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Green Spirituality and Physical Culture. Extreme Sports and the Imagery of Wilderness

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Abstract: In an area of increasingly widespread practices, the strengthening of the self through physical activities is exponentially reinforced by the inflexible laws of wild nature, now seen as a supreme judge. The knowledge of one's personal limits and their overcoming through the verdict of an implacable, inscrutable but fair nature, allows access to the powerful source of meaning of *green spirituality*. This phenomenon is closely linked to an unprecedented imagery of nature. In contemporary Western society there is a widespread trend to sacralise nature, but in the terms of a “disneyfied” object—to paraphrase David Lyon. The ritual of “symbolically challenging death”—to say it with David Le Breton—through extreme sports, forces wild nature to manifest its transcendent properties: Getting out of this trial unharmed means being able to recognise one's higher qualities. Challenging death and coming out unscathed means giving back to the disoriented contemporary individual a right and “nomized” cosmos—in the words of Peter Berger—capable of recognising the “chosen ones”, that is to say the ones that deserve salvation. I conclude that the growing phenomenon of extreme sports in the wilderness represents the attempt of experiencing an amplification of the self in order to “enter into resonance” with nature, to become “one” with it. Nature strengthens the ultimate meanings of experience, integrating them into a sort of *green eschatology*.

Keywords: nature; risk; meaning; sport; wilderness; spirituality

1. Introduction

The “death of God”, announced by Friedrich Nietzsche [1] in the early twentieth century, reveals the dissolution of a stable hierarchy of values. Before this epochal change, the forms of social bond were strongly legitimised by the collective sharing of religious values. The passage from a “prescriptive” to an “elective” condition [2]—that is, the transition from a society where the individual action is established from birth to one where it is possible to choose on each occasion—from one perspective this change opens up unprecedented spaces of freedom. However, from another, it also weakens any architecture of values where we can anchor steadily our experience in the world. The millenary process that caused the “exit from religion” [3], undermining the “plausibility structures” [4], which reinforced some social ties, implied a breaking down of the universes of meanings have been embedded individual biographies for a long time. With most of the relationships between “microcosm” and “macrocosm” broken [5], individuals need only to develop their potential completely, without any constraint, any connection to blood and the privileges of birth. Enlightenment ideology requires that everyone competes at the “social game” starting from the same position: Everyone, properly trained and educated, can achieve the same results [6].

More generally, the belief that human beings can fully achieve their freedom only through a complete self-determination is, albeit in an ambivalent way, a typical modern value and one of the main goals of individualistic and democratic society [7]. After the fall of the worldview based on

religious values, the one based on enlightenment values—albeit not entirely faded—also appears to be in crisis in the late-modern social configuration [8]. Since the religious value hierarchy and positivistic ideals are now weakened, it is increasingly problematic for people to rely on the matrices of meanings that previously in pre-modern societies, and then in modern ones, integrated the meanings of collective and individual life. The contemporary social scenario reveals a fragmentation of the economy of meanings, indicating the supremacy of a true existential market situation [9] based on demand and supply mechanisms: The insuppressible demand for meaning—a feature of human anthropology—is therefore a crucial social incentive toward a renewed rise on one hand of religious movements and, on the other, new forms of spirituality. “Morality”, banished God from the world, instead finds its home in individuals [10] in the secular form, for example, of “ethical choice”. In this scenario—where the market logic is unquestioned—any existential attachment is very problematic. Indeed, in the absence of transcendent anchors, the ultimate meanings of action in the world can never be guaranteed to last long. In an age of ever-increasing commodification, even if new forms of solidarity and new community logics emerge, ethical choice is more and more—as Michel Maffesoli [11] asserts—a mere and temporary passport to be accepted in “neo-tribes”. Belonging to a community no longer reveals a deep and lasting moral conviction, but rather, as the author concludes, an ephemeral “common feeling”, a sort of an aesthetic predominance.

