

Educating under the Prism of Sustainability through the Arts and Cinema

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Introduction

It has been widely recognized that the arts can have a relevant role in developing a common set of values needed to achieve sustainability, such as solidarity, equality and diversity. However, the arts, and cinema in particular, are underused in most educational contexts despite its enormous potential to generate the necessary changes in value systems, attitudes and habits of the general population required for sustainability to become a reality understood from multidimensional perspectives. In this sense, the arts are seen as cultural practices that can function as cohesive agents to promote a more holistic vision of sustainable development and the underlying importance of achieving the SDGs.

From our perspective, education is consolidated as a dynamic process that allows for the construction of joint cultural experiences while generating new opportunities that guarantee cultural evolution. The educational design to be discussed is articulated following Mesoaxiological Pedagogy which states that the different areas of knowledge can be transformed into fields of education; thus, identifying the educational process as axiological. Under these principles and with this purpose in mind, we have selected two of the most nationally and internationally acclaimed Spanish-films produced in 2022, *Alcarràs* and *As Bestas*. The values and themes linked to sustainability contained in the films were the main criteria used for their selection. Both stories take place in clearly defined Spanish regional rural environments – Galicia and Catalonia. They masterfully reflect the social, economic and environmental tensions that are sometimes generated by the actions undertaken in favor of sustainability. The selection was made with the intention of showing the relevance of culturally situated education by integrating local elements to challenge students on issues regarding sustainability analyzed from a variety of perspectives.

The proposal can be framed as education for sustainability through cinema; therefore, the guidelines for the educational intervention for each of the films selected seek to develop a set of skills for sustainability.

Theoretical Framework

Mesoaxiological Pedagogy considers that Pedagogy is an area that generates knowledge of education, from which axiological processes can be developed when educating through the different areas of knowledge such as history, geography, chemistry, or the arts.

Pedagogical interventions are carried out according to the meaning of education and the way in which these areas can be used to develop students' skills, habits, attitudes and knowledge. The educational system is framed within the concept of educational and creative cities, thus, integrating culture and school.

It is important to keep in mind that knowledge of education is different from the knowledge of the cultural areas. It is not only about transmitting concepts to students, but about having the necessary knowledge so that this particular information is transformed into education. The fact that a person has knowledge in a specific area, it does not imply that this person is suited to teach this particular content. Professional educators require both, knowledge of the cultural area according to the school level they are teaching, as well as the necessary pedagogical knowledge to be able to decide the level of complexity of the contents to be taught. That is, being able to assess whether students can learn them, the most appropriate method to teach them, and identifying the habits, attitudes, skills, and knowledge developed in the educational intervention. The pedagogical function, thus, does not consist in knowing art or teaching art, but in educating through the arts. Therefore, the cultural areas become both, a tool and an aim of education.

Mesoaxiological Pedagogy considers that the arts have sufficient cultural and social recognition to be addressed as an educational problem where axiological processes can take place. Among others, it has been identified that through the arts certain values needed to achieve sustainability can be developed. Values linked to creativity, innovation, glocal, spatial and territorial issues, as well as cultural values where identity and diversity play a central role. In addition, through the arts, it is possible to establish connections with reality from unique and singular perspectives; they offer possibilities of experimentation according to the particular characteristics of each art. They can favor connections between values and feelings; and, above all, when educating through the arts, it is possible to estimate, know, teach, commit, decide and execute aesthetic and artistic values¹; which include, being able to determine the qualities that make an artistic work a success². This does not mean standardizing the taste for certain artistic productions, but rather providing capacities to develop arguments built from the knowledge of a broad artistic culture that includes a diversity of expressions, and at the same time, favors the development of criteria to personally evaluate these productions³. In addition, through the arts it is possible to learn that there is not a single way to deal with the same problem.

From our perspective, arts education no longer consists in achieving instrumental or technical mastery of an art, but in acquiring the necessary artistic and cultural skills needed to act and interact in the world and to develop students' particular capacities to grow as individuals⁴. To achieve this, the arts must be present in education as a complex field filled with contradictions so as to favor reflection and the construction of meaning of the world through the arts. "The effectiveness of art does not consist in transmitting messages, offering models or counter-models of behavior or teaching to decipher representations. It consists first of all in dispositions of the bodies, in cuts of spaces and singular times that

¹ José Manuel Touriñán, "La relación artes-educación: Educamos con las artes y hay educación común, específica y especializada", *REDIPE* 7, No. 12 (Diciembre 2018).

² Elliot Eisner, *El arte y la creación de la mente. El papel de las artes visuales en la transformación de la conciencia* (Barcelona: Paidós, 2004).

