

Ben De Bruyn

## On Iser and Introductions

- **Wolfgang Iser, *How to Do Theory*. Malden, MA/Oxford: Blackwell 2006. x, 211 S. [Preis: EUR 18,50]. ISBN: 978-1405115803.**

At the beginning of this year, the world-renowned literary theorist Wolfgang Iser unfortunately passed away. As he was unable to complete a manuscript on emergence in the cultural and natural sciences, *How to Do Theory* is effectively his last book-length study. It is therefore essential reading for scholars, even though Iser's German readers will recognize certain ideas from his earlier work on *Theorien der Kunst* (1982) and *Theorie der Literatur* (1992). However, this slim introduction to theory is also part of a series that aims to familiarize students with the tools they need to study literature. Does it cater to the tastes of both audiences? To answer this question, it might be helpful to distinguish between two types of introductions. The first type impartially records every facet of a specific discipline, whereas the second one offers a committed view of its most pertinent aspects. In the field of literary theory, Peter Barry's *Beginning Theory* (1995) and Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983) might be good examples of these two approaches. As *How to Do Theory* hesitates between critical distance and personal commitment, it is both an interesting and a frustrating introduction for students and scholars.

Before turning to the specific theories under consideration, it is important to note that Iser's overview is framed with a more general description of the theoretical enterprise, one that clearly reveals his intellectual background. Modern theories of art and literature, he claims, share three important features. First of all, they have invariably originated in a desire to cut loose from the philosophical aesthetics of the nineteenth century. Modern theories effect a shift from overriding ontological definitions of art to more functional explorations of artistic variety, »a switch [...] from a semantics to a pragmatics of art, and from thematics to operations of art« (Iser 2006, 8). Reiterating his article on »Das Imaginäre und die epochalen Schlüsselbegriffe« first published in the 1979 *Festschrift* for Kurt Kiesinger, secondly, Iser maintains that twentieth-century theories always focus on the »structure, function, and communication« (8) of art. In other words, they describe three forms of relationships: the structural relations obtaining within the work of art, the functional relations connecting work and context, and – especially – the communicative relations relating the work to the »recipient« (171). Apart from their shared origins and similar concerns, thirdly, modern theories also fulfill parallel functions. Theories provide the blueprint for a concrete method of interpretation with its specific »central metaphors« (11) – difference, for instance, or phallogocentrism. But theories also help to integrate artistic products into their socio-cultural context. In the end, they therefore testify to man's indefatigable attempt »to capture in cognitive terms something which by nature eludes cognition« (171), namely aesthetic experience. In the light of Iser's publications on literary anthropology and the range of interpretation, theory thus becomes another tool with which human beings can explore the phenomena that escape the dominant discourses of their culture. Iser's general description of modern theories convincingly argues that they are historically, conceptually, and functionally related. His emphasis on the recipient of art and the function of theory, however, clearly reveals his own theoretical agenda. Additionally, a more detailed discussion of feminist and queer theory – the work of Judith Butler, for instance – would have shown that the emphasis on man's flexible, actor-like nature is another common feature of contemporary theory.

Of course, *How to Do Theory* is not insensitive to the diversity of theories either. Iser not only examines projects that his reception theory – discussed in a separate chapter – is indebted to (Dewey’s account of art as experience, Ingarden’s phenomenological, Gadamer’s hermeneutical, and Gombrich’s Gestalt theory) or shares certain affinities with (Eco’s semiotic theory, Miller’s deconstructionist approach, and Gans’ generative anthropology), but also offers insightful discussions of approaches that Iser has been and remains critical of (Williams’ marxism, Showalter’s feminism, Lacan’s psychoanalysis, and Said’s post-colonialism). These various schools, moreover, are instructively applied to a wide variety of artworks, ranging from typically Iserian texts (Spenser, Fielding, Beckett) to more atypical examples (Greek tragedy, Chrétien de Troyes, Kipling) and even paintings (Picasso and Holbein). The multiplicity of theory is inevitable, Iser claims, as art »simultaneously provokes cognitive attempts at understanding, and exceeds the limits of the cognitive frameworks applied« (8). Whereas the seminal *Akt des Lesens* (1976) argued that every coherent *reading* of a literary text is limited and precarious, *How to Do Theory* hence maintains that every consistent *theory* of art is selective and revisable. Of course, the need for a coherent theoretical system inevitably leads to selection and conceptual »closure« (22). As this closure can be dealt with in different ways, however, Iser distinguishes between two types of theories; the rigidly »architectural« (167) or cognitive models typical of phenomenology and the flexibly »operational« (ibid.) or experiential models typical of deconstruction. Given the influence of Ingarden’s phenomenology on Iser’s *Wirkungsästhetik*, it might seem surprising that he ultimately prefers operational models. And yet, this preference logically follows from Iser’s study on *The Range of Interpretation* (2000), in which he distinguishes between an architectural »predication« (Iser 2000: 151) that silences the space between the object and the register of an interpretation and an operational »production« (ibid.) that explores it fully. Closure might be »the hallmark of theory« (Iser 2006, 87), then, but Iser’s preference for operational criticism nevertheless implies the de Man-like conclusion that the proper form of theory resists the closure that defines it as such: »the interpretive potential of [Ingarden’s] theory is far reaching and widely applicable if freed from the restrictions which a theory has to impose on itself in order to gain closure« (27).

Iser’s emphasis on a specific type of theories is not the only problem with regard to the different schools under discussion. He off-handedly omits clarifying crucial notions such as »structuralism« and »poststructuralism« (ix), even though the complicated relationship between these terms might nuance his crude distinction between architectural and operational models. Neither does he discuss important currents such as new historicism and cultural studies, not to mention the recent ecocriticism. He fails to do justice, finally, to Edward Said’s project and the Foucauldian reasoning underlying it. After all, Iser incorrectly claims that post-colonialism lacks the »transcendental vantage point« (177) of theory and that it produces a »deterministic« (12) or *discursive* rather than »explorative« (ibid.) or *theoretical* conceptual system. He concedes that post-colonialism »has become an indispensable aid in our quest to grasp the essence of human culture« (185), but nonetheless maintains that Said’s work is ultimately »not a theory« (177), as it remains on the level of a counter-hegemonic discourse. In sum, Iser’s introduction traces significant similarities and differences between various ways of »doing theory« while simultaneously revealing his own preoccupations and preferences. On the one hand, this personal dimension might prove frustrating for beginning students in need of dispassionate guidance. On the other, it implies that *How to Do Theory* might effectively acquaint students not only with the key-terms of this discipline, but also with the tension between distance and commitment that is so ubiquitous in the contentious field of literary theory.

2007-09-11  
JLTonline ISSN 1862-8990

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**How to cite this item:**

Ben De Bruyn, On Iser and Introductions. (Review of: Wolfgang Iser, How to Do Theory. Malden, MA/Oxford: Blackwell 2006.)

In: JLTonline (11.09.2007)

Persistent Identifier: urn:nbn:de:0222-000015

Link: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0222-000015>