It is thus possible that the dissolution of “grand narratives” [12] necessarily implies the rise of meaning substitutes. The trends of neo-spirituality no longer appear, however, exclusively in the shape of the religious—or at least in the canonical forms, with which the *religious* has historically manifested itself. In fact, this paper will argue that *green spirituality*, is one of its most significant contemporary expressions. This phenomenon is closely linked to an unprecedented imagery of nature. In contemporary Western society there is a widespread trend to sacralise nature, but in the terms of a “disneyfied” object—to paraphrase David Lyon [13]. This form of “neoromanticism” certainly has several aspects in common with the romantic current of the Nineteenth century, however it differs in several others [14]. Neoromanticism and the related feeling of green spirituality is essentially postmodern. In fact it represents a form of “pastiche” [15], a mixture of mythical elements with advanced scientific themes and, moreover, it indicates an ambivalent will of fusion mixed with traits of domination. With “disneyfied nature”, I refer to the dimension of a nostalgic, Arcadian imagery, where nature (due to a growing process of technical taming of reality) is today transfigured by a sort of magical thought [16]. It is an imagery characterised by strong emotional features [17], which puts together in an inconsistent worldview, premodern themes with a radical mediatisation of reality: This “hyperreal” [18] nature is an imagery object (docile, maternal, fair, etc.) perceived as real, even though, actually, it never existed in the history of the planet. Moreover, green spirituality is also a candidate to be, at least potentially, a sort of spiritual path available for all social strata and not just for a small elite circle [19]. It is precisely because of its deeply ambivalent nature that green spirituality is a powerful resource of meaning: This disguised ambivalence, in which the rational and irrational sphere become one, is the ontological basis of its sacralisation and its best metaphysical shield from possible external critics.

This new kind of spirituality encounters and combines with another contemporary tendency, in which the body has a dominant role. In recent decades in Western society more and more importance is attributed to physical activity [20] and, more specifically, to fitness. Body care is increasingly associated with the “self-cultivation” [21]. In this particular scenario, nature plays an important role. In an area of increasingly widespread practices, in fact, this strengthening of the self through physical activities is exponentially strengthened by the inflexible laws of wild nature, now seen as a supreme judge. The knowledge of one’s personal limits and their overcoming through the verdict of an implacable, inscrutable, but fair nature, allows access to the powerful source of meaning of green spirituality. The ritual of “symbolically challenging death” through extreme sports [22,23], forces wild nature to manifest its transcendent properties: getting out of this trial unharmed means being able to recognise one’s higher qualities. Challenging death—although often on a merely symbolic level—and

coming out unscathed means giving back to the disoriented, contemporary individual, a right and “nomized” cosmos [24] capable of recognising the “chosen ones”, that is to say the ones that deserve salvation [25].

Dealing with this latter aspect in an organic analysis, that considers the above-mentioned issues, is the goal of this paper. The first section briefly reconstructs the issue of secularisation, dealing with the reasons for its theoretical failure. That is to say that secularisation is not a universal process, because it just refers to some exceptional cases: As has been demonstrated by Peter Berger, Gracie Davie and Effie Fokas [26], the secularity of Europe is in fact an essentially isolated case in the world configuration. The second section focuses on the “sacralisation of nature”, which is the metaphysical basis of the postmodern phenomenon of “green spirituality”. In the third section, the argument turns to underlining, in a phenomenological way, the narrow relationship between physical culture and green spirituality, especially analysing the role of nature and wilderness imagery in contemporary society.

2. Failure of Secularisation Theories: “Re-Enchantment” of the World

Fromm [27] makes it clear how existential certainty provided by religious dominance at the same time implies a high price to be paid in terms of freedom. However, an alienated condition, which is a direct consequence of this state of things is, for many people a fair “tax” to pay to a system of beliefs that—having answers to each question—releases those with faith from the weight of choice. By contrast, the secular awareness that one is the only master of one’s own destiny, constantly nourishes a nostalgic feeling of adherence to a stable universe of meanings that does not undergo the flow of time and the incessant transformation the world is subject to [28] (p. 9). This is a typical and quite recent existential problem.

