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Johann Georg Sulzer – A Forgotten Father of Environmental Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT. The main topic of the paper will be an introduction and analysis of Johann Georg Sulzer's views as described in his *Dialogues on the Beauty of Nature* (*Unterredungen über die Schönheit der Natur*, 1750), situating it within the body of Sulzer's work, and highlight the theme of the aesthetic appreciation of nature which appears, albeit in a variety of contexts, throughout Sulzer's works. From today's perspective, Sulzer's contribution is intriguing when considered in relation to the ideas of Enlightenment natural philosophy but also because of similarities between Sulzer's approach, based on the knowledge of environmental sciences, and Carlson's environmental aesthetics.

1. Introduction

Johann Georg Sulzer, the author of *Allgemeine Theorie der Schönen Künste* (1771–1774), became a founding figure in aesthetics and the general theory of the fine arts in the Age of Enlightenment. Although he is usually cited in relation to his *Allgemeine Theorie*, he also wrote the nearly forgotten *Dialogues on the Beauty of Nature*, *Unterredungen über die Schönheit der Natur*, published in 1750 – the same year as Baumgarten's *Aesthetica*.

In *Unterredungen*, Sulzer argues the necessity of an aesthetics of nature, and he recounts the experience he had gained by that time as a scientist and admirer of nature's beauty. Drawing on certain themes from his early work, *Versuch einiger Moralischen Betrachtungen*

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über die Werke der Natur (1745),⁸¹ he develops his argumentation on why it is essential to pay attention to nature's aesthetic qualities and what forms the foundations of nature's beauty.

However, unlike, for instance, Burke or Kant, Sulzer does not build his arguments on the subjective experience of nature, and he does not stray from traditional ideas linking beauty with symmetry or usefulness. Instead, Sulzer tries to build on the knowledge of the sciences. According to him, it is this type of knowledge that leads to a higher and "true" appreciation of nature's beauty. Such a view makes Sulzer an interesting predecessor to Carlson's environmental aesthetics. But because Sulzer's *Unterredungen* has been mostly forgotten today, his contribution in this area has been left out of the discourse in the 20th century. Even in studies devoted to Sulzer's work, there are almost no references to his *Unterredungen*.⁸²

The primary aim of this article is to (re)introduce Sulzer's *Unterredungen*, situating it within the body of his work, and to analyze and highlight the aesthetics-of-nature theme which appears, albeit in a variety of contexts, throughout Sulzer's writings. Additionally, from today's perspective, his contribution is intriguing when considered in relation to the ideas of Enlightenment natural philosophy. A secondary aim of the article is to point out certain similarities between Sulzer's argumentation and the argumentation of Carlson's environmental aesthetics – and to draw attention to the potential problems resulting from relying on an approach which bases aesthetic appreciation of nature on knowledge of the sciences.

2. Aesthetic Aspects of Nature in Sulzer's *Dialogues on the Beauty of Nature*

As a whole, Sulzer's *Unterredungen* is a kind of pedagogical introduction to admiring nature. It is written as a dialogue in which one friend, Eukrates, tries to turn the other friend, Charites, into a lover and admirer of nature (Sulzer, 1971, p. 8)⁸³. At the very beginning, Sulzer declares the fundamental importance of our perception (*Empfindungen*) of nature, especially of "free" nature (Ibid., p. 10) – even though, as the description of the surroundings suggests, the dialogue

⁸¹ And also focusing on nature and the mountains which were at that time becoming a subject of aesthetic interest (Sulzer, 1743, 1746).

⁸² See the extensive co-authored monograph (Grunert, F., Stiening, G., 2011). (But Tumarkin at least occasionally deals with Sulzer's aesthetics of nature, Tumarkin, 1933).