³ Vicente Blanco y Salvador Cidrás. *Educación a través de arte. Cara a unha escola imaxinada*. (Santiago de Compostela: Kalandraka, 2020).

⁴ Touriñán, "La relación".

define ways of being together or apart, in front of or in the middle of, inside or outside, close or distant”⁵ [personal translation]. The way personal and collective identities are configured have become diverse and multipolar; therefore, education becomes the most effective tool to learn how to live together and generate citizens who are capable of adapting to the world from a localized perspective where it is possible to recognize and accept the other from diversity⁶ and as someone who remains in close contact with nature. Education, therefore, serves “*to build oneself and recognize the other in a diverse cultural environment of interaction*”⁷ [italics in the original] [personal translation]. The arts have been considered a privileged field to develop these capacities for being capable of understanding and interacting in diversity. The arts are relevant because “Their significance derives not from the issue of what it means to reimagine the work of art as education (because this would play into the hand of those who wish to instrumentalize art to socially useful ends), but to rethink the possibility of non-alienated learning through the lessons of artistic sensibility”⁸.

Within a comprehensive education, the arts receive the recognition they require as generators of knowledge and of complex exploration processes which are essential for education to take place. They allow for an approach to the world based on subjectivity and affectivity.

The link between arts, education and sustainability

In 2006, UNESCO published the Roadmap for Arts Education in which the arts in education are recognized as a way to achieve comprehensive education and a sustainable future based on the development of values and attitudes necessary to promote active citizenship who responsibly faces current and future challenges. Under this approach, it is identified that arts education has the potential to be a means for territories and communities to develop through their cultural capital and their endogenous capacities to create strong, creative and sustainable initiatives.

In recent years, a trend regarding the competences to strengthen and to promote sustainability in different educational contexts has been present. One of the most recent proposals in the European context, and the one that we will take as main reference in this work, is the *Green Comp. The European Sustainability Competence Framework*⁹. The main objective of this framework is “to foster a sustainability mindset that helps users develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes to think, plan and act with empathy, responsibility and care for our planet”¹⁰.

In this document, the key competences on sustainability have been detailed with the objective to guide and improve the teaching-learning process, facilitate the acquisition of

⁵ Jacques Rancière. *El espectador emancipado* (Pontevedra: Ellago Ediciones, 2010), 59.

⁶ José Manuel Touriñán. *Artes y Educación. Fundamentos de Pedagogía Mesoaxiológica* (A Coruña: Netbiblo, 2010).

⁷ Touriñán, *Artes y Educación*, 71.

⁸ Claire Bishop, “The New Masters of Liberal Arts: Artists Rewrite the Rules of Pedagogy,” in *Education*, ed. Felicity Allen (Cambridge, MA: White Chapel and MIT Press, 2011), 201.

⁹ Guia Bianchi, Ulrike Pisiotis, and Marcelino Cabrera. *GreenComp. The European Sustainability Competence Framework* (European Commission: 2022).

¹⁰ Bianchi, *Green Comp*, 2.

attitudes, knowledge, abilities, skills or diverse values in students related to the environment or social justice, among other factors. In fact, in this proposal the competence on sustainability is defined as follows:

It trains students to embody sustainability values and embrace complex systems, in order to adopt or call for action that restore and maintain healthy ecosystems and enhance fairness, thus generating visions for sustainable development¹¹

Likewise, the framework has been structured in four interrelated areas with their associated specific competences as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. GreenComp framework

Area	Competence
Embodying sustainability values	a) Valuing sustainability b) Supporting fairness c) Promoting nature
Embracing complexity in sustainability	a) Systems thinking b) Critical thinking c) Problem framing
Envisioning sustainable futures	a) Futures literacy b) Adaptability c) Exploratory thinking
Acting for sustainability	a) Political agency b) Collective action c) Individual initiative

Source: elaborated by the authors after the GreenComp Framework (2022)

The first area of competence, *embodying sustainability values*, is linked to thinking about the values of sustainability, equity or justice and the consideration of people as part of nature. The second area, *assuming the complexity of sustainability*, focuses on the development of critical and systemic thinking in students in relation to environmental and social, cultural or economic issues, trying to understand their interrelationships and their socio-environmental effects. The third domain, *envisioning sustainable futures*, focuses on the future prospects of alternative scenarios for achieving a sustainable future. Lastly, the fourth area, *acting in favor of sustainability*, focuses on citizen mobilization and active participation (individual or collective) that contributes to the achievement of changes and transformations that allow achieving global sustainability.

