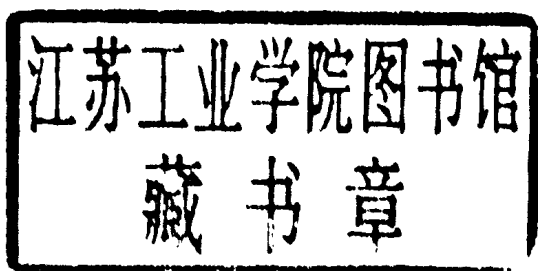




how to do  
theory

# How to Do Theory

*Wolfgang Iser*



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# Preface and Acknowledgments

This exposition of modern theories of literature and the arts has been conceived as an introduction to theory-building primarily, but not exclusively, for students in the humanities. I have therefore chosen a fairly wide variety of theories in order to highlight the many different ways in which works of art have been conceptualized.

Each theory translates art into cognition, for which a scaffolding is required. This starts out from a presupposition, on which are built certain structures that serve a particular function, the fulfillment of which is organized through specific modes of operation. In trying to make the theories sufficiently transparent, I have confined myself to a bare outline of their components. Since the aim of this handbook is to acquaint interested students with the architecture of theory-building, I have presented the theories as dispassionately as possible, and have refrained from judging, let alone criticizing, them. It is for readers to voice their own likes and dislikes. Indeed, there is no need to subscribe to any of the theories outlined, since the object of this book is simply to elucidate both the arguments and the achievements.

With a few exceptions, I have chosen only one representative of the theory concerned in order to explain the procedure according to which the cognitive framework was built. It would not have made sense to piece together concepts from different theorists, even of the same camp, as this would have distracted from the consistency of theory-building. I have tried to let the authors speak for themselves by quoting them extensively, and in this respect the book is an anthology of key theoretical statements. It must be said that not all of the theories assembled are heavyweights, but in order to assess what they are able to accomplish, their difference in range and depth is in itself a relevant factor.

Some readers may wonder why there is hardly any mention of structuralism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, and intertextuality. No doubt these phenomena are important, and they are often hotly debated in the humanities. However, they are not theories; they may have inspired certain theories, slanted their arguments, and shaped their objectives, but in themselves they are movements, preoccupations, period concepts, and forces that jostle for prominence, at best raising the hue and cry “against theory.” In order to provide an overview of theory formation, I chose to stay clear of all these “isms.”

Some might advance the same arguments against my inclusion of feminism, and I must confess that I found only a few essays that head toward a genuine theory of literature without ever coming up with something fully fledged. However, I would take this as a justification, for while other theories set out from a basic premise in search of elucidation, feminism sets out from a basic premise in search of theory.

As regards the theories that I have chosen, I agree beforehand with all those potential critics who will object to the omissions. If I had been given more space, I would certainly have expanded the repertoire. It was a hard decision, for instance, to leave out general systems theory, sociological theories of art, analytical language theories, and theories of symbolic logic. I did so mainly because they have a highly elaborate technical structure. This applies to Arnold Gehlen’s sociological approach to art, and even more to Nelson Goodman’s *Languages of Art*. Apart from the logical intricacies of their frameworks, their appeal is limited to students in the humanities, whereas a handbook should focus on what is widely debated.

It may be expedient to say a few words about why I have chosen Anton Ehrenzweig to represent a psychoanalytical theory of art, and Eric Gans to represent an anthropological theory. Ehrenzweig was both an analyst and a historian of fine arts. Instead of using works of art in order to corroborate findings or to illustrate tenets of psychoanalytical theory, Ehrenzweig proceeded in the opposite direction by putting psychoanalytical theory to work in order to elucidate the creative process of the artist. One would be hard put to find a psychoanalytical theory of art comparable to that which Ehrenzweig proposed. Although it was eclipsed for a while, it is now resurfacing even in professional circles of psychoanalysis.

There are several reasons for my choice of Gans. First of all, he created a new discipline, generative anthropology, single-handedly. In order to accomplish his end, the theory had to be global and rigorously reasoned. This makes it an interesting case of theory-building, since it had to embrace the

rise of humankind, the development of human culture, the necessity of the arts, and the history of literature from the Greeks to postmodernism. Needless to say, such a theory requires a framework that was bound to be reductive, if the welter of phenomena was to be marshaled into an overall explanatory pattern. Regardless of whether this pattern is convincing or not, the theory itself is unique in that it is based entirely on a construct, whereas the others arise from realities such as perception, consciousness, sign usage, etc. Gans has fulfilled in his own way what other anthropologists have striven for: "a functional aesthetics."