⁸³ I am citing this new modern edition which is a reprint of the second edition of Sulzer's work from 1770. Nevertheless, this second edition differs from the first one practically just by a slight shift in the typesetting template. I prefer to use the original German text before the English translation (Sulzer, 2005), based also on the 1770 reissue of these work.

takes place in a cultural landscape. Moreover, the dialogue begins by Eukrates describing the beauty of nature as a painting (*Gemälde*).⁸⁴ What is being appreciated is the variety and variability of the colors, the forms, and the light – it is not, however, only the harmony and beauty of the infinite multiplicity of colors and shapes – it is also their ordering, and the order as a whole (*die Ganze Anordnung*) (Ibid., p. 9). Therefore, when I speak of Sulzer’s work as anticipating, in certain respects, for example, Hepburn (1963, 1966) or Carlson (e.g., 1976, 1979, 2002), this assertion does not pertain to their efforts to appreciate nature as something that is not like a piece of visual art.

In this, let us say, visible form, Sulzer appreciates especially the type of nature that is in what we might call the classicizing, arcadian, style – free of extremes, with a somewhat rolling terrain, and with wide views into a lovely and diverse cultural landscape (Sulzer, 1971, pp. 3, 17). This landscape resembles ancient groves or caves where, as Sulzer observes, “nymphs might live” (p. 18).⁸⁵ At other times the landscape is composed like a park (the only concrete example that is mentioned are the Sanssouci gardens in Potsdam (Ibid., p. 17)). As in Rousseau’s work, nature here stands against the city – “the smoke of the city” (Ibid., p. 33)⁸⁶ is explicitly described. In other passages, Sulzer refers to those who live in large cities and at courts, and do not see nature’s beauty (Ibid. p. 73). Sulzer perceives in nature primarily kindness (*e Mildigkeit der Natur, milde Natur*, e.g., Ibid. p. 95). And even though, as an aside, he mentions that nature may have also somewhat turbulent aspects, as for instance in the rapids of a stream, Sulzer keeps returning to nature in a more stable, calmer form (Ibid., p. 10-12). This is because our spirit should also be calm and quiet to perceive nature’s beauty. Our mind is usually occupied with various worries, such as politics, filling the mind with unease, which is not only unpleasant but also blinds us to nature’s beauty.

To truly enjoy nature’s most beautiful image (*das sanfteste Bild der Schönheit*), our soul should be free (*freye Seele*), and our spirit should be like the spirit of an innocent child. Sulzer gives the example of rough waters which reflect neither the landscape nor the heavens.

⁸⁴ Sulzer, 1971, p. 8, see also his comparison of the landscape to a painting on p. 19.

⁸⁵ At one point, Sulzer compares the landscape with Thessaly. However, while this is the case in this particular work, Sulzer clearly appreciated a broader range of elements constituting landscape beauty as can be seen, for example, in his travelogues (Sulzer, 1743, 1746, 1780). It should be acknowledged, though, that in the travelogue, Sulzer does not mention his appreciation of nature’s beauty on every page.

⁸⁶ Rousseau’s first *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (*Discours sur les sciences et les arts*) was also published in 1750. Sommer believes that Sulzer was who made “Rousseau’s true spirit” comprehensible to the German people (Sommer, 1892, p. 196).

Only calm waters create “a beautiful painting”. In this way, pure images of nature are “painted” only on quiet souls (Ibid. s. 12).

Despite his fascination with scenic beauty – or, as Carlson would say, his appreciation of nature through the *landscape model* (Carlson, 1979) – Sulzer’s aesthetic appreciation of nature is not limited merely to its visual qualities. It also involves experiencing nature with all the senses – in other words, the “traditionally” (in environmental aesthetics) cited difference between perceiving nature and perceiving works of art. However, Sulzer does not dwell much on the involvement of the other senses. He places more importance on other aspects.

When we appreciate a painting, we do not simply assess the colors – we assess, as well, the skilful selection and interconnection of all the parts, and the relation of the proportions of each part to the whole. And it is the same when we appreciate nature, which offers myriad of beautiful and harmonious shapes. And each harmonious connection of the parts, of the proportions, and the perspectives, as well as of the individual organisms (Sulzer, 1971, pp. 16-17) is according to some special rules. And so the higher kinds of beauty arise from “proportions, harmony, order, and wisdom” (Ibid., p. 99).

