VU Research Portal

[Review of: P.H. Kahn (junior) (1999) The human relationship with nature: the development of culture]

Wels, H.

published in

Space and Culture
2003

DOI (link to publisher)

[10.1177/1206331202250104](https://doi.org/10.1177/1206331202250104)

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

Wels, H. (2003). [Review of: P.H. Kahn (junior) (1999) The human relationship with nature: the development of culture]. *Space and Culture*, 6(2), 196-198. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1206331202250104>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:

vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

Space and Culture

<http://sac.sagepub.com/>

Book Review: The Human Relationship With Nature: Development and Culture, by Peter H. Kahn, Jr. (1999). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. ISBN 0-262-11240-X (cloth), 0-262-61170-8 (paper). 295 pp.

Harry Wels

Space and Culture 2003 6: 196
DOI: 10.1177/1206331202250104

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://sac.sagepub.com/content/6/2/196>

Published by:

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Space and Culture* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://sac.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://sac.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://sac.sagepub.com/content/6/2/196.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - May 1, 2003

[What is This?](#)

The Human Relationship With Nature: Development and Culture, by Peter H. Kahn, Jr. (1999). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. ISBN 0-262-11240-X (cloth), 0-262-61170-8 (paper). 295 pp.
DOI: 10.1177/1206331202250104

Kahn's book is well organized and neatly structured. It is a scientific yet accessible book and winner of the Outstanding Book Award 2000 on Moral Development and Education from the American Educational Research Association. The book deals with the human relationship with nature, as the title indicates. More specifically, Kahn seeks to understand the development of environmental moral reasoning and children's values through different grades of schooling. Kahn attempts to develop a universally valid perspective on this issue. The empirical research on which the book is based was carried out mainly among children in different grades of primary and secondary schooling and in different parts of the world (the United States, Brazil, and Portugal). Part of the empirical research was also done among the parents of the children (in the United States). Interviewing and statistical analysis of the results are Kahn's primary methodological tools. All this research was done to make suggestions and recommendations for environmental education in the final chapter.

The book is aimed at social scientists in general and psychologists in particular. Kahn starts his argument by elaborating on the term *biophilia*, coined by E. O. Wilson. This concept refers to the hypothesis that there is a fundamental and genetically based "human need and propensity to affiliate with life" (p. 2). Kahn adds his own personal perspective to this debate by arguing convincingly that grounding biophilia in evolutionary biology, as Wilson and others in his wake did, is a "[constraint to] the biophilia construct" because a far too "mechanistic [and thus functional] conception of the human mind is assumed" (p. 3). Kahn therefore suggests that "the human affiliation with nature needs to be investigated in ways that take development of the mind *and culture seriously*" (p. 3, italics added).

All in all, this is as much an ambitious book as it is a scientific book in the positivist sense of the term, seeking to find universally valid answers through questions that are explored locally and traditionally. This particularly classical and strictly positivist approach is at times convincing and consuming, but it is probably also the main reason for my uneasy feelings about this book. Kahn's positivist approach reflects the design and all other aspects of the book and is therefore also apparent in his approach to what nature, and our relation to it, is. Kahn's argument does not seem to be based on a broad exploration of the field of studies done in various disciplines that study our relationship with nature. His argument seems to stem primarily from his opposition to what he calls postmodernism. Kahn builds his own argument by condemning postmodernism for deconstructing nature, almost to the extent that nature appears to be no more than a socially constructed human artifact instead of something "real" and tangible, that is, outside ourselves. He does not allow himself to accept anything from the postmodernist debate about our relationship with nature, or so it seems. Kahn cites nothing from the ongoing debate in which various scientists from different disciplines argue that the distinction between culture and nature is not some kind of binary and mutually exclusive opposition. They state that these concepts are intertwined, that is, that "nature made culture, culture influenced nature, and therefore became culture," as Mavhunga (2002, p. 3) formulated it in his fascinating study on Gonarezhou National Park in Zimbabwe. In his fierce attack, Kahn seems to reduce

(or stereotype) an academic debate of Kuhnian proportions by accusing postmodernists of playing only a “language game.” Apparently, he does not want to recognize or acknowledge, even partly, their contribution to exploring the richness, the paradox, and the complexity of the processes of human interpretation and the universal trait of people to give different meanings to themselves and their relations (plural!) to the environment. This observation is illustrated by Kahn’s interpretations about children’s lives in Houston, Texas, and in two locations in the Brazilian Amazon (Manaus and Novo Ayrão), that “animals and plants played an important part in their lives” (pp. 97, 150). On this basis, he concludes that statistically, there is hardly any difference in the attitudes of these children toward nature. But as long as Kahn is not able to specify or qualify what meanings or interpretations, in terms of content, these different children give to this “important part” and to “their lives” (and the combination of the two), it does not make a strong or a convincing argument; it seems a generalization without content or scientific nuance. I strongly doubt if a so-called postmodernist would even dare to draw these kind of culturally unspecified generalizations. Whether you agree with them or not, postmodernists do take culture seriously, the very point Kahn advocated in relation to this topic earlier in the book.