All these competences serve as a guide for the configuration of educational practices, educational planning (educational or training programs), or policy proposals in favor of sustainability. In addition, it is characterized by being an intergenerational framework (with applicability to different age groups and educational stages) that can be used in different educational contexts (formal, non-formal and informal). It advocates for transversality as a priority axis of action to work on the various competences formulated. The objective of the framework is to generate changes based on reflective processes regarding the existing forms of production and consumption, and the impact that our lifestyle has upon them. In fact, numerous artworks are linked to issues related to sustainability, such as the films we will analyze briefly during this intervention.

¹¹ Bianchi, *GreenComp*, 12.

When referring to sustainability, it is not enough for people to understand the concept and its implications, but it is necessary for them to become aware of the origin of the challenges and the consequences of our current lifestyle. Frameworks, such as the GreenComp, become, thus, relevant and necessary. When educating through the arts, it is possible to favor inquiry processes that allow contrasting the evolution of the different artwork, provide explanations for the understanding of these changes, develop possibilities of imagining how people lived in the past and in different cultures, and contrast them with those we have nowadays. Through the arts, it is possible to offer explanations to account for the changes that have been experienced. Accordingly, students can develop skills to deal with problems holistically, not as if they occurred independently and isolated from the historical context that generates them¹². The arts can contribute to the development of critical thinking because “those of us who work in the art world have given additional importance to understanding relationships rather than treating units in isolation or discontinuity”¹³, which makes it easier to contextualize the problems, especial one as complex as sustainability.

Students’ ability to imagine alternatives and anticipate different actions in regards to the same situation can be enhanced. Therefore, arts education can contribute to improving awareness of this complex and multifactorial reality, which must be considered in the interactions that people carry out with their environment. This is what is manifested in the different international proposals on competences for sustainability, which intend to address the problems that are present and latent in different contexts, at the same time they provide with the possibility of social transformation towards sustainable lifestyles. It is here where the link between arts education and skills for sustainability can be established. This is, in the ability to generate common goals and establish them as complementary means that with a pedagogical orientation can be used to generate values, attitudes and habits to confront contemporary and future challenges in societies.

Educating for sustainability through cinema: *As Bestas* and *Alcarràs*

The films *As Bestas* and *Alcarràs* make up an opportunity that is necessary to use for educational intervention. Both films deal with themes and values closely related to sustainability. In this paper, we aim to identify these themes and values with the intention of contributing to the GreenComp framework and to promote a sustainable mindset that allows learners to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to think, plan and act with empathy, responsibility and care for our planet¹⁴.

Both films embody values of sustainability by making visible the need to support fairness and the promotion of nature, showing situations and scenes that generate reflections on equity, justice and the role of human beings as part of nature. The two films encourage viewers to assume the complexity of sustainability, and represent valuable resources to promote critical and systemic thinking from education in relation to environmental, social

¹² Stephen Addiss and Mary Erickson. *Art History and Education. Disciplines in Art Education: Contexts of Understanding* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press,1993).

Giroux, Henry. *Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope. Theory, Culture and Schooling* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997).

¹³ Elliot Eisner, “The Emergence of New Paradigms in Educational Research”, *Art Education* 46, No.1 (January 1993):53

¹⁴ Bianchi, *GreenComp*, 2.

and economic issues, which enables the contextualization of problems associated with sustainability. Through the educational intervention using cinema as our main tool, it is possible to work on these skills. Additionally, it is possible to educate the capacity for future projection, adaptability, exploratory thinking to encourage citizen mobilization to undertake actions in favor of sustainability.

We identify that one of the strong elements these two films have, as engines for education for sustainability is their glocal character; that is, they express issues that refer both to local and global factors, which concern both realities through topics of undeniable relevance in the Spanish territory.

The values and themes linked to sustainability contained in each film have been identified as a starting point for carrying out the educational design, whose main objective is education for sustainability through cinema.

As Bestas, or the conflict of interests for the desires of two families

As Bestas is a “western-style thriller in the Galician countryside”¹⁵ that has surpassed one million viewers and raised almost 7,000,000 euros in box office takings¹⁶. The success of Rodrigo Sorogoyen’s film has revived the interest in the true crime that in 2010 killed the Dutchman Martin Albert Verfondern in the small village of Santoalla, located in the Galician region, in the northwest side of Spain¹⁷.

The multi-award-winning film tells the story of Antoine and Olga Denis, a French couple who settles in a village in the Galician countryside to make their project of leading a bucolic life and living in contact with nature a reality. Their coexistence with the locals is not as idyllic as they would have liked, but it is harmonious until a conflict with the Anta brothers, which revolves around the sale of communal land to an energy company for the installation of wind turbines, ends in tragedy.