For Sulzer, nature is primarily a work of the Creator. The beauty that attracts us to nature – these are “the rays of the expression of the original beauty”. The beauty that we experience through perceiving color, light, and shadow, and the forms of nature that can be perceived by our senses is only the lower level of beauty. Our goal is to discover the hidden, deeper level of beauty – and this must be discovered by our spirit. (Ibid., pp. 14-15).

Even though Sulzer talks mainly about a lower and a higher type of beauty in general, at one point he divides beauty into three levels (Ibid., p. 99), or three kinds of recipients. The first kind are the lowest, or shallowest, recipients who perceive only the simple or sensual types of beauty and enjoy only things that are novel, unexpected, and wonderful.

The second kind are deeper recipients who especially enjoy the type of beauty that springs from proportion and order (*aus der Proportion und Ordnung*). But for the third, the deepest kind of recipients, the most limitless joy flows from examining the hidden art and wisdom of nature (*verborgene Kunst und Weisheit*) (Ibid., pp. 99-100).⁸⁷

However, these second and third levels of beauty often merge or overlap in Sulzer’s

⁸⁷ These three levels of beauty may, in part, be an early formulation of Sulzer’s later triad, a three-point scale distinguishing the concepts of *Stoff-Form-Harmonie*.

work – examining the hidden art and wisdom leads to discovering order and proportional relations, and vice versa. The essential type of nature, then, is primarily the so-called “hidden” nature – the source of our joy in perceiving the relationships between the parts and the proportions of the parts in relation to the whole, and in reflecting on the rules of Creation which we as observers discover (Ibid. p. 16).

Even though in his later, more important, works Sulzer deals primarily with the fine arts, in *Unterredungen* he considers the main source of beauty to be nature – after all, nature is God’s work. In this respect, Sulzer refers to Hutcheson and his division of beauty into two types: absolute beauty, which lies in nature, and relative beauty, which lies in art (Ibid., p. 23). When, in *Unterredungen*, Charites tries to argue that, for instance, a statue made by a skilful master is more inventive and better proportioned than plants or animals, Eukrates points out that artists, too, take all the proportions from nature. Human art is only an infinitely tiny part of nature. There is nothing in works of art that is not already present in nature (Ibid., p. 24-26).

Nature, in essence, is absolutely harmonious (*vollkommen harmonisch*), and all forms are interconnected (*einaner verbunden*) (Ibid., p. 26). It seems as quite a common idea, but, surprisingly, Sulzer understands this interconnection of forms mostly taxonomically, cladistically, and hierarchically.

He does not so much analyze the individual structural and formal aspects of animal or plant anatomy (that would be an outer level). Rather, he focuses on the integration of the individual species into the system (from which the outer anatomical differences are derived) – in other words, on the integration of the individual species into the hidden, and deeper, harmony. Sulzer begins his discussion of this ordering within the *hidden* nature mainly by highlighting the ingenious organization of this type of nature into classes or families each of which has its own particular, yet always harmonious, proportions and sizes. Each class or family has its own characteristics, its particular place of occurrence, and its special way of life. These related families form small *republics*, and they together then form one large state or even a *monarchy* (Ibid., p. 19-22). When using the term republic in connection with organisms (*die Pflanzen-Republik*), Sulzer refers to the Swiss natural scientist and poet Albrecht Haller, a well-known author of the poetic composition *Alpen* (1732).

In this context, Sulzer offers more detailed examples of various species of gentians, and also of various species of animals (Ibid., pp. 20-21). He does not borrow quite all of the

taxonomical groups from Linné's *Systema naturae*,⁸⁸ and so his use of terms referring to political structures is directed toward highlighting the unified laws within each small state, each republic, and each kingdom. Within the "monarchy" of plants, the same laws apply to oaks as to grasses or tulips. For instance, all plants have the same basic parts, whether it be a hyssop or a cedar of Lebanon. And it is the same for animals, etc. (e.g., *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56).