It is important to emphasise that, it is not until early 1970s of the twentieth century, that the legitimacy previously accorded to the overarching matrices of enlightenment meanings—those referred to by Jean François Lyotard [12] as “grand narratives”—decreases significantly. The enormous void, left by the dissolution of the two universes of meanings—the premodern one underpinned by the sacredness of religion and the modern one related to the emancipation of individuals through the progressive advances of science and history—that give sense to social existence implies, in a seemingly paradoxical way, the ideal conditions for the emergence of substitutionary narratives. It is evident, however, that if a spiritual revival is going on today, it is manifested, by its content and mode, in the forms of late-modernity [29]. If a renewed inventory of transcendence is available today, it is offered to potential users with the syntax of the contemporary world [30], rather than the discourses of antiquity.

It should be emphasised first that the process of secularisation, which is an important part of many classical studies, has been an overvalued theory compared to the socio-historical dynamics as it is in fact concretised [31,32]. In short, the explanatory model developed by social sciences for explaining this phenomenon—in their links to modernisation—seems to be an effective tool to describe the social reality of a single part of the world, that is to say, Europe. The non-exportability of the paradigm refutes the original universalising claim of this otherwise sophisticated conceptualisation. The religious situations of the United States, South America, and Islamic regions, among others, invalidates any forecast of gradual and complete secularisation of the planet. Indeed, as Peter Berger, Gracie Davie and Effie Fokas affirm [26] (pp. 17 and ff.), Europe is an exceptional case compared to the rest of the globe, which remains deeply religious. However, what Europe and the rest of the world do seem to share, as far as the issue of secularism is concerned, is an intellectual elite, and it is no coincidence that it is this social class that is transversally secularised. A phenomenon of a global scale instead—despite the secularisation does not involve the entire planet—is that of “pluralism” [26] (p. 23). Modernisation has therefore not necessarily produced a desacralisation of social life. It has, however, caused a prismatic social scenario, in which the religious offer is quite heterogeneous, spreading a multiplicity of religious perspectives that humans can freely adhere to and disintegrating the economy of the meanings and dissolving traditional community common values of traditional societies, in the process [33]. Such a condition causes a radicalisation of the doubt about the choice

to be made. In this climate of “competition [. . . proper to a true] religious market” [26,34] (p. 23), religious affiliation is constantly negotiated and therefore it is no longer an ascribed status of personal biography. It is evident that this unprecedented condition has important implications “both from an institutional point of view and in the consciousness of individuals” [26,34] (p. 23). The choice, even if proclaiming atheists or agnostics, becomes an obligatory condition in the late-modern world [35]. Even so, it is worth mentioning that in the framework of a changing religious scenario, which we can consider in the United States, there persists “a big difference between a tradition that is taken for granted and the neo-traditionalism that is the result of a choice” [26,34] (p. 24). In reality, a typical dimension of the postmodern age prevails—namely the “«do-it-yourself»” [26,34] (p. 24). In any case, a strong wind of spirituality, regardless of a precise fideistic affiliation, blows through the whole globe. A “«without-faith belonging»” [26,34] (p. 25), a typical condition of European society, reveals a widespread “nostalgie de l’absolu” [36], the aspiration to “perceive” individual existence not dissociated from higher levels of experience [37].

