

children want to learn> be an ideal or hypothetical set of facts, principles, or circumstances—often used in the phrase in theory <in theory, we have always advocated freedom for all>

51 a plausible or scientifically acceptable general principle or body of principles offered to explain phenomena <wave theory of light>

6a n hypothesis assumed for the sake of argument or investigation b: an unproved assumption: CONJECTURE c: a body of theorems presenting a concise systematic view of a subject <theory of equations>

An observable event!

So theory is a basis for action, but also an explanation of how phenomena work. In art history, we could say that theory helps us to develop precise and penetrating lines of questioning to guide our research. Certain modes of inquiry, or theories, are recognized as valuable across a variety of disciplines: among these are semiotics, Marxism, queer theory, and psychoanalysis. Others are more specific to their disciplines—like iconography in art history.

Signs + symbols  
→  
their use + interpretation  
→  
identification  
→  
description + analysis of an history

The range of theories most commonly employed today in the social sciences and humanities is often called critical theory. The term originated in the mid-twentieth century with the Frankfurt School, a group of Marxist scholars based at the University of Frankfurt who critiqued capitalism and consumer culture (see Chapter 3). The term is used more broadly now to indicate contemporary theories useful in the investigation of history, culture, and society across a range of disciplines. These include, for example, feminism, psychoanalysis, semiotics, and structuralism. However, I think it's important to avoid creating a canon of critical theory, as if there are certain works to be considered theory and others to be excluded. Engaging with theory is not about what's trendy or what other people are doing; it's about your own intellectual, political, and creative commitments and endeavors, and about searching out and developing the tools you need to expand your thinking and do this work.

applying to a specific matter

theories are personal and unique to every individual

In a broader way, you could also say that "theory" is anything that helps you think better about a subject, enlarges your perspective, and helps you formulate new questions. The source may not be a text widely used and labeled as "critical theory." I included the famous passage from Proust at the beginning of this chapter as a reminder of the potentially broad nature of "theory." For the main character in Proust's novel, the taste of a cake unexpectedly lets loose powerful memories. Similarly, it's hard to say what is going to free your ideas and give you new perspectives on your work—a

song, a poem, a novel, a dance performance. For such prompts to truly work as theory, I would argue that a sustained line of questioning, a coherent perspective on your subject, must develop out of them. Theory isn't just what gives you an idea, but what gives you some real insight.

For example, I have used a rather unconventional approach to theory in my writing about a particular cultural practice in early nineteenth-century Tahiti, where judicial courts were established under the influence of English missionaries. These courts made tattoo a crime, but, paradoxically, they also used tattoo as a punishment for the crime of getting tattoos, as well as for other transgressions (Figure 1.1).<sup>1</sup> I was particularly interested in the class and gender dimensions of this set of practices: the elite didn't typically receive these punishments, and, among commoners, only women were marked on their faces for crimes (including adultery). The "theory" that helped me think about this situation was not, as one might expect, the work of the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault (1926–1984) (see Chapter 5). His famous book about prisons and corporal punishment, Discipline and Punish (1977), deals with the ways in which European societies punished criminals and changed behavior using the body. As useful as Foucault was in tracing the social construction of power and the development of

1.1 Henry Byam Martin, watercolor of Tahitian woman, 1847. Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA.

According to Martin, a local court condemned this woman to death for murdering her husband. Instead, the local missionary argued that her face should be tattooed with the word "murderess"—the mark of Cain to mark her crime. Under the influence of evangelical missionaries, Tahitian courts frequently punished women for adultery—only defined as a crime with the coming of Christianity—by tattooing their faces.



# Jargon

If you are in difficulties with a book, try the element of surprise—attack it at an hour when it isn't expecting it.

H.G. Wells

When is language appropriately precise and technical, and when is it jargon—pretentious, long-winded, and obscure? That's a hard line to draw. Before being too quick to damn a piece of writing as pure jargon, make sure it's not just your own lack of familiarity or discomfort with the material that's making you experience "the jargon effect." Often,

when you're new to a discipline or theoretical approach, even basic words (such as, in the case of semiotics, sign, interpretant, or semiosis) will seem strange and unwieldy. As you keep reading, these words will become more familiar and will no longer be stumbling blocks. At the same time, some theoretical writing is convoluted: not all great thinkers are elegant writers. If this is the case, it sometimes helps to find a summary of the arguments elsewhere (e.g. the Introduction to an anthology, a book review) which you can then use to guide your reading.

institutions, I also found myself turning to fiction, to Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and Franz Kafka's short story "In the Penal Colony" (1919). In relation to these tattooing practices, I wanted to investigate individual experience and agency—that is, the ability and opportunity to act in society—which Foucault doesn't really consider in *Discipline and Punish*. In fiction, I found a framework to help me discuss the individual and experiential aspects of this tattoo practice; it was important for me to consider what it may have been like for a woman or a religious resister to wear a tattoo as punishment, or for someone to inflict a tattoo as punishment. These are not abstract moral or poetic questions, but central issues in examining the reception of these tattoos and the kinds of social conditions and power structures that made punitive tattooing possible.

## Is theory pure, universal, and impartial?

The short answer to that question is "no." Now I'll provide the long answer . . .