It was one of the publisher's stipulations that the skeletal exposition of a theory should be followed by an example, intended to add flesh to the bones. As theories are not merely methods of interpretation, the examples provided are not applications. If one were to apply a theory to such a purpose, a much more extensive elaboration of the example would be necessary. Furthermore, the examples are not meant to corroborate the validity of the theory concerned, not least because – as the reader will see – theories themselves often resort to examples in order to underpin basic arguments at the point where explanation leaves off. The example then functions as a compensation for what the concepts are unable to grasp, and thus is meant to furnish the generalizations which the cognitive frameworks can no longer provide. This is a practice by no means confined to theories of art but one which is widespread in a great many theoretical discourses today. Therefore, the examples are simply meant to show what a work of art would look like if viewed in terms of the theory concerned.

Also in accordance with the publisher's wishes, I have provided a glossary of technical terms. All the terms that appear in the glossary are printed in bold on their first occurrence in order to distinguish them from those explained in the text.

Finally, I should like to thank Andrew McNeillie, who commissioned this book and persuaded me to write it. I am equally grateful to my friend David Henry Wilson for his astute and penetrating criticism, as well as for polishing my English. Last but not least my thanks are due to Barbara Caldwell for compiling the index.

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# Introduction

## Why Theory?

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Literary theory is of recent vintage. Since entering the scene after World War II, it has had a considerable impact on the main concern of the humanities: the interpretation of texts. Interpretation had long been understood as an activity that did not seem to require analysis of its own procedures. There was a tacit assumption that it was a natural process, not least because human beings live by constantly interpreting. We continually emit a mass of signs and signals in response to the bombardment of signs and signals that we receive from outside ourselves. But while such a basic human disposition makes interpretation appear to come naturally, the forms it takes do not.<sup>1</sup> Literary theory created an awareness of the variety and changing validity of interpretation, thereby changing interpretive practice in the humanities altogether.

Theory became a necessity at a critical juncture in literary studies, and as there is no simple explanation for this development we must look to history for possible reasons. Obviously, time-honored approaches to art were no longer capable of dealing with modernity, and it is no exaggeration to maintain that the rise of theory marks a shift in the history of criticism equal to the replacement of Aristotelian poetics by philosophical aesthetics at the threshold of the nineteenth century. The rule-governed Aristotelian poetics offered a recipe for making works of art, whereas the triumphantly emerging aesthetics proclaimed art to be knowable. “Making” versus “cognizing” art articulates the change wrought by aesthetics.

Such a turnabout had more or less invalidated a central eighteenth-century preoccupation, namely, the tracing of distinctions between the “sister arts,” as exemplified by Lessing’s *Laokoön*. Lessing contrasted the verbal and the pictorial arts, with poetry as the temporality of verbal sequence and painting as the spatiality of the pictorial instant. This distinction – though differently evaluated and at times even understood hierarchically, as evinced by Addison – was also meant to pin down the respective impacts of the arts on the recipient. More often than not the verbal arts were privileged, because they spurred the imagination into more comprehensive action than painting or sculpture. Poetry, according to Murray Krieger, “works on the ‘soul’ or mind,” and its “virtue is its capacity to function just where mere picturing leaves off.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, poetry is a spiritual experience, whereas painting engages only the senses. Thus the individual arts were marked off from one another according to their operation, medium, and effect.

This neatly distinguished plurality of the “sister arts” was displaced by philosophical aesthetics, which strove to determine the nature of art by means of definitions which – though continually changing from Hegel to Adorno – gave art an ontological basis. Pluralism gave way to holism. It all began with the Romantics, who elevated aesthetics to the be-all and end-all and entrenched it as a philosophy of art. This identification of aesthetics with the work of art gained such dominance throughout the nineteenth century that the great philosophical systems felt compelled to extend their speculations to the realm of art by giving the latter a systematic exposition, and hence an ontological root.