In short, religiosity is far from disappearing despite the previsions of secularisation theories. Even though great changes have been made, mainly because of the “expansion of new communication and information technology [. . .] and the diffusion of consumerism” [13,34] (p. 11), and having diffused a certain “relativism of faith systems” [13,34] (p. 11), it is no longer possible to say that rationalisation has replaced religion. The customs, rituals and beliefs of this field are affected by the “commodification of daily life and [. . . by] the influence of the culture of mass consumption” [13,34] (p. 12), thus transferring the believer to the world of consumption: In postmodern society seems to be a sort of “disneyfied faith” (to paraphrase David Lyon). To sum up, the individual belief—the fruit of a preference given to the products of faith available on the market [38]—would become a way to give a coherent sense to life, otherwise fragmented and unstable. Nostalgic landscapes of lost worlds and “pastiche” of transfigured realities would constitute the scenario of postmodern religion, well synthesised in the expression “Jesus in Disneyland” [13,34] (p. 15). The pluralisation of a society founded on the commodification of the existent and on the growing media development leads to an institutional homogenisation. Each institution, if it wants to survive, must undergo and incorporate logic that regulates such conflicting fields. It is for these reasons, Lyon asserts, that the Church takes similar features to the other institutions in terms of media posture and promotional choices: Definitely, “the real dynamic is entertainment rather than obedience” [13,34] (p. 25). The religious therefore expresses itself along the lines of strength that the postmodern situation encourages and carries: This era is distinguished on the one hand, for a tendential and growing “sacralisation of the self” [13,34] (p. 26), from whom the marketing of all commercial spiritualism takes advantage and, on the other hand, for the dominance of the playful element and the “principle of pleasure” [13,34] (p. 27). That is to say entertainment as gratification of individual drives against the community solidarity and obedience obligations that social life inevitably requires. If in the political sphere “market culture replaces the condition of citizen with consumer status” [13,34] (p. 29), the situation is no different in the religious sphere. For these reasons, the “sacralisation of the self” is a mission pursued through very personal spiritual research, which brings together different beliefs and different backgrounds into a not so coherent totality. “In a de-traditionalised world of deregulated religion” [13,34] (p. 35) it is normal, on the other hand, that a re-articulation (albeit fragmented) of the cognitive, emotional, and value universe takes place. Humans reorganise matrices of meanings, even religious, in accordance with the forms and contents that become available in the postmodern cosmology. “The world today [. . .] is increasingly characterised by undifferentiated bricolage of Disneyland” [13,34] (p. 53), by which individuals create unprecedented constellations of beliefs useful to face the anxiety caused by critical existential situation. Ultimately, the weakening of stable universes of meanings—universes that modernity could build and legitimise to the point of “disenchanted the world” [39]—causes the rise of new spiritual streams, which if often polymorphic, contradictory and inconsistent, give, in the absence of other, the best emotional support available at the moment. The “re-enchantment” [13] (p. 57) of the

world reveals a reactive dynamics: The anxiety of an anomic situation drives people to find alternative universes of meanings.

At this point, to better understand the thesis that is supported in this paper, it is necessary to underline—according to Thomas Luckmann [30,40–42] Peter Berger [24] and Mircea Eliade [5,43], for example—that religiosity is a structuring element of the human condition in terms, at least, of a constant search for transcendence. If we wanted to use a metaphor, we could say that the religious experience in the postmodern world reproduces in some ways the typical logic of a very famous furniture multinational: Giving shape to a familiar, welcoming and reassuring environment, by designing low-cost personalised interiors that are able to communicate a recognisable identity to the outside, built through consumption; feeling at home creating a space of experience as consistent and meaningful as possible for the purposes of the consolidation of the ego; assembling the objects available on the market in order to gratify the self in an economical way, without asking big sacrifice in return. The world outside the front door is threatening and out of control, everyone is supposed to want freely choose the religious furniture that thinks more appropriate to own individual dispositions, to the construction of his own spiritual home: It does not matter if the final result may appear kitsch to the “traditional” look, the important thing is *feeling at home*. Perhaps more than a bridge to the afterlife, the postmodern declinations of religiosity favour the earthly aspect, that one relating to a meaningful sejour in the world: During the transit, it is good to have a “roof on the head”, a metaphysical shield—albeit fungible, temporary and inconsistent—against the disturbing incursions of chaos. The choices of faith seem to be resolved through a sort of religious design—a statement that would certify, however, the postmodern passage to the “ethics of aesthetics” [17].