The terrible ending is the least relevant element for this work. However, if the conflict had not burst, the case would never have made headlines in the national and international press and, had it not been for this fatal outcome, the story would probably never have inspired the creation of the film, which provides us with a valuable educational opportunity for sustainability¹⁸.

The contribution of As Bestas to education for sustainability

This film is an excellent opportunity to think, reflect, and trigger change, both for individuals

¹⁵ Juan Esparza, “As Bestas: thriller en clave de western en el campo gallego” *Cameraman: Revista técnica cinematográfica* 120 (2022).

¹⁶ TaqEsp, “As Bestas. Taquilla España”, *TaqEsp*, 17 noviembre 2022, <https://www.taquillaespana.es/peliculas/as-bestas/>

¹⁷ Antonio Rivera, “El crimen real que inspira el éxito de los Premios Goya: “con la escopeta hice bum bum”, *Esquire*, 11 febrero 2023, <https://www.esquire.com/es/actualidad/cine/a41949593/as-bestas-pelicula-historia-real/>

¹⁸ The film is available for viewing on different streaming platforms.

and societies. *As Bestas* places the viewer at the core of the complex intricacies derived from the economic, social, environmental and moral dilemmas that sustainability entails. The film clearly embodies sustainability values. One of the most relevant aspects where the film contributes to education for sustainability is a moral dilemma about the complex balance between the three dimensions of sustainability, the conflicts that arise when there is interest in managing shared resources and the collateral damage that the pursuit of goals and actions in favor of sustainability have on other individuals or communities. It makes clear that each of the dimensions of sustainability is part of an inseparable whole and that their relationships and connections are extremely complex. The solution to a problem of environmental nature can lead to generating problems of social or economic nature, and vice versa. This is the crossroads of sustainability, that of solving the problems that concern the world trying not to generate new conflicts, or at least anticipating those new conflicts that may arise from the actions undertaken, trying to reach a balance that seems delicate among all dimensions.

The values of sustainability are directly related to the 2030 Agenda. We have established direct relationships between the topics addressed by *As Bestas* and the SDGs, which consolidate the potential of design and educational intervention for sustainability through the film:

- The allusion to the *end of poverty* is directly present in the film, since the family lives with the little resources they obtain from working in the countryside but that does not allow them to entirely satisfy their needs.
- Access to *quality education* is fervently represented and is one of the causes of many of the conflicts that can be seen on screen. The film shows, probably intentionally, the conflict between a cultured Frenchman, who has traveled the world and who also shows off his knowledge, in contrast with the native family whose members are portrayed as barbarians, beasts, feral, violent and who resolve their conflicts with force, denoting the importance of quality universal education for all as a strategy to promote the peaceful resolution of conflicts. The lack of mechanisms to manage emotions is also another symptom of a deficient education.
- The desire on the part of the brothers to access, of what they perceive as a decent job, allows them to improve, even modestly, their lives, providing *economic growth*.
- The *Reduction of inequalities* is another objective that takes place throughout the film, since we can clearly see enormous inequalities between the two families, in terms of access to education, to a dignified life, and their socioeconomic opportunities.
- *Sustainable cities and communities* is embodied in the Denis family that moves to the countryside to rehabilitate the village, live in harmony with the environment and serve as a school for volunteers from all over the world, so they can visit the community and learn about sustainable lifestyle.
- *Responsible production and consumption* is the element that triggers the conflict. The offer made by an energy company to buy the communal forests to install wind turbines would allow the exploitation of renewable and non-polluting wind energy.
- *Climate Action* is present in the film through two components: the Denis family

moves to the rural environment trying to live in a more consistent, coherent and harmonious environment, and the companies that try to install the wind turbines are contributing to leave behind the use of fossil fuels as source of energy. Both aspects call directly for climate action.

To conclude with this section, it should be noted that the native family does not think about environmental sustainability when they decide to agree to the possible sale of the communal forests for the installation of the wind turbines, but rather about opting for a more dignified life. In fact, the installation of wind turbines is another example of how finding solutions to a problem can generate new ones. When trying to install wind turbines to exploit renewable energy, such as wind power, and be able to leave behind fossil fuels and pollutants, the destruction of ecosystems, habitats of species, the migratory routes of birds or acoustic and visual pollution becomes real¹⁹. The French family thinks about environmental sustainability but also thinks about their own benefit and fulfilling their dream.

The conflict occurs between two conflicting interests. In the end, the two families pursue exactly the same thing: a dream, the dream of improving their lives, which for some materializes in rehabilitating the village and using its resources in an ecological way; while for others means being able to sell their land to provide their family with a better future far from the sacrifice of living and working in rural areas for life.