Each of the three main parts – state, republic, and kingdom – of nature (today we distinguish six kingdoms) is then further divided into other sub-groups. Each sub-group has additional specific rules, its particular types of transformation of the basic patterns, and its own special organization of relationships and setting of proportions (*Ibid.*, p. 23). What richness of not only forms but also rules and transformations of the rules!

However, the relationships between individual taxa, "states", and families of the infinite monarchy (*eine unermessliche Monarchie*) are, of course, not only hierarchical – they are interconnected and infinitely varied. Each animal and plant has its own needs and its own tendencies. Here Sulzer points to (what we would in modern terms call) diverse food chains as well as the particular specializations and strategies of aquatic animals. These specializations and strategies then influence the animals' morphology, the proportions of their bodies – for instance depending on whether they hunt for food above or underwater, and how they move in water (*Ibid.*, pp. 57-59). In these passages, Sulzer refers to the study of taxonomy, which was flourishing at the time. But he draws also on the study of the structural elements of plant and animal organisms, which was soon to develop into classical morphology, and on the paradigmatic and comparative study of body planes, which would fascinate upcoming generations of natural scientists – much like issues regarding development in terms of ontogenesis and species evolution. Sulzer's thoughts on the interconnections of the species and on the species' varied relations with the environment then foreshadow the biological discipline of ecology.

Simultaneously, the differences separating one species from another are practically unnoticeable. Everything forms a harmonious whole (*Ibid.*, p. 26). This whole is hierarchical because everything is organized into one long continual chain. We find here the popular and very traditional idea of *scala naturae*, an idea that was widely shared in Sulzer's time. Sulzer's

⁸⁸ Sulzer borrows from Linné only classes, and does not write about kingdoms, orders and genera. At the same time, Linné did not use the term family. But this term had been used since the Seventeenth century – *famille* was used as a French equivalent of the Latin *ordo*.

influences, such as Leibniz, often mention this idea. The beauty of creation is based, among other things, on this so-called Chain, or Ladder (*Kette*) of Creation (see Lovejoy, 1960), from the simplest creatures to the most complex ones – from inanimate earth to plants, and up to animals and humans, in a totally uninterrupted, continual line, with almost invisible steps from one species to another, from the lowest to the highest (Sulzer, 1971, pp. 26-27, 75, 87, 133). Humans, and the human body, are at the top – humans are the highest and also most beautiful (Ibid. p. 25).⁸⁹ All species fit together, build on one another, and not a single species may be taken out. If even one single species were to be taken out, all of nature would eventually die out (Ibid., p. 95).

However, such insights, like those regarding proper proportions, will not be obvious to everyone who observes nature. Those who want to see and experience higher joy from nature's beauty must have knowledge and must be taught, especially about the sciences (*Unterredungen* has been quoted by many more natural scientists than artists or philosophers). One's understanding of proper proportions and one's knowledge of nature is then applied also when perceiving works of art – those who do not know what the beautiful proportions of the human body are do not experience joy from the most beautiful of statues, either. (But Sulzer does not specify here WHAT such beautiful and proper proportions are) (Ibid., pp. 31-32).⁹⁰ Amazement at the beauty and ordering of nature can lead all the way to religious ecstasy – nature is holy, a sanctuary.

It is not only the ordering of the individual species into *Scala naturae* that is beautiful and admirable about nature, and that inspires thoughts about the relationship between nature's beauty and human art. Nature's beauty lies also in the inner workings of each species; or in other words, their *design*. In this, too, nature is, primarily, a model for art. In fact, art and technology are nothing else but imitations of nature (Ibid., pp. 38-40). Sulzer here elaborates on and then compares works of nature with works of technology. For him, organisms are, at a certain level, machines that significantly surpass the works of human art. He talks in this context about the famous Vaucanson's duck (Ibid., p. 39-40).

In Sulzer's times, the metaphor of an organism as a mechanism was one of the basic approaches to thinking about live bodies. However, it must be said that Sulzer does not use this

⁸⁹ Compare with *Allgemeine Theorie*, the term *Natur* (Sulzer, 1994, p. 508).