3. Green Spirituality: That Is to Say the Sacralisation of Nature

At this point of the discussion we can try to understand the “cryptoreligious” forms—to say it with Mircea Eliade [5]—through them individuals of late-modernity try to satisfy, which own desire for the absolute. If it is true that at this stage it seems to be a resurgence of “moral” values, however, it happens with the characteristics of this particular socio-historical configuration. A restructuring of the moral universe is certainly on-going [44]. There is a re-hierarchisation of values, for this reason new horizons of meanings arise. These horizons of meanings promise all-encompassing visions which, although not so different from those of some pre-modern societies, also differ in significant respects. For example, the bond with the transcendent structures social relations in a peculiar manner. The relationship with the religious becomes a strictly individual matter so that it is possible speaking—as Ulrich Beck [45] does—about “A God of One’s Own”. In reality, the collective research of a “superior” universe of meanings is not exhausted, a universe that promises the way by virtue of which it’s possible to go beyond the rigid boundaries of reductionist perspectives.

Green spirituality in this sense represents a significant indicator. We can find in this narrative all the typical features of the relationship with the sacred. Antithetical couples (sacred/profane, pure/impure, evil/good, etc.) that structure this sphere are active on the cognitive, on the value and on the emotional level. Yet, since most of the correspondences with other worldly regions are greatly weakened, people’s relationship with the sacred is solved in the earthly sphere. Once the religious narratives, those positivistic and those related to the philosophies of history are delegitimised, there is a *sacralisation of nature*. The elevation of the natural sphere—idealised as virginal dominion to the corruption of human activity [46]—causes its opposite, namely, the degradation of the human being [47].

A new moral ontology is enshrined: The individual, in the presence of sacred Mother Nature, is again the manifestation of the profane [48]. However, to be nullified in the name of a superior mission on behalf of entities that transcend us completely—“Gaia” [49] or “Biogea” [50], for example—has significant implications. The human being, recognising the ambivalent and radical otherness of Nature, and declaring himself similar to the most elementary protozoan (or a virus in the most apocalyptic visions) [51], represents the mimesis of a religious model typical of Western tradition. Demeaning

themselves in the face of righteousness, wisdom and the omnipotence of an incorruptible entity when not violated by a sinful conduct—yesterday’s blasphemy, today’s pollution [52]—of people ultimately means degrading themselves to ascend. Humiliation, in these cases, is always the price to pay for exaltation. A metaphysics based on a masochistic conception [24] guarantees to the self-proclaimed group of the elect the ascesis through sacrifice, mortification, renunciation: To stand out in the name of a superior, a definite, an eternal value, creating a community of the righteous in the middle of a corrupt society to be completely destroyed and reconstructed from “tabula rasa”, is the typical mechanism of “revolutionary gnosticism” [53].

The renewed possibility of clearly separating Good from Evil into a world whose growing complexity and relativisation seemed to no longer allow it, is a formidable resource of meaning, with which to construct individual and collective identity. Self-perceiving as belonging to the moral universe of the pure people, reveals ultimately a quota of disguised narcissism: The “sacralisation of the self” necessarily passes through the annihilation of the Other. The nostalgia of a pure and uncorrupted world [54] is a feeling that nourishes most Western myths as it is probably the case with the “grand ecological narrative” [55,56], by virtue of which people wish a “neo-romantic” return to a “disneyfied nature” [57].

We are in the presence of a sort of “geodicy”, a postmodern and green re-edition of theodicy, in which Gaia takes the place of God in the role of supreme judge. Catastrophes then become “hierophanies”—with Mircea Eliade [5]—no longer an expression of the divine will, but evidence of the sins committed by people against the biosphere. In this universe of meaning, catastrophes are perceived as fair punishment for transgressions. The question of “unde malum” coincides with the blaming of human beings. A human being punished for its responsibilities by the court of Nature, now the only court to which individual is willing to recognise legitimacy, once the authority of God, History and Progress has evaporated [58]. The strong emotion, emanating from this nostalgic imagery—a pure and primordial scenario, mixed with the perception of a constant threat to life (we think about climate change overall)—causes a strong feeling of guilt, that is projected on every natural phenomenon to the point of deleting the boundary between nature and society. Behind every catastrophe, as happened in pre-modern society, there is a guilty, because it is no longer History [59], but Nature, which is, today, the cosmic tribunal where summoning the transgressors of natural order, a sort of new sinners [56,60].

