

## REZENSIONEN / BOOK REVIEWS

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Book Review / **Andreas Suchantke**: *Zum Sehen geboren - Wege zu einem vertieften Natur- und Kulturverständnis*. Stuttgart: Verlag Freies Geistesleben 2008

If Waldorf education were a country, then Andreas Suchantke would be one of its national treasures. Or, if not, then he should be. Not only because his work, as teacher and author, is of inestimable value to Waldorf teachers, but also because it transcends the bounds of the Waldorf world, or rather enlarges them to the level of a dialogue on equal terms with any of the world's major disciplines. As such, he is one of an illustrious company, made up of all too small a number of individuals.

Suchantke's latest book, „Zum Sehen geboren - Wege zu einem vertieften Natur- und Kulturverständnis“, is part of a rich body of work - comprising a series of books and a large number of articles - written between 1970 and the present. These are the fruits of a long career, first as a high school teacher in Zurich, then as a lecturer at the Institute of Waldorf Education in Witten-Annen, and between-times as an adventurer with an evident desire to gain first-hand experience of as many places in the world as possible. It has been Suchantke's particular distinction to have turned these multifarious travel experiences into books and articles of the first rank, exquisitely written and lavishly illustrated not only with his own photographs, but also with ink drawings of plants, animals and landscapes, all done by his own hand.

If Suchantke was - as the title of his current book states - „born to see“, these drawings are a powerful testimony to his skills in this area of sensory experience. He was not content just to record with a camera (an art form in itself in which he was also highly skilled), but took the immense trouble to grace the pages of his books with these lovingly fashioned illustrations. They thus lend his books a special quality that is a perfect complement to the equally care-crafted text. Drawing the phenomena of nature was an integral part of Suchantke's whole discipline of observation and textual characterisation. It is one thing to „see“, but quite another to get the seen into words that enable a reader to feel party to it, while at the same time remaining true to the text's scientific intentions. This is

something of which Andreas Suchantke is a master - he has no peer that I know of - and this mastery shows as much in this latest book as it did in any of his others.

The contents of this book span the whole of his career. There are a number of chapters here on subjects that are dealt with at much greater length in earlier works. Hence on one level this book could serve as a useful introduction to Suchantke's work for those who have never encountered it before. But there are also an equal number of articles which here have been collected together for the first time (two of them actually appeared together in English<sup>1</sup> prior to this), and these give ample testimony to Suchantke's powers in reading and formulating the language of nature.

The book opens with a series of pedagogical articles based on his own experience as a high school geography and life science teacher. Any teacher in doubt as to whether a phenomenological approach will work in these subjects, or wishing to attempt such a thing and not knowing where or whether to start, could profit much from reading them. They are a demonstration of how far you can go just by observing something so seemingly simple as a map of the world. Using this as a starting point, Suchantke demonstrates how a thoroughgoing description of the dynamic topology of the earth's land masses and oceans leads quite organically to an initial understanding of the world's cultural currents. The picture is painted in broad phenomenological strokes, underscored with telling details. Taken together, these opening articles constitute an object lesson in wholistic methodology.

That the subsequent chapters of the book are not expressly pedagogical in intent, however, in no way diminishes their pedagogical value. Above all, a teacher must be a broadly cultured individual, he must have acquired what in German is called „Bildung“, if his style of teaching is not to be too narrowly specialised. These articles of Suchantke's will contribute to the deepening and enlivening of a teacher's cultural education in a number of significant ways (and by „teacher“ I do not mean specifically geography and biology teachers - any teacher's pedagogical instincts will be sharpened, enriched and strengthened by reading this book).

The first way relates to the fact that they are written like high-class National Geographic articles (with better illustrations), each one giving a comprehensive description of a particular part of the world. Thus in these pages we are taken on vivid tours of the S. American rainforest, New Zealand, Sri Lanka, Siberia, the East African savanna and Palestine. As an exercise

1. Andreas Suchantke: „Eco-geography“, Lindisfarne 2001

simply in enlarging one's knowledge of different places this is worthwhile, but the book does much more than that.