⁹⁰ Sulzer does not respect Haller, the botanist, any less than Haller, the poet.

metaphor altogether consistently. Actually, we could say that in Sulzer's work, there appear echoes of contemporary debates about and disagreements between mechanicism and vitalism. On the one hand, Sulzer at times talks about animals as machines. For instance, at one point, animals are for him something like chemical machines in which nature cooks and mixes everything, *herself* (Ibid., p. 96). At another point, he observes that a plant is, undoubtedly, a beautiful machine (Ibid., p. 45). He also writes about all organisms as machines in his later work, *Theorie der angenehmen und unangenehmen Empfindungen* (Sulzer 1762, p. 74).

On the other hand, in other passages Sulzer directly contradicts Descartes, mentioning him by name and asserting that, in fact, animals are not mere machines. A real duck is alive, Sulzer says, while Vaucanson's duck is, like all machines, dead. To move, machines need power coming in from outside, while live animals and plants do not. Machines cannot repair themselves, while organisms have the ability to heal, and so on (Sulzer, 1971, p. 42).

Sulzer then offers an idea which is, to a certain degree, a compromise solution, and which is, actually, one of the central themes in Leibniz's *Monadology* (*La Monadologie*, 1714, even though Sulzer does not cite Leibniz here). While human machines can be disassembled into parts that cannot be further divided, with organisms, it is different. The view through the microscope had shown that each organism-mechanism is composed of other mechanisms, and those of other mechanisms, etc. Of course, such fascinating ordering inspires further feelings of beauty and strong emotion (Ibid., pp. 44-49).

Not only does the microscope reveal the microcosm, the telescope shows us the amazing order of the macrocosm. And so we find here a comparison of the works of nature and art which is similar to the comparison offered in Hepburn's ground-breaking article (Hepburn, 1963, 1966). As Hepburn suggested, in nature, we experience aesthetic appreciation also when we change the scale – and this view, too, broadens our experience of nature; in contrast, a view into the microstructure of the painter's canvas does not.

In other respects, quite logically following on the idea of nature's ideal order, Sulzer retains (the basically Aristotelian) idea of nature's complete purposefulness. Everything is built purposefully within each part, and, viewed from outside, these parts together then create a beautiful form (*schöne Gestalt*).

Of course, the whole is not comprised by only animate organisms, but also by so-called inanimate elements – water, fire, soil, minerals – everything forming a wisely ordered and,

mainly, interconnected whole (Sulzer, 1971, p. 62, see also pp. 95-100). And not just at the level of Earth, but also within the position of Earth among the other planets. Additionally, Earth has a thoroughly balanced climate and temperature conditions, and even a small deviation could kill everything that is alive (Ibid., pp. 62-65).

Sulzer's work often emphasizes the whole, and in this, we can perhaps see a parallel with a much later text by Hepburn (1966), which also examines in some detail the common theme of feeling the unity of nature. This feeling includes a broad scale of aesthetic experiences in nature understood as unity, up to the ideal of oneness with nature (Sulzer, 1971, pp. 199–203).

Everything is so well ordered that we even cannot conceive of a different kind of order (Ibid., p. 76). This harmony or perfection is not only in the whole, it is also in each part (Ibid., p. 89). Everything is perfect and presents the best variant – as Hans Wili (1945, p. 12) pointed out, we can see here the influence of Leibniz's pre-stabilized harmony.

A certain theoretical problem is presented by dysmorphology, that is, by monsters, to whom natural scientists had paid much attention since the Renaissance and who, like venomous animals and poisonous plants, would be counter-examples of the general harmony. However, according to Sulzer, monsters develop in only totally minimal numbers, and venomous animals have their place in nature. Moreover, these animals always have warning coloration; today we would say that they are aposematic. (Sulzer, 1971, pp. 89-91).

