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Interpretation at Risk: Post-Interpretive Criticism After the 20th Century

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Written at the Threshold

For over seventy years, aesthetic theory in Europe and North America has operated on a shared assumption. This assumption transcends political differences, methodological divides, and institutional affiliations. It persists across structuralism and hermeneutics, critical theory and institutional critique, phenomenology and post-structuralism. The premise is this: meaning is not inherent; it is produced.

Everything else varies. Schools disagree violently about how meaning is produced, who produces it, what counts as legitimate production. But the foundational claim, that meaning emerges through mediation rather than residing in the work, remains constant.

This essay argues that Post-Interpretive Criticism represents a direct opposition to this settlement. It does not propose a different theory of how meaning is produced. It questions whether production is the right frame at all. More precisely: it treats mediation not as neutral ground but as ethical risk that must justify itself before being permitted.

This is not a return to objectivism, formalism, or naïve realism. It does not claim that meaning is fixed, that artworks are self-explanatory, or that viewers are irrelevant. It makes one claim only, but absolutely: interpretation is not the ground of meaning, but an intervention into an already structured encounter. That single proposition puts Post-Interpretive Criticism outside the post-1950s consensus. Not as a refinement within it, but as a refusal of its operating license.

The dominance of mediation as the governing framework for aesthetics did not happen by accident. Diverse traditions converged, despite profound disagreements, on the necessity of interpretation. Roland Barthes declared the work “a tissue of quotations” and the author dead. Jacques Derrida argued meaning is différance, never present, always deferred. Hans-Georg Gadamer positioned understanding as “fusion of horizons” between text and interpreter. Paul Ricœur claimed all self-understanding depends on interpretive mediation. Theodor Adorno argued artworks resist meaning only through negative dialectics, a form of mediated resistance.

These traditions disagreed about nearly everything except one thing: the artwork could not mean on its own. It required completion through discourse, interpretation, institutional framing, or phenomenological constitution. Moreover, interpretation became morally valorized. In the post-war period, silence was associated with complicity. After the Holocaust, colonial collapse, and fascism, articulation became equated with responsibility. To remain silent before art, or history, or suffering, was to fail ethically. The 20th century did not merely permit interpretation. It required it.

Post-Interpretive Criticism does not claim that meaning is objective, that artworks explain themselves, or that viewers play no role in aesthetic experience. It refuses something far more

specific: the neutrality of interpretation. The post-1950s consensus treats interpretation as either necessary, inevitable, constitutive, or liberating. Even when acknowledging interpretation's limitations, the tradition assumes mediation is essentially benign, or at worst, unavoidable.

Post-Interpretive Criticism argues the opposite: interpretation is structurally hazardous. Not sometimes. Not when done poorly. Always. Because it introduces a force into a field that existed before it arrived. This introduces a fundamental reversal. Where 20th-century aesthetics held that meaning emerges through mediation, Post-Interpretive Criticism insists that mediation must justify itself against the structure of the encounter. Interpretation shifts from default position to special case.

The encounter between work and viewer already possesses structure before interpretation begins. This structure is not subjective, it does not depend on individual psychology, nor objective, it does not inhere in the work alone. It is relational, existing in the field between work and witness. This structure has measurable properties: proportion, the ratio between elements within the work and between the work and its context; distance, the space required for the work to appear without crowding; interval, the duration necessary for perception to complete itself; silence, the absence of premature speech that allows presence to register.

These are not metaphors. They are conditions. And they can be violated. Interpretation that arrives too soon collapses the interval. Language that fills silence crowds the distance. Explanation that substitutes for perception destroys proportion. The encounter can be preserved. It can also be destroyed.

Why is interpretation structurally hazardous? Because it performs three operations that inherently threaten the encounter. First, it recenters the human. Interpretation makes meaning depend on the critic's act of understanding. Even when claiming to serve the work, the interpreter becomes the necessary mediator. Human language becomes mandatory intermediary. This is not always wrong. But it is always a transfer of weight, from work to words, from presence to discourse.

Second, interpretation crowds the interval. Perception requires time. Not clock time, but phenomenological duration, the space for sense to gather, for proportion to register, for form to articulate itself to awareness. Premature interpretation forecloses this duration. It replaces the slow accumulation of perception with the rapid substitution of concepts. The viewer stops looking and starts recognizing.

Third, interpretation substitutes language for presence. Even the most careful interpretation produces sentences. And sentences, by their nature, claim space. They invite response, generate discourse, multiply into commentary. The work becomes occasion for text rather than site of encounter. This is displacement. When unacknowledged, displacement becomes disproportion, the collapse of a relational field through excess. Disproportion here does not

name intention or malice, but structural consequence: the failure of ratio between work and witness.