Aesthetics, then, became a philosophical discipline, ranking alongside metaphysics and ethics, and was basically concerned with cognition of art in relation to the dominant tenets of the system. Hegel, for instance, exemplifies the ontological definition of art by conceiving aesthetics as the study of how the “spirit” on its way to self-consciousness assumes ever new trappings embodied in works of art, which provide the “sensuous appearance of the idea.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, the work of art gives sensory expression to the direction in which the “spirit” is destined to move. Aesthetics turns into a study of representation, conceiving art as a medium for the appearance of truth. Powered by the conviction that art is knowable, such an assumption, however, is less concerned with the work of art for its own sake than with something other than the work, for which art serves as an indicator. This holds true from Hegel up to Adorno, irrespective of what they considered the basic definition of aesthetics to be.

A genuine work of art, Adorno maintains, is permeated by a rift, which indicates that it has cut itself loose from the world within which it was produced. By imitating the beautiful in nature, the work creates an appearance which in turn features the presence of something nonexistent, and by giving outward form to something inconceivable, the work endows a figment with illusory reality.<sup>4</sup> The latter, however, is not so much a deception as a foreshadowing of perfection in an imperfect world.

Aesthetics, which had elevated art to the highest pinnacle of human achievement, declined in the twentieth century because the holistic conception of art was no longer tenable. When it became apparent that the work of art could not be pinned to any metaphysical basis, let alone have a definable essence, a host of new questions arose. What are the functions of the work, what are its modalities, how do they operate, and what accounts for their differences? Even reflection on approaches to art became a major preoccupation. Consequently, theory found itself tackling not art but issues such as the language and structure of the work, its message, the organization of its sign relationships, its patterns and their communication, the inroads made into its contextual realities, the processing and reception of texts, and the exposure of assumptions inherent in the work.

Theory liberated art from the umbrella concepts that had been superimposed on it by philosophical aesthetics, thus opening up a vast array of facets inherent in the individual work. Instead of formulating an overriding definition of what art is, theories provided an ever-expanding exhibition of art's multifariousness; the ontological monolith of the work became pluralized.

Another important historical reason for the rise of theory was triggered by the state in which literary criticism found itself in the 1940s and 1950s. Theory counteracted the prevailing impressionistic approach to art and literature, which was highly personalized, appealing only to the initiated. The postwar generation of critics began to query the validity of what was regarded as "the great adventure of the soul among masterpieces." Hence it became necessary to find ways to access art and literature that would objectify insights and separate comprehension from subjective taste. Theory became a means of preventing and unraveling the confusion created by impressionistic criticism. The success of this approach became apparent from the degree to which various disciplines of the humanities, e.g., semiotics, gestalt theory, psychoanalysis, hermeneutics, information theory, sociology, and pragmatism, felt called upon to develop their own theories

of art and literature. The very fact that the latter were based on empirical findings made them all the more persuasive.

Furthermore, the impasse in which impressionistic criticism found itself was highlighted by a growing conflict of interpretation. The cultural heritage no longer served as an unquestioned means of promoting what was called *Bildung*, because there were no uniform guidelines for such an education any more, as there had been in the past. Initially, though, there did not seem to be a problem if an individual work generated very different and, at times, controversial interpretations. The professor was a kind of feudal lord or at least an arbiter in the existing hierarchy, and he decided what a work had to mean. The fact that works had a content, which was considered a carrier of meaning, was taken for granted. Therefore interpretation had to uncover the work's meaning, which legitimized the whole process because meanings represented values to be employed for the purpose of education. Thus excavation of meaning became a prime concern, but in due course this raised the question of why the meaning had been concealed within the work and why authors should indulge in such a game of hide-and-seek with their interpreters. What turned out to be even more puzzling was why the meaning – once found – should change again with a different reader, even though the letters, the words, and the sentences of the work remained the same. Eventually this created an awareness of the fact that the presuppositions governing interpretation were to a large extent responsible for what the work was supposed to mean. Therefore the claim to have found *the* meaning of the text implied justification of one's assumptions and presuppositions, and this triggered what has since become known as the conflict of interpretation. What the latter revealed, however, and what made it really interesting was the inherent limitation of all presuppositions, and hence their restricted applicability to the tasks they were meant to perform.