Nature influences us also by being always novel and unexpected. In fact, we are constantly astonished by it. Let us look at how many interesting elements there are in the mineral world – such amazing minerals, luminescent substances, or fossils found in the highest mountains. And how much more there is in the plant world,⁹¹ and the animal world⁹² (Ibid., pp. 118-122).

In the conclusion of the dialogue in *Unterredungen*, Sulzer summarizes or lists the reasons to admire nature. While nature and nature's beauty inspire our imagination,⁹³ observing nature elevates also our spirit (p. 131, 132) and leads us to the Creator. Experiencing “the

⁹¹ At more length, Sulzer here deals with plant propagation and sexuality, with interesting ways of seed transfer, and with exotic plants (1971, pp. 106-111).

⁹² In particular, Sulzer discusses corals, the amazing transformations and social life of insects, as well as beaver communities and constructions (Ibid., pp. 111-124).

⁹³ “meine Einbildungskraft davon ganz erhitzt war,” Ibid., pp. 125, compare with Addison's *Pleasures of Imagination* (1712) – nature always offering something novel and unexpected, more than art (Addison, 1976).

beauty of nature [is] the quickest and surest way to persuade people of the existence of the highest being” (*hoehern Wesens*, p. 129). We find a similar motif in other texts that deal with nature’s beauty, for instance in Shaftesbury’s *The Moralists* (1709). As Sulzer, referring to Plato’s recommendation, puts it, nature educates the spirit, and humans should not turn away from it (1971, p. 132). By studying nature, we try to understand the intentions of the Ruler of the world, nature can also heal the spirit and teach the heart. And when we observe the order of nature, our moral sense develops (*Moralische Geschmack*). Nature offers both pleasure and learning, and we should send our children to the school of nature (*Ibid.*, p. 133-140).

3. The Aesthetics of Nature in Sulzer’s Later Works – Between Landscape Painting and the Picturesque

In his later writings, Sulzer focuses on issues other than nature’s beauty, but this theme continues to appear from time to time. In Sulzer’s main, and best-known, work, *Allgemeine Theorie der Schönen Künste*, an extensive dictionary of terms from the fields of fine arts and aesthetics, there are several entries that deal with aesthetic appreciation of nature and with nature in relation to art – even though most of the entries in this dictionary, of course, concentrate on art as such. Nevertheless, the entry *Nature* is interesting in itself. At the very beginning, Sulzer properly points out the various meanings of this term, some of which are so broad in certain respects that, essentially, nature is seen as encompassing human works, and works of art thus also are works of nature (Sulzer, 1994, III, p. 507). In the narrower definitions, too, “the theory of art is nothing but a system of rules that have been obtained through exact observation of the ways/methods of nature” (*Ibid.*, p. 507). And Sulzer repeats here his view of nature as a teacher of the artist and as a source of highest wisdom. For the artist, nature is a reservoir, a magazine of subject matter. It is a source of not only an infinite multitude of outer forms, but also of the deeper rules and principles according to which the outer forms are made. A work of art then does not need to be a direct imitation of some place, object, or phenomenon that we can perceive by our senses. In a work of art, nature can also be portrayed through the artist’s creative power and imagination – specifically for poets, it is through their

Dichtungskraft.⁹⁴

Other entries in the *Allgemeine Theorie* are related to aesthetic appreciation of nature, too – for instance, *Garden design (Gartenkunst)*, which, according to Sulzer, should be included among fine arts together with architecture (Ibid., II, p. 229). Here, again, nature is seen as the most perfect of gardeners. The entry *Landscape (Landschaft)* also expresses Sulzer's belief that almost everyone enjoys beautiful views (*Wohlgefallen an schönen Aussichten*). Sulzer again emphasizes the huge, even infinite variety of colors and forms that landscapes offer to our senses (Ibid. III, pp. 145-154).⁹⁵ Nevertheless, it is clear that for Sulzer, landscape is not in any way an exclusive or dominant form of encountering nature, and neither is it an invalid form of such encountering (as Carlson was to criticize later). As he did in his *Unterredungen*, Sulzer here avoids any thematization of the difference of the perceived whole, the issue of nature's unity or disunity, and the relation to the whole. This is because Sulzer's primary focus is on the painted landscape. As was common at the time, Sulzer (citing Hagedorn) distinguishes two types of landscape, the heroic and the pastoral. But Sulzer also adds another distinction which was not so usual back then, between the closed (*gesperrten*) and the open landscape – with the open landscape offering views into the far distance (Ibid., III, p. 152).