Kahn’s explicit position in this particular scientific debate, his straightforward rejection of postmodernism, also precludes him from paying attention to the impact of things such as European romanticism and political ideology on our Western perspectives on our relation with and position in relation to nature. How romanticism triggered philosophers such as Kant, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche to think and reflect about our relation to nature, as the philosopher and anthropologist Lemaire (2002) elaborated on in his fascinating study entitled *Met Open Zinnen*, remains unexplored. How nature inspired composers such as Grieg and Beethoven, poets such as William Blake and Samain, and painters such as C. D. Friedrich and many impressionists, who all tried to translate and interpret our relation with nature through their respective art forms, is not even touched on. What they all shared was the recognition of a certain spiritual dimension about our relation with and place in nature. This comes close to the American conceptualization of “wilderness.” But a discussion of this concept, obviously highly relevant to the theme of this book, is also not included in Kahn’s overview. It would have been interesting to explore how this general notion of a spiritual dimension of nature is interpreted in a culturally specific way among various people around the globe. Everyone, from Australian Aborigines to (Latin) American Indians and Africans in sub-Saharan Africa, appears to recognize this spiritual dimension. But for Kahn, this most probably all sounds far too postmodern. Perhaps this is the reason why despite the search for an all-embracing Grand Theory and Answer, these understandings and interpretations of our relationship with nature are absent from Kahn’s book. The same holds for the absence of a discussion of the role political ideologies play in our relationship with nature. For example, the French philosopher Luc Ferry (1993) convincingly showed in his study *Le Nouvel Ordre Écologique* that much of Western green radicalism shares roots with the political ideology of national socialism. This same stance against postmodernism might also explain why Kahn does not explicitly elaborate on the concept of culture in his book, although it is explicitly used in the subtitle, because the current debate on the concept of culture is influenced by a postmodern problematization of the nature of cultural realities.

Part of the differences in perspective on these matters might also be attributed to the concept, so often uttered in scientific discourse, of the “representative.” Again, Kahn

follows a rather classical, scientific approach, holding his samples “by and large . . . representative of some larger population” (p. 81). From this position, it is possible to interview 44 children in the Brazilian Amazon (30 in Manus and 14 in Novo Ayrão) and entitle Chapter 9 “*The [italics added] Brazilian Amazon Study*,” and it is possible to interview 120 students in Lisbon and entitle Chapter 10 “*The [italics added] Portugal Study*.” How serious can he be about culture and cultural differences and nuances in countries? As much as Kahn sees his samples as serious representatives of a whole country or region, he considers what people say in an interview setting to be representative of what they actually do in daily life. Without any relativism or irony, Kahn writes the following about the parents of the children he interviewed in Houston: “The majority of the parents (93%) *said they did things [italics added]* to help the environment” (p. 120). As a skeptical social scientist, I would say that such a blatantly optimistic outcome is in need of at least methodological triangulation, for instance, through additional participant observation to check if these parents actually do what they said they do. On the other hand, if all social scientists would take the art of interviewing as seriously as Kahn and his team do, research outcomes would become far more comparable than is now usually the case.

Yes indeed, Kahn’s is a neat and accessible scientific book, giving rise to fascinating discussions. But by taking such a strong position against postmodernism, Kahn is diverting too much of his readers’ attention (including mine!) to this debate instead of persuading or seducing them to reflect on their own relationships with nature and their implications for present and future generations. His radical antipathy toward postmodernism also prevents him from including some fascinating studies that tried to explore the less positivist aspects of our relationship with nature.

References

- Ferry, L. (1993). *Le nouvel ordre écologique. L'arbre, l'animal et l'homme*. Paris: Luc Bernard Grasset.
- Lemaire, T. (2002). *Met open zinnen. Natuur, landschap, aarde* [With open senses. Nature, landscape, earth]. Amsterdam, the Netherlands: Ambo.
- Mavhunga, C. (2002, June). “If they are thirsty as all that, let them come down to the pool”: Some historical dimensions of wildlife heritage from Gonarezhou, South-Eastern Lowveld Zimbabwe, 1860-1923. Paper presented at the conference of the South African Historical Association, Rand Afrikaans University, Johannesburg.

—Harry Wels

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Telegraph Messenger Boys: Labor, Technology, and Geography, 1850-1950, by Greg Downey (2002). New York: Routledge. ISBN 0-415-93109-6. 242 pp. (paperback).

DOI: 10.1177/1206331203251261

Telegraph Messenger Boys: Labor, Technology, and Geography, 1850-1950, is a fascinating analysis of the intermingling of the social and technological. Downey portrays