

Exemplifying *Umweltlehre* Through One's Own Life A Biography of Jakob von Uexküll by Florian Mildenberger

Review of *Umwelt als Vision: Leben und Werk Jakob von Uexkülls (1864–1944)*, by Florian Mildenberger Stuttgart, Franz Steiner Verlag, 2007, 320 pages

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Jakob von Uexküll was a well-known author in the German biological and philosophical circles in the first decades of the 20th century. His work influenced Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger, Ludwig von Bertalanffy and Konrad Lorenz, among many others. However, *tempora mutantur*, after the Modern Synthesis in biology, his texts became non-understandable in the framework of the mainstream discourse for several decades. But what is fascinating is that in 1987 he is mentioned as one out of 8 major classics of semiotics (see T. von Uexküll 1987; in Krampen et al. 1987), and in 2001, as one out of 50 major classics of biology of all times (see Hassenstein 2001, in Jahn and Schmitt 2001). Meanwhile, many minds got infected by Uexküll's *Theoretische Biologie*—Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gilles Deleuze, René Thom (not to mention those who in many different fields have used some of his concepts—Ortega y Gasset, Giorgio Agamben, Noam Chomsky, Arne Næss),... and above all, Thomas A. Sebeok.

In 2007, Florian Mildenberger has published a monograph on the life and work of Jakob von Uexküll, entitled *Umwelt als Vision: Leben und Werk Jakob von Uexkülls (1864–1944)*. It is the first full scientific biography written about Uexküll, predated just by Mildenberger's own professorial dissertation (2005).¹ The monograph differs from previous dissertations written on Uexküll (among these, Chien 2005; Helbach 1989; Schmidt 1980) in its comprehensive interweaving of the chronologically ordered biographical data and the development of Uexküll's and his contemporary scientific ideas and ideologies.

¹The structure and content of Mildenberger's dissertation (2005) differ from the biography largely because a more pronounced medicine historical perspective was adopted in the dissertation.

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The rise in the number of articles published on Uexküll in the recent decade has been significant (two journals have issued a separate volume on Uexküll (*Semiotica* vol. 134 (1/4), 2001, and *Sign Systems Studies* vol. 32(1/2), 2004; see also an extensive bibliography in Kull 2001). On the background of such a number of publications concentrating either on one or the other aspect of Uexküll's work, the value of Mildenerger's monograph lies above all in the complex observation of all phases in the development of Uexküll's political, scientific, social and philosophical thought. And there are not few of them! Hundreds of threads are leading from the works of Uexküll to their selective instrumentalisation by people from various disciplines and ideologies, who have used some parts of Uexküll's works while discarding almost all the rest. To bring just a few examples from the later period of Uexküll's life, the beginning of 1940's, we see Konrad Lorenz using the Umwelt concept for the formative age of animals reinterpreted in the context of his instinct theory, and Ludwig von Bertalanffy, who regarded the mechanicism-vitalism debate as pointless, appreciating Uexküll as an author beyond the opposition. At the same time some scientists still respected him for his early works in the zoological research institute in Naples, while most of the authors found "(neo)vitalism" to be a good enough category under which Uexküll could be placed—paradoxically, both with negative and positive emphasis (cf. Ernst Cassirer, Viktor von Weizsäcker, Nicolai Hartmann) (Mildenerger 2007a: 185, 199–202). Relying mainly on primary sources (many of which come from German, Austrian, Estonian, and Swedish archives), Mildenerger observes the variety of Uexküll's trains of thought and the diverging interpretations of Uexküll's theories in their historical sequence, without prioritizing any of those.

The key-sentence of the monograph can be found in the conclusion, where Mildenerger (2007a: 241) states that: "Jakob von Uexküll exemplified Umweltlehre through his own life".² This statement is guiding Mildenerger's approach throughout the text. By paying significant attention to how the changes in Uexküll's own thoughts were influenced by the social and political perturbations surrounding him, what today may look like odd course-changes in Uexküll's ideas gain a sound standing. Historical context is certainly not an argument in itself and does not serve as a means by which to condemn or exculpate anyone. Mildenerger's work demonstrates that the sequential logic that is demanded in history cannot always be used when the life and work of a person are in question. Here the controversies in one's ideas or deeds may serve as the most essential junctions of one's individual development. We could therefore conclude that Mildenerger is introducing some of the principles of *Umweltlehre* into the science-history writing itself. The subject is not treated as an independent and fixed matter, as being essentially this or that. Neither is the subject handled as a constellation of the *Zeitgeist*. What we get is an impression of a person who has a home, a family, colleagues, interests and enemies, all of which contribute to his specific way of existence, while retaining at the same time the subjectivity of the person under observation.

A fact that unfolds from the pages on the reception of Uexküll, is the astonishing rigidity of the scientific categories. One of the most important period in the development of Uexküll's ideas was the time after 1902 at Heidelberg University,

² "Jakob von Uexküll lebte die Umweltlehre vor".

where also Hans Driesch and Otto Cohnheim were working. Although the later interpretations may say that what he started there was the beginning of something new for either cybernetics, biosemiotics or ethology, the choice that Uexküll had at the time was either to stay in the mechanical camp or to follow the vitalist track, a third way being unthinkable, says Mildenerger (2007a: 71). The point, however, as Mildenerger himself repeats several times, is that Uexküll didn't identify himself as a vitalist (see von Uexküll 1908, 1913). Neovitalism, with its set of concepts related to self-organisation, was one of the central views that many of the greatest minds in biology shared at the beginning of the 20th century. And already then, Uexküll, who was supportive of neovitalism, also made a further step to search for (and to formulate) the mechanisms of life's intentionality.³ He succeeded in this by formulating first the revolutionary concept of *Umwelt*, and afterwards the concept of functional cycle as a general mechanism and model for it (the 2nd edition of his "Theoretical Biology", 1928).