As could be expected at the time, nature and natural motifs are integrated also in the aesthetic category of *The Sublime (Erhabene)*. Even though in this entry Sulzer mainly deals with the sublime in art, he also refers to experiencing the sublime when encountering high mountains, such as when “we cannot look at the majesty of the Alps without admiration,” (Ibid., II, p. 97) and he quotes several times Albrecht Haller's “Alpine” verses. But interestingly, when it comes to the entry *Beauty*, even though Sulzer begins by mentioning the human body as the pinnacle of beauty, the rest of the description of this term does not include many references to nature in the sense of the landscape or living organisms (Ibid., IV, p. 354). The dictionary does not include the term *Picturesque*, the aesthetic term, which is, especially in British theory, connected with aesthetic appreciation of nature, was not yet theoretically much reflected on in Sulzer's times, even though Sulzer's *Allgemeine* does refer to some of Gilpin's works.

⁹⁴ Already in the entry *Natürlichkeit* (Sulzer, 1994, III, p. 511).

⁹⁵ We could borrow Martin Seel's words to say here that “encountering nature as landscape is a totality ... of possibilities” (Seel, 1991, p. 220).

But this changed in 1793 when Sulzer attempted to more closely define the meaning of the *Picturesque* in the German-speaking cultural sphere. He did so just one year after the publication of Gilpin's *Three Essays* and one year before the publication of Uvedale Price's *An Essay on the Picturesque* and Richard Payne Knight's poem *Landscape*, which started the well-known "picturesque controversy." In his *Über Pittoreske in der Malerei*, published in *Charaktere der vornehmsten Dichter aller Nationen*, (Sulzer, 1793, pp. 31–40) Sulzer explicitly deals with the painter's view of nature and with the influence of visual art on our aesthetic preferences regarding nature. In addition to pastoral terrains and gardens and also the Alps, that he had written about until then, in this work Sulzer includes another type of nature – *the picturesque*. Sulzer defines this term as it was employed at the time in British theory and practice. He considers *Malerisch* to be synonymous with *Pittoresk* and uses *Malerisch* in much of the text.⁹⁶ Like Gilpin, Sulzer mainly works with the phrase "picturesque beauty," *malerische Schönheit*. According to Sulzer, picturesque beauty is a purely visual kind of beauty. An object is called picturesque if it has qualities that are affecting for the person who understands beauty (*auf eine angenehme Weise berührt*). The more other sources of enjoyment are added, the less we can speak of picturesque beauty in the exact sense of the term (Ibid., p. 34). In this way, while many objects, such as rugged rocks, wild caves, or ruins of old walls, may be considered to be something inferior, they are, actually, liked by painters. This is because painters are sensitive to the influence of light and shadow, and of the volumes and forms that these objects and scenes offer. The painter's approach changes our perspective, and we no longer look at the ruin of the old wall only "with the eye to the economy" (*mit einem ökonomischen Auge*), but also "with the eye to the picturesque" (*mit einem malerischen Auge*) (Ibid., p. 35). Interestingly, like British theoreticians of the picturesque, Sulzer points out the phenomenon of movement or the dynamics of the changing view. Objects that do not seem picturesque can become so when viewed from a different perspective or at a different time, due to the change in the lighting from the sun or the moon. Nevertheless, Sulzer still sees the picturesque primarily in works of art – in these works, picturesque beauty is more strongly pronounced and more easily perceived. But even in nature, picturesque beauty can stir our emotions (Ibid., pp. 37-38).