Let me first define the term *discourse*. As you read theoretical works, you'll frequently come across this word in phrases such as "art-historical discourse" or "Marxist discourse." In these contexts *discourse* has a very specialized meaning. You may typically define *discourse* as "conversation," "speech," or "communication," but it is also, more precisely, according to literary theorist Terry Eagleton,

"language grasped as utterance, as involving speaking and writing subjects, and therefore, also, at least potentially, readers or listeners."<sup>2</sup> We understand *discourse* not as idle chitchat, but as meaningful communication that expresses and shapes cultural ideas and practices. (Keep in mind that meaningful communication can include images, gestures, or sounds as well as writing or speech.)

So language, or *discourse*, is not innocent or neutral; it can shape, express, reflect, or even conceal human experience and human realities in a variety of ways. Throughout his writings, Foucault emphasized that *discourse* is interwoven with power relations and social practices.<sup>3</sup> This dynamic is visible both on a large scale—where, say, certain groups don't have access to governmental power and so can't make policy or law—and on a small scale: think about how families or classrooms work. The work of the cultural critic bell hooks (lower case intentional) reminds us that a revolutionary gesture is made when disempowered peoples simply speak for themselves and represent their own viewpoints and experiences.<sup>4</sup>

Theory is a *discourse* (or a web of many intersecting discourses) and as such it isn't neutral, universal, or impartial. Different theories and writers present specific points of view on the world: Any given theory emerges in a particular place and time, in response to particular events. It subsequently circulates, and is used and developed by scholars with particular motivations, working in particular places and times, with particular audiences.

The first quote that opens this chapter addresses this issue, as you will see, drawing attention to the ways that theory can reflect and perpetuate—as well as challenge—society's injustices. Poet and activist Audre Lorde (1934–1992) points out that we need new ideas and new theoretical constructs if we are going to achieve social justice. She argues that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house because the ideas that emerge within racist, sexist, and homophobic contexts are not going to be able to change those contexts.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, bell hooks challenges the racism underlying much contemporary critical theory, writing that, "racism is perpetuated when blackness is associated solely with concrete gut-level experience conceived either as opposing or having no connection to abstract thinking and the production of critical theory. The idea that there is no meaningful connection between black experience and critical thinking about aesthetics or culture must be continually interrogated."<sup>6</sup> Theory doesn't stand outside culture, even when it critiques culture.

study guides recommend a process called SQ3R (Survey, Questions, Read, Recite, Review).<sup>2</sup> The reader first surveys, or skims, the reading to get an idea of the nature of the argument, paying special attention to the introduction, conclusion, illustrations or diagrams, headings and subheadings. Then the reader develops a set of questions about it. Headings and subheadings will often provide clues: a subheading such as "Freud and Ancient Egypt" might become "Why and how was Freud interested in Ancient Egypt?" Next comes reading the piece, either taking notes or annotating the text itself (underlining or highlighting alone is a relatively passive and ineffective reading method). Jot down answers to your questions, add new questions as important points emerge, and be sure you understand new terms. In the recall stage, summarize what you've read, check whether your initial questions have been answered, and pay special attention to ideas that still don't seem clear. Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the argument and relate it to other works you've read. As an art historian, focus on how the reading expands your engagement with artistic practices. A day or two later, review what you've learned to help consolidate it as part of your base of knowledge.

Readers who have used my previous book, *Look! The Fundamentals of Art History* (2003), will find both similarities and differences here. I've tried to keep the text simple and accessible—although, given the complexity of the ideas discussed here, the language is necessarily more technical. Concrete examples and practical advice about developing arguments and writing papers stand here alongside the discussion of more abstract ideas. I've tried my best to be even-handed in discussing various theories of art-historical practice, but I hope that my own viewpoints and experiences as an art historian aren't entirely lost.

In the end, this book is an introduction to the scholarly struggles—the rewarding, frustrating struggles—to which Stuart Hall so gracefully refers above. After reading it you won't be ready to bill yourself as an expert on psychoanalysis or semiotics. (Is that a relief or a disappointment?) You'll have to read much more widely to gain that kind of status, but you'll be ready to make a start. **Good luck with your work.**

FROM  
FROM: *Methods + Theories*  
OF ART HISTORY

AUNE  
DI ALLEVA

Chapter 1

## Thinking about theory

The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.

Audre Lordé, *Sister Outsider* (1984)

And suddenly the memory revealed itself. The taste was that of the little piece of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray . . . my aunt Léonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of tea or tisane.

Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way* (1913)

Before exploring different strands of critical theory, like Marxism, feminism, or psychoanalysis, we first have to define what theory is—and answer the crucial question, why is theory important? Engaging with theory is hard work, and you may start to wonder why you're bothering, when struggling through yet another article about cultural hegemony or the sign. You'll find the answer here, I hope.

### What makes theory "theory"?

Undergraduate students have often asked me this question. Why are Marx's writings considered theory? When people talk about literary theory, or critical theory, is that what we're using in art history? Why is one art historian's work considered theory and another's not?

Like "art" or "culture," theory is one of those words that we use all the time but which is actually hard to define when we stop to think about it. Theory can be defined in fairly narrow terms or more broadly, and both perspectives are useful.

To start with a relatively narrow definition, I'll turn to Merriam-Webster's *Colligate Dictionary*, which includes under the term "theory" the following:

- 3: the general or abstract principles of a body of fact, a science, or an art <music theory>
- 4a: a belief, policy, or procedure proposed or followed as the basis of action <her method is based on the theory that all