.

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[52] On the indissoluble relationship between theory and practice in Næss's thought, see Sessions 1992.
[53] Diehm (2004): 74–75.

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