

Jakob von Uexküll Centre, since 1993

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No doubt, great intellectual heritage serves to be studied, repeatedly. Estonian local traditions in valuation of nature and the scientific fields of theoretical biology and semiotics provide a creative context for the principal study areas of Jakob von Uexküll Centre — biosemiotics, ecosemiotics and the philosophy of nature. Roots, schools and different periods of those discourses in Estonia have been analysed elsewhere (Kull 1999; 2001; Maran, Tüür 2001, Sebeok 1998; Sutrop, Kull 1985), in this brief review we focus only on the activities of the Uexküll Centre of the last dozen years. It should also be mentioned that this has been a decade of a new wave of academic contacts between eastern Europe (including Estonia) and western scientific communities. Extensive dialogues between different fields of science about various aspects of nature–culture relations have also taken place throughout this period (about these relations and dialogues in Estonia, see Lehari, Sarapik 2000; Sarapik *et al.* 2002).

Founding. The motives for the founding of Jakob von Uexküll Centre in Tartu included (a) the formation of an international network of biosemiotics in the beginning of 1990s, (b) the need to organize several meetings on semiotic biology, and (c) the lack of any organisation dealing with the heritage of Jakob von Uexküll until that time. The Centre was established on November 16, 1993 by a group of scientists and students in Tartu. Most of the students involved were those attending a course in biosemiotics, which was lectured for the first time at Tartu University in the same fall semester of 1993. The Centre was established as a branch-organisation of Estonian Naturalists' Society, one of the oldest academic societies in the Baltic States. From the beginning until today, Uexküll Centre has been in close contacts with the section of Theoretical Biology of Estonian Naturalists' Society and

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Department of Semiotics of Tartu University. The nominated international committee with advisory function included Thomas A. Sebeok (after whose death Torsten Rütting was elected as a new member), Jesper Hoffmeyer, late Thure von Uexküll, Jakob von Uexküll jr., Peeter Torop, and Kalevi Kull. Everyday activities are maintained by a Board of seven members.

Concurrently with the establishment of the Centre the outstanding environmentalist Jakob von Uexküll jr. became interested in his Estonian roots, making several visits to the University of Tartu and participating in the activities of the just-founded Centre (Uexküll 1994). As a co-operation between Jakob von Uexküll jr. and the Centre, Estonian Renaissance Award was annually given in the years 1993–1997 to persons with serious commitment to rebuild Estonia and to solve the problems Estonia was facing by cultural and academic means. The statute of the award and the overview of the winners' activities have been also published by Uexküll Centre (Tiivel *et al.* 2000).

Archive. One of the Centre's main goals is to keep and maintain Jakob von Uexküll's legacy. The archive-library contains a collection of Uexküll's publications, manuscripts as well as publications about Uexküll, and some of Jakob von Uexküll's personal correspondence (e.g., between Uexküll and F. Brock, H. S. Chamberlain, F. Huth, H. von Keyserling, K. Lorenz). The library also keeps a small number of publications by the contemporaries of Uexküll and works from fields related to Uexküll's studies. The library is open to researchers from Estonia as well as from abroad and the Centre tries to foster and support Uexküll-studies both on local and international level. Many scholars of special interest in study Uexküll-materials have visited the Centre, among them Myrdene Anderson, Sabine Brauckmann, Sergey Chebanov, Tobias Cheung, Jui-Pi Chien, Barend van Heusden, Kari Lager-spetz, Florian Mildenerger, Aldona Pobojevska, Torsten Rütting, Morten Tønnessen, and others. The library has been a great help in the period of preparations of the large special issue of *Semiotica* (vol. 134, 2001): *Jakob von Uexküll: A Paradigm for Biology and Semiotics*, including an Uexküll-bibliography (Kull 2001).

Events and publications. The Centre's activities have also been shaped by orientations towards international science as well as to the local cultural sphere. In co-operation with different academic institutions, Uexküll Centre has organized various seminars, conferences and work-shops. Together with the University of Tartu, Department of Semiotics and Aarhus University the conference on semiotics, social anthropology and phenomenological ethnography "*Uses of Nature — towards an anthropology of the environment*" was held in 1998. The presentations of the conference were published as a collection of articles (see Roepstorff *et al.* 2003). Several international conferences or workshops have taken place in the field of biosemiotics in recent years in Tartu: "*Uexküll and the Living Environment*" (July 7–9,

1999), “*Gatherings in Biosemiotics 2*” (June 14–17, 2002) and “*Cassirer, Lotman, Uexküll — between biology and semiotics of culture*” (May 13, 2004).

Since Jakob von Uexküll was, after all, a theoretical biologist, his Centre should certainly have this field in attention. Accordingly, it has been a co-organizer of Estonian spring schools in theoretical biology, particularly the ones on the topic of “Methodology of life sciences” (1994), “Theory of recognition” (1995), “Languages of life” (1996), “Theory of lie” (2005) (the papers of these meetings being published in the series *Schola Biotheoretica*, vols. 20, 21, 22, 31, accordingly).

At the same time the Centre has also paid attention to the promotion of nature-related discourses in Estonian culture, for instance in the forms of the youth nature photography contest (which has grown by now into the largest contest of nature photography in Estonia), local seminars on culture–nature studies and some translation projects of ecophilosophic literature. On the local academic level one-day spring work-shops (“*Estonian culture and nature*” 2001, “*Staging nature*” 2002, “*Mediated natures*” 2003) and summer outdoor seminars on theoretical biology (Kaplinski 1995) and ecosemiotics have taken place. The favourable place for outdoor events has been the historical Puutu peninsula in western Estonia, where Jakob von Uexküll with his family spent the summers between 1927 and 1939. The former Uexküll’s house in Puutu houses the Puutu Biological Station of the Estonian University of Life Sciences now.

Beginning from 1995, regular seminar series under the general title “*Text and Nature*” have been held together with Estonian Literary Society. The seminars have set an aim to develop discussions between humanities and natural sciences and to provide a common dialogue ground for different perspectives on the role of culture in our understandings of natural phenomena. Different aspects of culture-nature studies e.g textuality of the natural world, communication between humans and animals, representation of nature have been observed. The collected papers of the seminars were published by Estonian Literary Society in 2000 (Maran, Tüür 2000).

Uexküll Centre and Department of Semiotics often share the responsibility for inviting well-known scientists to Tartu in order to vitalise intellectual debate in Estonia and make Tartu the meeting place of different views in culture-nature studies. Among others we have been honoured by the visits of Norwegian eco-philosopher Arne Naess, anthropologist Tim Ingold, semioticans Thure von Uexküll, Thomas Sebeok, Jesper Hoffmeyer, Winfried Nöth and John Deely.

Despite the small number of members and some periods of minor activity, Jakob von Uexküll Centre has continued its activities in order to contribute to the development of biosemiotics on international level. In Estonia our

intention remains to provoke interest in local nature and to discuss its various connections with cultural sphere.

Tartu as the town of Uexküll's student years and Estonia as his birth-country, with what he remained connected throughout his life, has kept not just the memory of Uexküll, but has retained the research fields and his ecological thought in a lively manner. The opening of the Uexküll archive also in Hamburg (in January 2004, organised by Torsten Rütting; see also Rütting 2004) provides a supportive proof for the continuing importance of research on Uexküll's legacy and his place in today's scientific thought.

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