4. Physical Culture and Wilderness: The Only Legitimised Court of Late Modern Society

Peculiar practices are spreading in recent years [61–65]. As David Le Breton [23] masterfully explains, in “Physical and Sporting Risky Activities”, the individual perceives temporarily itself as the sole sovereign of his own existence. Often immersed in a wild nature, the athlete bets on his own abilities, engaging in a “symbolic challenge with death” [22]. Yet, it is precisely the possibility of finding death in the challenge to ensure—in the positive performances—an intensification of the biographical meanings, a sense of control and fullness that is not possible experiencing in the routine of the ordinary world. This superior kind of experience is opposed to a daily life seen as alienating and uncertain, in which the feeling of inessentiality and impotence of the individual, ensnared in largely over-personal social processes, causes the dispossession of a life perceived as inauthentic. It is in the dangerous nature of extreme sports performance that the athlete finds an otherwise inaccessible dimension of self [22,23,66–68].

Throwing oneself from a bridge tied to a bungee cord to within a few centimetres from the surface of a rivers’ water, jumping among the steep cliffs of an alpine mountain attached to a paraglider, surfing among gigantic waves, is a means of consecrating one’s life to a form of existence where adrenaline is the main substance [67]. Adrenaline becomes the “drug” that supports and guides athletes through peculiar form of “trance” [69]. In a semi-altered state of consciousness, athletes play a “mimetic” game with immortality, “deconstructing” it through challenges beyond all limits: Only this superior challenge allows the access to the “nirvana of post-modernity” [70].

More generally today the “sacralisation of the body” [71] is a dominant phenomenon, and one of the principal carriers through, which individuals affirm the self and build individual identity [72]. The hard training, through which the body is subjected to almost intolerable sacrifices, represents a contemporary form of asceticism, in which all the aspects of daily life are involved [73–75]. This long, gradual and suffered existential path is an indispensable premise of risky sporting performance. This sort of secular *Camino de Santiago* allows living a life that is no longer alienated, but authentic and full [23]. “Risk”, generally feared in ordinary daily life, is perceived as an attack on one’s own safety and security. It is instead intentionally sought—the French scholar continues—in other spheres of experience, those, that is, where a trained use of one’s own body—contextually with the constant balancing of a hardened psyche—allows for a widening of the spheres of existence subject to the individual sovereignty. In daily routine, people are subjected to processes beyond their control that cause an increasing alienation. By contrast, one who courageously engages in an extreme sport brings under control the “vertigo” of danger, redefining the sense of limits and tasting a “feeling of omnipotence” [23] (pp. 408 and 409).

But, the universe of meanings of “risky physical activities” reveals a wider imagery, in which the human is seen with increasing suspicion, and in which only Nature seems to maintain an uncorrupted authority [76]. Nature becomes the only legitimate tribunal that can judge unquestionably individual and its activity. This particular type of physical practice put people in front of wild nature and its fair verdicts. The fact that authority of God, of History and Progress is weakened on normative, cognitive and value level, causes, by contrast, a “*sacralisation of nature*”: Through this process Nature becomes personified and elevates itself as judge of human action. Due to the delegitimisation of the institutions that had ordered the social world, up until a few decades ago, human beings give to nature the exclusive right to announce an authoritative verdict. Wilderness, with its ancestral and unquestionable laws, becomes the absolute judge of a sort of “cosmic court” [77]. Only in the face of the “wilderness” can individuals accept to be summoned as defendants [23] (pp. 421 and ff.)

Extreme sports are a source of meaning enhanced by the combination between the symbolic challenge to death, and the challenge to the wild nature—both symbols of a virile subjugation of the world [22,67], or expression of the achievement of a condition of “harmony” and “fusion” between the human sphere and the non-human sphere. This state of affairs corroborates the hypothesis of a return of a certain “neo-romanticism” [57]: This phenomenon sheds light on a contemporary trend—a sort of symbolic escape from society—since society is today lived as a domain of inauthenticity, of a Kafkaesque regulation of life and of a forced anonymity [23] (p. 410) [78].