This situation cried out for investigation, and theory addressed itself to the task. Presuppositions came under scrutiny, not least as the theories implicitly reflected on the premises in order to find out what they were able to master. No doubt there are additional reasons for the rise of theory, such as the proliferation of the media and a growing interest in culture and intercultural relationships, but the main driving forces were a declining belief in the ontology of art, the growing confusion spread by impressionistic criticism, and the quest for meaning that generated the conflict of interpretation.

## Hard-Core and Soft Theory

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Theories are first and foremost intellectual tools. There is, however, a difference between hard-core theory and soft theory. The former – as practiced in physics, for instance – makes predictions, whereas the latter – as practiced in the humanities – is an attempt at mapping. These objectives require different forms of theory. “Physical theories,” writes Norwood Russell Hanson, “provide patterns within which data appear intelligible. [ . . . ] A theory is not pieced together from observed phenomena; it is rather what makes it possible to observe phenomena as being of a certain sort [ . . . ] Theories put phenomena into systems. [ . . . ] A theory is a cluster of conclusions in search of a premiss. From the observed properties of the phenomena the physicist reasons his way towards a keystone idea from which the properties are explicable as a matter of course.”<sup>5</sup> Such “keystone ideas,” when found, are considered laws: Karl Popper maintains that it is the task of the natural scientist “to search for laws which will enable him to deduce predictions. [ . . . ] he must try to advance hypotheses about frequencies, that is, laws asserting probabilities, in order to deduce frequency predictions.”<sup>6</sup>

Soft theory is almost the reverse. First of all, it actually “pieces together” observed data, elements drawn from different frameworks, and even combines presuppositions in order to gain access to the domain to be charted. This *bricolage*<sup>7</sup> is adapted to what is scrutinized, and augmented by new viewpoints when required. This is in keeping with the objective of soft theory, as it would be meaningless for theoretical inquiries in the humanities to make predictions. Art and literature can be assessed, but not predicted, and one cannot even anticipate the multiple relationships they contain. Prediction aims ultimately at mastering something, whereas mapping strives to discern something.

Furthermore, soft theory is not governed by laws, let alone driven to establish or even discover them – again in contrast to the procedures of hard-core theory. Instead of moving toward a general principle, it starts out from a basic presupposition, which can be modified in view of observed data that are to be incorporated into the framework.

This accounts for a conspicuous feature of soft theory. All theories assume their plausibility through the closure of the framework; closure is, of course, perfect when a law for making predictions is discovered. Soft

theories, especially when focusing on art, aspire to closure through the introduction of metaphors or what has been called “open concepts,” i.e., those marked by equivocalness owing to conflicting references. For instance, “polyphonic harmony” (the strata of the work merging together) is the favorite metaphor of phenomenological theory; the “fusion of horizons” (between the past experience embodied in the work and the disposition of the recipient) is integral to hermeneutics; and the inter-relation between making and matching (adapting “inherited schemata” [Gombrich] to the world perceived) is favored by gestalt theory. The metaphor performs the necessary function of finishing off the system, for only if the system is closed can it put on the mantle of theory.

Metaphor versus law, as the respective “keystone idea” of soft and hard-core theory, highlights a vital difference between the sciences and the humanities. A law has to be applied, whereas a metaphor triggers associations. The former establishes realities, and the latter outlines patterns.

There are two further distinctions between the two types of theory, relating to their efficacy and to the task they must perform. If predictions are to be deduced from a theory, its various statements must be tested in order to find out which are the most efficient for ensuring prediction. “If this decision is positive,” according to Popper, “that is, if the singular conclusions turn out to be acceptable, or *verified*, then the theory has, for the time being, passed its test: [ . . . ] So long as theory withstands detailed and severe tests and is not superseded by another theory in the course of scientific progress, we may say that it has ‘proved its mettle’ or that it is ‘*corroborated*.’”<sup>8</sup>

Such testing procedures do not apply to soft theory. Its ability to map and chart can be neither verified nor falsified, as there is no objective and measurable reference – like a prediction that has come true. Consequently, humanistic theories cannot be discarded if their intended function is not fulfilled; at best they compete with one another. Yet even such competition is not governed by an overarching idea to which all the different theories feel themselves beholden. On the contrary, it is due to changing interests and fashions that certain theories at times dominate their “rivals,” while others move out of orbit, as currently witnessed by the waning of Marxist theory and the rise of general systems theory. The very fact that humanistic theories – in contradistinction to scientific ones – are not judged by being put to the test may account for the multiplicity of soft theories, as each of them starts out from a different presupposition, pursues a specific

objective, has a limited scope, and yields something its competitors do not. Soft theories gain their acceptance by assent and not through tests, and for such an acceptance their relative persuasiveness is more often than not decisive.