Uexküll is certainly not an easy material for a historian. His first period of nationalist ideas (from 1914 to the early 1930's—his politically most active period—when he had contacts with H. S. Chamberlain and connections with the *Deutsche Vaterlandspartei*) was followed by a phase of confrontation with anti-Semitism. Uexküll made a pronouncement, in 1934 in Weimar, where he claimed that the universities should remain untouched by political events, but he was not allowed to end the speech; he denied to give to the *Deutsche Adelsgenossenschaft* a confirmation of his Aryan origin, saying that belonging to the gentry is a matter of self-impression and not of blood; and he tried to influence Hitler, through his Bayeruth contacts, to stop dismissing his Jewish colleagues at Hamburg University (Mildenerger 2007a: 158–160).

His turn from the mechanical-reflex researches to the studies of the self-centred world of marine invertebrates was one of the most significant shifts in his research interests. All those idea-level transformations were accompanied by forced changes of home-countries (from Estonia to Germany to Italy) and home-places and constant fights for scientific positions and research finances, troubles with becoming institutionally affiliated, changes in the circles of friends and enemies.

The last two chapters of Mildenerger's monograph are already post-biographical, concentrating on the fate of Uexküll's research after his death. The absence of a mental heir, on a par with Uexküll's own rank (except for his son Thure perhaps), who would carry on and expand *Umweltlehre*, seemed to lead to the death-blow of Uexküll's research in the two decades following Uexküll's death. By the mid 1960's the name of Uexküll had disappeared from the debates taking place in the natural sciences (Mildenerger 2007a: 229). The Uexküllian meaning of "Umwelt" was forgotten, and the definition of his competitor August Thienemann was used instead. Unexpectedly, step-by-step the name "Uexküll" was re-vitalized again in the works of Thomas A. Sebeok, Thure von Uexküll and Juri Stepanov (the latter is not mentioned in the monograph) in the 1970's, entering everyday semiotic debates by the 1990's.⁴

³ We use the term 'intentionality' here in a generalised sense, covering all forms of functional behavior in the living world, all forms of semiosis, as proposed by J. Hoffmeyer and several other biosemioticians.

⁴ See Sebeok 1979; Kull 2001.

Fig. 1 Uexküll's summer-house in Puhtu, Estonia, where he spent his summers with his family between 1928 and 1939. At this place, he probably wrote most of his book "The Theory of Meaning" (published in 1940). Since 1949, the building belongs to the Puhtu Biological Station



As Mildenerger (2007a: 242) says, his biography “does not answer every question about Uexküll’s (private) life and work”,⁵ but it can be a “building block for a biological history”.⁶ Indeed. There are many interesting points for future research.

One of them, for instance, is Uexküll’s relations to places.⁷ Tallinn, Tartu, Puhtu, Heidelberg, Hamburg, Naples, Capri. Jakob von Uexküll liked seashores. As ecotones, these are very rich in life communities indeed. As a small boy, Jakob spent much time with his aunt Elisabeth von Uexküll in her manor at an Estonian seashore village Virtsu (then called Werder). He went to school in Tallinn (then Reval), the Estonian capital city at the Baltic Sea. When studying in Tartu University, he got as supervisor a zoology professor Maximilian Braun (1850–1930) whose studies focused on animal life of the Baltic Sea, and Jakob accompanied him to research-trips. When in Heidelberg, he used to spend much time in Naples for his experimental research at the biological station. And also later in Jakob von Uexküll’s life, most of the places he chose for a stay, were situated by the sea—Hamburg, Puhtu (Fig. 1), Capri.

Particularly the life and connections in Estonia, and in Capri, may provide more interesting and rich details for further study, since there are still some materials that can add some information to what we find in Mildenerger’s book. Some of these may concern his beloved summer-home Puhtu, in Estonia, where Alexander Keyserlingk (1895–1995) was a curator and also Uexküll’s helper in biological studies. Some others may be found in Capri, where Villa la Guardia has materials not yet included in the biographical studies (see also Gnerre 2007). Mildenerger himself has already added some remarkable findings on the history of ideas as related to Uexküll in his more recent work (Mildenerger 2007b). However, Uexküll’s node in the history of ideas would provide material⁸ for another volume—particularly if the thesis by John Deely (2001, 2004), on Jakob von Uexküll’s importance in the overcoming of Modern philosophy, is taken into account.

⁵ “[...] beantwortet sicher nicht alle Fragen zu Uexkülls (Privat)Leben und Werk”.

⁶ “Baustein zu einer biologischen Geschichte”.

⁷ Cf. also a certain emphasis on places in the biography written by Jakob’s wife Gudrun von Uexküll (1964).

⁸ See for instance Clausberg 2006.

Florian Mildenerger's book is an extraordinary rich source (where each and every statement or detail is carefully supplied with a precise reference) for everybody who wants to understand Uexküll. In order to grasp "Why biosemiotics?" one needs to comprehend Uexküll. Which means that it would be helpful to have the texts (both by Uexküll and about Uexküll) available in several languages (including English).

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