⁹⁶ Even though Sulzer put *Pittoresk* in the title, in much of the body of the text he then used *Malerisch*.

4. Conclusion (and the Problem of Seeing of Nature through the Natural Sciences)

In comparison with Burke's, or also Kant's, work, Sulzer's conception of the aesthetic experience of nature thus represents a rather traditional approach based on deriving nature's beauty from the Creator, believing in nature's objective beauty, and basing aesthetic qualities on such order and on proportions. Despite such a traditional approach, however, Sulzer's views have remained a striking example of a strong interplay between natural philosophy and philosophical aesthetics, a kind of interplay to which many of today's natural scientists and aestheticians may subscribe. But Sulzer's approach, as described in his *Unterredungen*, is unique in that this interplay does not involve only one field drawing inspiration from the other or using it as a supply of examples. In Sulzer's conceptualization, it is a serious attempt at a *true interconnection* of natural philosophy and philosophical aesthetics, and no other thinker since Sulzer's times has accomplished such a degree of interconnection of the two fields. Therefore, regardless of all the references to traditional order, form, mathematization, symmetry, and proportionality, for Sulzer, nature's beauty is based primarily on the beauty of the inner, hidden order – especially on the hierarchical organization of nature in the form of *scala naturae*, a kind of pyramid of the individual organisms, their species, and classes, but also in the form of laws regarding their relationships and regarding the transformation of the forms in different environments.

In Sulzer's work, there appear themes that we find later in the writings of Hepburn, such as the possibility to change the scale toward the microcosm as well as the macrocosm, the repetition of certain structures, the involvement of more than one sense, and the feeling of unity (at various levels). Most significantly, however, in Sulzer's work, there appears a theme that is essential, for example, for Aldo Leopold (1949, 1991) or Allen Carlson (1976, 1978, etc.): for aesthetic appreciation of nature, the hidden principles, connections, relationships, rules, and laws are more important than the forms and colors that can be perceived by the senses. And these hidden laws can be communicated to us mainly through the natural sciences. For Carlson, it is the sciences that should replace the influence of the fine arts in our aesthetic appreciation of nature so that we may perceive nature as nature, not as art. Much has been written on this topic and the argument between cognitivists and non-cognitivist has certainly been interesting

(in a broader context, it did not concern only the sciences, of course).

In this respect, Sulzer's work poses an interesting theoretical question to Carlson and others who want to base our aesthetic experience on knowledge of the sciences: What if this knowledge proves to be wrong in its fundamental theoretical underpinnings, in its *paradigm*? What if, somewhere in a lab corner or out in the field, there is now working away a new, as yet unrecognized, Linné or Darwin who is going to radically shift our existing paradigm (which is, it needs to be said, rather falling apart)?

At a minimum, we live today in a nature that is much changed, and in a paradigm of biology and other sciences that is much different from that in which Sulzer lived. We no longer work with a kind of hierarchical order of all objects and beings in nature, and the idea of the amazing Great Chain of Being has long been surpassed. Not only because of the impact of humans but also in the course of evolution, billions of species have died out without the world completely collapsing. The final disappearance of life will probably not happen very soon, maybe humans will disappear but not life, and certainly not because of "taking out" one species – that has been verified by, sadly, the loss of thousands of species. Nature is not quite so perfect as was traditionally believed. Clearly, the paradigm of biology today is different, and our view of nature is always influenced in part by today's science, whether or not it is also influenced by our aesthetic appreciation of nature. But does this mean that because Sulzer saw nature through the lens of an "incorrect" paradigm, he could not have appreciated nature's beauty "fully"?

Therefore, Sulzer can be considered an important predecessor of the cognitivist branch of environmental aesthetics. However, thanks to being grounded in a significantly older paradigm, he shows that attempts to base aesthetic appreciation of nature on biology or the sciences, in general, may be somewhat problematic – none of which detracts from his *Unterredungen* being a highly interesting and inspiring work. After all, as is clear from the extensive discussions on environmental aesthetics, the cognitivist approach has its legitimate place in the discourse.

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