This particular type of athlete, attributing to nature an undeniable sacredness, is willing to symbolically sacrifice his life on the altar of “green spirituality”. The individual engages in a real “ordeal” [22], in which the eventual survival would certify belonging to a group of the elect and the existence of a fair and superior order capable of recognising the deserving of a meaningful existence. On the other hand, the wilderness is the perfect place to experience the sacred, as it inspires sublime feelings with its grandeur: Scenarios that, on planet earth, seem to be closer to the imagined greatness of God [79]. The sublime landscapes of uncontaminated nature [80]—impetuous waterfalls, unsurpassable peaks, deepest canyons—become the ideal stages for extreme sports performances that inspire and reinforce the feelings of green spiritualisation: in these special places, nature manifests with utmost force its “tremendous” and “fascinating” sides, the mysterious features of the sacred [81].

This is for example the case of surfing, as has been acutely explained by Bron Taylor. Surfing has eclipsed the distance between human beings and nature, which is one of its characteristic aspects. The degree of emotional involvement is such that it is licit to speak of an “aquatic nature religion” [82]. The Ocean embraces the surfer’s experience in a fusional way, sacralising it. Nature becomes an overarching horizon of meaning in virtue of which relationship between human and non-human sphere is filled with sacred meanings, promising the spiritual growth of the individual self. The symbolic roots of surf—Taylor asserts [82] (pp. 926 and ff.)—sink in a nostalgic imagery very close to a paradisiac transfiguration of nature, and in which the Ocean is perceived as a true

divinity. The sea is lived by surfer as an entity with its own equilibrium: The Ocean is able to recognise who respects it, and its ancestral rules by means of specific rituals. The spiritualisation of surfing is part of a wider cultural scenario that can be backdated to the 1960s. This phenomenon must be related to the emergence of countercultural movements, in which nature is becoming increasingly relevant. The author concludes that this form of spiritualisation is also closely linked to radically environmentalist conceptions, in which the remarkable mystical component seems to confirm and reinforce the current green spiritualisation of the West. Surfing, in essence, becomes a powerful source of meaning as it supports the construction of identity with a solid hierarchy of values made of a mixture of spiritualism, animism, mysticism, ecologism, communitarianism, sensualism—that is, antithetical values compared to the Western ones (rationalism, disenchantment, empiricism, industrialism, individualism, scientism).

Another striking example of the ever-increasing diffusion of this phenomenon is certainly the western success of martial arts, which seems to derive from the spiritualising possibilities promised by the practice of these peculiar physical activities. Although they are in most cases not real extreme sports, martial arts are a good example of the popularisation of this trend. These sports, practiced at least “ideally” in nature, corroborates the idea that green spiritualisation is an ongoing process. They have been defined as a “secular religion”, through which it is possible to aspire to an ever more perfectible “self-cultivation” [83] (p. 47). In any case, even the search for “wholeness”, typical of martial arts, is in solidarity with the green universe of meaning. Both the green spirituality and the martial arts, in fact, mean the relationship between human beings and nature in an essentially monistic way. This is an aspect of a larger phenomenon that I will address briefly in the conclusions. Here it is important to highlight that in this vision of the “One”, in which the individual tries to harmonise himself with the environment and with the whole cosmos [21,84], every dualistic opposition is banned [85]: Nature and human beings, in this holistic worldview, reconvene as allies and no longer the subject of the other, as well as mind and body are no longer seen in juxtaposition [84].

Both the green spiritualisation (especially in the aspect of “disneyfied nature”), and the martial arts understood as a “secular religion”, share an “idealized reconstruction of the past” [86] (p. 534): it means that both are internal to a certain form of “neo-romanticism”, in which concepts as “authenticity” and “purity”—typical of an oriental vision of life—are central [85] (p. 129). In some martial arts we can find explicit relationships with ecologism. For example, some forms of Taijiquan practice are completely embedded into a “green horizon”, in which everything, from the clothing to food, has to respond to an ecological ethics [87].