Alcarràs or the confrontation between tradition and change

Alcarràs revolves around the Solé family, who has been cultivating peaches for a long time on a land whose legal ownership they cannot prove because the grandfather took over those lands through verbal agreement. The landlord will kick the family out to install solar panels, a profitable use to exploit the land. The film takes place during the summer of the last harvest, a summer path towards that previously announced end which seems inevitable but that nobody wants to accept²⁰.

The work reflects a very common conflict throughout Spain derived from the fact that the owner of the land decides to rent the land that the Solé family uses to cultivate to set up a solar panel park. This ends the way of life and subsistence of the family²¹. The challenge of the energy transition affects a large number of families in Spain, since they are forced to transform their way of life lacking

¹⁹ Belén Ramírez, “¿Vale la pena la energía eólica? Ventajas y desventajas de la energía eólica,” *Aprende Institute*, s/f, <https://aprende.com/blog/oficios/energia-eolica/ventajas-y-desventajas-de-la-energia-eolica/>

²⁰ Arturo Tena, “Alcarràs: la gran película que planta semilla colectiva,” *Cine con Ñ*, 4 julio, 2023, <https://cineconn.es/alcarras-pelicula-critica-carla-simon-semilla/>

²¹ José Cano, “Los otros “Alcarràs”: el reto de la transición energética en la España rural,” *El Español*, 30 mayo 2022, https://www.elespanol.com/enclave-ods/historias/20220530/alcarras-reto-transicion-energetica-espana-rural/675932418_0.html

government aid to undertake these changes without losing everything they own.

The film is presented as a reflection on tradition and change, and how two different perspectives are confronted so that human beings can continue to evolve. Solar energy is also necessary and Spain being one of the sunniest countries in Europe can play a relevant position in the ecological transition. Tradition in many cases is an example of sustainability, but world conditions demand change and, probably, some components of traditional ways of doing will probably suffer a crossroads that will force them to modernize or become extinct.

The contribution of Alcarràs to education for sustainability

In the same way we did in the previous section, direct relationships are established between the themes addressed by *Alcarràs* and the SDGs, which consolidate the potential of design and educational intervention for sustainability through the film:

- *Health and well-being* are present transversally in the film. The situation that triggers the conflict has emotional and psychological consequences for the whole family, which experiences a roller coaster of emotions and sensations during the summer of the last harvest.
- *Affordable and non-polluting energy* sometimes has unwanted consequences for families and for thousands of people who see their way of life threatened by the advent of non-polluting energy, as we have already mentioned in *As Bestas*. The challenge of the energy transition is another dilemma with many edges that requires a holistic perspective to try to avoid the generation of new conflicts.
- The way of life of the farming families and the representation of the problems they face with this new world order give a good account through the film of the need to ensure the promotion of *decent work and economic growth*, with policies that promote the redistribution of wealth.
- *The sustainable cities and communities* goal is present in the film because the countryside is the main source of supply for the city, be it food or energy. It is the lives of rural communities that experience changes and alterations due to the actions that urban societies undertake in favor of sustainability.
- *Responsible production and consumption* fully touches the history of the Solé family, both in terms of agricultural and energy production. It is a paradox to appreciate the testimony of people close to the conflict who confess that these ecologically and sustainably grown products, such as the peach in the town of Alcarràs, are only affordable for the wealthiest pockets.

Alcarràs is a valuable tool in education for sustainability because it deals with topics such as quality agriculture, the advent of renewable energies, the ways of life of families, the ecosocial, economic and environmental transformation and the lives of people who have to accept the consequences generated by action in favor of sustainability. The ability of cinema to stimulate, impact and influence people must be strengthened in the world of screens in which we live, since we make daily use (or abuse) of digital and technological media; nevertheless, the use of the

audiovisual as an educational resource is still far from reaching the desirable quotas.

Conclusions

Undoubtedly, *As Bestas* and *Alcarràs*, are two undeniable examples of the importance that sustainability has taken on in recent years in our societies, in our cultures and in the artistic creation.

Once the links between the films and sustainability have been established and the values contained in each of them were identified to serve as a principle of education for sustainability, the intention is to develop individual educational intervention guides for each of the films. Both films have sequences and moments that we have called “catalysts” which are used when making the educational design to pose complex dilemmas about conflicts that are difficult to resolve for the students. The educational intention is to make them reflect, think, hypothesize and try to anticipate the resolution of the conflicts that, with total certainty, will occur in the lives of many citizens as a consequence of the actions undertaken to achieve a sustainable reality with the aim of not compromising the environment, society and the economy of groups and individuals.

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