This writer is not just a geographical journalist. He has dedicated his life to schooling himself in the Goethean method of observing nature in such a way that the phenomena speak for themselves. As a result, his recounting of the features of a country or landscape are always a means towards revealing the formative processes - geological, ecological, cultural - that are thus expressed. So this is a second way the reader finds his or her horizons being widened by these writings - ultimately it is an expansion of consciousness. Any local phenomenon will be read for what it reveals of the larger context in which it is embedded. What, for instance, is expressed in the fact that a species of Gentian is to be found in the Alps of New Zealand? From an initial description of this phenomenon you find yourself imaginatively involved in complex bio-geographical processes that set New Zealand in an earth-wide context that makes sense not only of its flora and fauna, but also of its physical shape. When Suchantke then begins to speak of "formative motifs" that certain upland areas of New Zealand have in common with places in the Andes, we begin to experience what it means to think in "flexible concepts" [bewegliche Begriffe], and to appreciate that a true understanding of evolution is only possible by developing such a style of thinking. Reading Suchantke is a training in such thinking.

The examples of such moments in this book could be multiplied a hundred-fold, but it is when the context expands to include the contribution of human culture to the formative processes at work in shaping the face and fate of the planet that the deepest level of Suchantke's work is reached. His intellect and vision are able to encompass, face up to, and cast light upon such profound subjects as the relation between the earth's great rift valleys and the history of human consciousness, or the fate of the tropical rainforest and its significance for human culture, to name but two. In the latter article, having clearly shown that there were (are) those who could sustainably cultivate the rainforest, he laments that while we cannot return to the mentality of the "noble savage" and that it would indeed be hopelessly romantic to attempt to do so, what we need is the modern scientific equivalent of this: a goetheanistic ecology.

Nothing in Suchantke's own work epitomises such a goetheanistic ecology more definitively than his key insight - a discovery of which he is justly proud and which figures in several of the articles here - concerning the savanna. This book contains several evocative descriptions of what he calls "the cultural savanna" [Kultursavanne] - he may even have coined the term. He uses it to designate the most widely manifest form of sustainable co-operation between culture and nature. This is not an analogy nor an imitation, but rather a cultural recapitulation or repeated re-creation of an archetypal form, the form of humanity's primordial homeland, that we have carried with us wherever we have settled. Using examples of anthropogenic landscapes in a range of different countries, from Spain to the Middle East to the Amazonian rainforest,

he makes the universal expression of this cultural archetype abundantly clear. With this he has established an important principle, arrived at goetheanistically, which substantiates the claims of ecologists (eg. Eugene Odum) that a healthy cultural landscape should correspond not to the pioneer or the climax phase of an ecological succession, but to the middle phase, i.e. the one which is most savanna-like, and where there is a high degree of bio-diversity. Suchantke also justifies the principle by showing how it relates to the evolutionary process of juvenilisation. This process (space precludes explaining it), as it appears in the living form of both plants and animals is a cornerstone of the goethean view of evolution, and this book provides a useful introduction to this crucial concept.

The book is also replete with examples of how human beings have failed to find the balance of culture and nature represented by the cultural savanna, and in this context the author lavishes praise upon Rachel Carson, the author of "Silent Spring", as one of the great ecological pioneers, who spoke out against the depredations of modern agriculture. While Rachel Carson is certainly worthy of his praise and, as he says, deserves to be emulated rather than forgotten, he himself, in his dedicated devotion to the natural world, must surely rank with her, even though he has never enjoyed the same kind of renown. But his message is ultimately much more radical than hers, and its modernity and urgency places him, as I see it, shoulder to shoulder with eco-warriors like Wes Jackson and Vandana Shiva.

In all this, however, we must not forget that Andreas Suchantke is first and foremost a teacher. And not only that. A teacher who can teach teachers: a teachers' teacher. The English poet William Wordsworth regarded nature as "the soul of all [his] moral being". If a teacher is to develop moral imagination, the place to look for it is in Suchantke's vividly observed and finely crafted readings in the book of nature. To read him is to learn, irrevocably, that the senses can be trusted to yield a veridical experience of the natural world. It is to undergo a training in wholistic thinking, to be able to lavish loving attention on sensory details, while seeing them as expressions of a greater context. It is to know the names of the phenomena, but to see past them to the super-ordinate whole that animates them. This is the kind of knowledge that makes teachers.