In short, society (now perceived as corrupt and unjust) pushes people to find a symbolic refuge in nature. Human beings thus trust in the natural sphere and in its power of detecting the “chosen ones”. The judgment is revealed in an apocalyptical way very close to the religious tradition [88]: That is to say through a sentence of life or death. Finding death in these extreme sports, however, can in an apparently paradoxical way, guarantee some form of immortality through the memory of the specific community of sportsmen and sportswomen. Nature intensifies the ultimate meanings of experience, integrating them into a sort of *green eschatology* [57,89].

5. Conclusions

All these phenomena are surely the expression of a wider process that Colin Campbell [80] has defined “Easternisation of the West”. The West and its universe of meaning, drastically weakened by the tragic events of the twentieth century, finds a fascinating place of inspiration in the East. One of the dominant traits of this “easternisation” is certainly the monistic way of seeing nature. Because of this process, nature seems once again to be re-enchanted. Moreover, the failures of the ideological “grand narrative” of progress, in which History was the protagonist, causes a return to mythical thought [88] (pp. 741, 746 and ff.).

In this sense, “green spiritualisation” is radically opposed to history seen as linear progress and indeed it promotes the idea that is much better conserving the world rather than modelling

it. The only desirable revolution is that which causes a complete metamorphosis of human inner life. A process that ultimately leads to a collective anthropological transformation and to a global material change: Living according to a sustainable lifestyle in a renewed unpolluted and wild nature, it means reaching advanced states of consciousness more and more in harmony with the external natural environment. In this sense extreme sport, as I tried to explain, is one of the ideal means for achieving this higher goal. Ironically, the fact that practicing these extreme sports in an alleged state of fusion with nature, fostering an ecological vision of the world through these activities, causes damage to nature itself—crisscrossing the globe to go in the best natural scenarios, technically equipping the chosen places, etc.—is a further indicator of the ideological and postmodern nature of the today's green universe of meaning.

After all, green spirituality promises just that: The human being finds out a new pattern of ultimate meanings, based on a wise and super parties (that is to say neutral and transcendent) guide that is neither God nor History, nor Progress. In a complex world where nothing is certain, where the modern institutions don't work anymore as a source of meaning, nature therefore becomes the best candidate to perform this function, a function that in fact—under the psychological impulse of a vacuum of meaning—sacralises it. The extreme sport practiced in the all-embracing horizon of wilderness is the best medium to ascend to these higher levels of experience. Despite the combination of wilderness and extreme sports strengthens the quest for green spirituality, it is certainly possible that other less extreme sports or that are not practiced in nature are a relevant source of meaning in contemporary society.

The systematic search for a fusional experience with the environment transfigures even death found in this way. Ultimately, it represents the maximum degree of this fusion. More in general, speaking in sociological terms, martyrdom has to be understood as a practice that strengthens symbolic adhesion and the sense of belonging to a communitarian system of values. For these reasons, dying during the practice of extreme sport, eventually causes, even if in a tragic way, the mythicization of the event and, therefore, the symbolic immortality of the athlete.

In conclusion, the growing phenomenon of extreme sports in the wilderness represents the attempt of experiencing an amplification of the self in order to “enter into resonance” with nature, to become “one” with it as seems to be confirmed by the cases mentioned above. These sports—as emerges, especially from Le Breton's studies—are perceived by those who practice them as a form of elevation of the self, an ascesis from a world perceived as absurd, a way to tame the fear of a senseless death, a way to control an otherwise uncontrollable life. But, the finding that I want to emphasise here is that the extreme challenge with wilderness, from which the athlete emerges victorious, represent a sign of election sent by nature, now the only sacred court legitimised to give meaning to human life. Nature, whose values and meanings are strengthened, as I have tried to demonstrate, by the very contemporary phenomenon of green spirituality.

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substantial difference lies in the unquestionable judgment that nature can make on the athlete's individual skills: Nature—As I will explain later also through the contribution of Le Breton's works—Is rising to a more legitimised authority of contemporary society.

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