The second major distinction between the two types of theory is closely connected with the testing procedure. Physical theories are discarded when they no longer stand the test, whereas humanistic theories move in and out of focus, depending on changing interests. Why are physical theories discarded? Because predictions are not made for their own sake but are meant to solve problems. Thomas Kuhn has described “normal science” as working within a paradigm, defining it as follows: “Normal science, the activity in which most scientists spend almost all their time, is predicated on the assumption that the scientific community knows what the world is like. Much of the success of the enterprise derives from the community’s willingness to defend that assumption, if necessary at considerable cost.”<sup>9</sup>

This does not apply to the humanities. Although the scholarly community may work for a certain period of time within the parameters of a dominant theory, this does not mean – as is the case with a scientific paradigm – that the basic assumptions of the theory in question must be defended. This is due to the fact that the humanities are not a problem-solving undertaking. Instead, their prime concern is to achieve understanding, to assess context-relatedness, to investigate meaning and function, and to evaluate art and literature, as well as to address the question of why we need them. In the sciences we witness a succession of theories, judged according to their achievements in predicting natural phenomena, whereas in the humanities we have an assembly of theories each seeking to grasp or even exploit the inexhaustible potential of art and literature. Consequently, there is no need for “retooling” theory in the humanities, because multiple theories are their hallmark in view of what they intend to conceptualize. Things are different in the sciences, however. “So long as the tools a paradigm supplies continue to prove capable of solving the problems it defines, science moves fastest and penetrates most deeply through confident employment of those tools. The reason is clear. As in manufacture so in science – retooling is an extravagance to be reserved for the occasion that demands it. The significance of crises is the indication they provide that an occasion for retooling has arrived.”<sup>10</sup> Retooling as a consequence of failure as opposed to a multiplicity of competing tools – this again marks the difference between the sciences and the humanities.



## **Modes of Theory**

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Why do we have so many different theories? Each one subjects art to a cognitive framework, which is bound to impose limits on the work. Whatever aspects one concept fails to cover will more often than not be taken up by another approach, which will of course be subject to its own restrictions, and so on *ad infinitum*. However, this not only accounts for the multiplicity of theories, but also allows us to experience the ultimate unknowability of art. In the final analysis, it refuses to be translated into cognition, because it transcends all boundaries, references, and expectations. Thus it simultaneously provokes cognitive attempts at understanding, and exceeds the limits of the cognitive frameworks applied. This duality transforms art into an experiential reality for which, however, the cognitive quest is indispensable.

How do theories operate and what are their distinguishing features? To answer this question we need to examine a great variety of theories: phenomenological, hermeneutical, gestalt, reception, semiotic, psychoanalytical, Marxist, deconstructionist, and pragmatist theories. These will form the bulk of our detailed investigation. But we shall also have a cursory glance at feminist theories. The presuppositions of these are differently applied. They may be heuristic, i.e., the assumptions made are tentative, and hence subject to revisions; prescriptive, i.e., the assumptions have to be followed, and hence rules are to be obeyed; exploratory, i.e., the assumptions are probes, and hence to be changed in the event of failure; dogmatic, i.e., the assumptions are taken as realities; or the assumptions may even become equated with what is to be elucidated, and hence are superimposed on the object of investigation.

Basically all modern theories of art and literature replace the question formerly asked by aesthetics, but instead of defining what art is, their concern is how art comes about, or when it is art, or what function is exercised by art, or what are its modalities. There is also a switch to be observed from a semantics to a pragmatics of art, and from thematics to operations of art. Furthermore, modern theories do not lay claim any longer to universal application of their basic principles.

There are three key concepts that govern the intentions of modern theories: structure, function, and communication, which more or less dovetail within the theories concerned. Structure allows classification of the work's components and a description of how meaning is produced.