The ethical question Post-Interpretive Criticism introduces is simple: Does this interpretation preserve the encounter's proportions, or does it collapse them? Not: Is this interpretation true? Not: Is this interpretation useful? But: Does it maintain the ratio between work and witness, or does it crowd what it claims to clarify? Interpretation becomes ethical only when it preserves proportion. It is guilty until proven proportionate. It must justify its intervention rather than asserting its right. It must demonstrate that it adds measure rather than overwhelming it. This does not eliminate interpretation. It subjects it to a test it has rarely faced: the test of restraint.

If Post-Interpretive Criticism's claims are sound, why did they not arise sooner? The answer is not that previous thinkers were wrong. It is that post-war intellectual culture needed interpretation in ways we no longer do. After 1945, aesthetics developed in the shadow of atrocity. The Holocaust, colonial violence, fascism, all demanded articulation. To remain silent before them was complicity. Art criticism inherited this imperative. Speech became not just analytical but morally necessary.

Academic institutions rewarded discourse production. Publishing, tenure, grants, conferences, all required output. Silence was not publishable. Museum practice followed similar logic. Exhibitions required wall texts, catalog essays, interpretive programs. Democratic access meant explanation. This was not false consciousness. It was historically appropriate response.

What changed: We now face the opposite problem. Not too little interpretation, but interpretive saturation. Every artwork arrives pre-interpreted. Gallery walls overflow with text. Criticism multiplies faster than attention. Social media produces instant readings before perception completes. The problem is no longer access to discourse but protection from it. Post-Interpretive Criticism emerges not because earlier needs were false, but because conditions have inverted.

Post-Interpretive Criticism shares obvious affinities with phenomenological aesthetics. Both emphasize direct encounter, both resist premature conceptualization, both attend to perceptual structure. Phenomenology, especially in Merleau-Ponty and Dufrenne, insists that perception precedes interpretation. Aesthetic experience involves pre-reflective engagement that cannot be reduced to concepts. Post-Interpretive Criticism agrees. The encounter possesses structure prior to interpretation.

But phenomenology describes experience while Post-Interpretive Criticism governs conduct. Phenomenology tells us how encounter works, what consciousness does, how perception unfolds, what constitutes aesthetic experience. But it does not establish when interpretation is permitted or how much interpretation is proportionate. Phenomenology explains appearance. Post-Interpretive Criticism disciplines response. Presence alone is insufficient without restraint.

It is not enough to acknowledge that direct encounter exists. One must also ask: What threatens it? How is it violated? What conduct preserves it? This is why Post-Interpretive Criticism cannot be absorbed into phenomenology. It addresses the question phenomenology did not ask: What discipline must govern speech to protect what silence reveals?

Post-Interpretive Criticism practiced consistently produces specific consequences. For criticism: fewer interpretations, higher thresholds. Critics write less, publish less, explain less. The volume of discourse contracts. For curation: reduced narration, protected encounters. Wall texts shrink or disappear. Exhibitions become harder to curate. For pedagogy: silence as training. Students learn restraint before articulation. Aesthetic education includes negative capability, the capacity to remain in uncertainty without reaching for concepts. For institutions: loss of interpretive authority. Museums, universities, critics surrender the power to complete the work through explanation.

Post-Interpretive Criticism does not grow the field. It contracts it. The field would narrow. The question is not whether this is appealing. The question is whether it is necessary.

At this point, further explanation would be redundant. The method has been named. Its cost has been stated. What remains cannot be argued for, only practiced.

Post-Interpretive Criticism does not claim to be anti-intellectual. It claims to be precise. It does not reject interpretation categorically. It subjects interpretation to a test it rarely faces: the test of proportion. It does not promise liberation or empowerment. It offers discipline.

The work is not finished. Post-Interpretive Criticism remains incomplete as method. Its principles require refinement. Its applications need testing. Its limits must be discovered through practice. But one thing is clear: the 20th-century settlement cannot continue unchallenged. Not because it was wrong historically, but because it has become wrong circumstantially. What served genuine need in 1950 now produces the problem it was meant to solve. Interpretation, once necessary speech, has become noise.

If Post-Interpretive Criticism succeeds, it will not be because it defeated rival theories. It will be because enough practitioners discovered that restraint serves the encounter better than explanation. The test is simple: Does the work become more present when we speak less? Does proportion clarify when language withdraws? If the answer is yes, and the evidence suggests it is, then interpretation must now justify itself. Not because meaning has disappeared. But because the encounter has begun to matter again.

This essay establishes the theoretical foundation and historical break of Post-Interpretive Criticism. It does not claim universal adoption or institutional inevitability. It claims necessity within specific conditions: interpretive saturation, discourse excess, and the erosion of

unmediated encounter. Whether those conditions obtain is observable, not debatable. Whether Post-Interpretive Criticism addresses them effectively remains to be tested.

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