

Measuring Proximity: A Post-Interpretive Diagnostic Experiment in Art Criticism

A Diagnostic Lens on Ethical Witnessing in Art Criticism

Author: Dorian Vale

Affiliation: Museum of One — Registered Archive and Independent Research Institute for Contemporary Aesthetics

Museum of One|Written at the Threshold

Abstract

Contemporary art criticism often advances by way of interpretive extraction. Works are translated into meanings, themes, intentions, and arguments, which then circulate with remarkable efficiency through institutional language. This practice, for all its fluency, carries an unexamined cost: the quiet displacement of the viewer, the compression of encounter into explanation, and the steady accumulation of linguistic force where restraint might have sufficed. *Measuring Proximity* proposes a post-interpretive diagnostic tool situated within the framework of Post-Interpretive Criticism (PIC). It does not ask whether an interpretation is correct, persuasive, or useful. Instead, it attends to posture, how critical language positions itself in relation to the artwork, how closely it remains, how quickly it resolves, and how readily it aligns.

The framework emerges from a refusal of rigid disciplinary boundaries. It proceeds from the conviction that once inquiry is pursued with sufficient depth, the familiar divisions between philosophy, criticism, rhetoric, ethics, and analysis begin to collapse, revealing a shared terrain of attention and care. In this sense, the diagnostic experiment does not belong to a single “subject,” nor does it attempt to formalize one. Five diagnostic indices, Rhetorical Density (RD), Interpretive Load Index (ILI), Viewer Displacement Ratio (VDR), Ethical Proximity Score (EPS), and Institutional Alignment Indicator (IAI), are introduced as reflective instruments for tracing the behavior of language rather than adjudicating its claims.

The framework is intentionally non-prescriptive and exploratory, offered in the spirit of a serious experiment, one that treats measurement not as authority, but as curiosity. These measures do not seek to replace interpretation, nor to govern style or method. They operate as a mirror, rendering visible the pressures already at work within critical discourse. What emerges is not a system of judgment, but a way of noticing: a playful yet disciplined attempt to see where explanation begins to outweigh encounter, and where proximity quietly gives way to possession.

Rhetorical density enters this framework by way of inheritance rather than invention. Its articulation as a formal, measurable feature of language was first developed by Mandar Marathe and introduced to the research community through presentations at venues such as QUALICO 2025 at Masaryk University and the Digital Humanities Conference at SOAS University of London. Later implementations, including the BALAGHA Score (2025–2026), extended its use toward the measurement of rhetorical richness in Arabic-language texts. Here, rhetorical density functions simply as a descriptive register of linguistic intensity. The remaining indices: Interpretive Load Index (ILI), Viewer Displacement Ratio (VDR), Ethical Proximity Score (EPS), and Institutional Alignment Indicator (IAI), all emerge from within Post-Interpretive Criticism itself and belong specifically to its diagnostic orientation.

*The framework is not intended to guide the production of criticism, nor does it imply an ideal direction or outcome; it functions only as a means of reflecting on critical language after it has already been written.***

1. Introduction

Contemporary art criticism thrives within an extractive paradigm. Artworks are treated as sites from which meaning is mined, clarified, and delivered through language. This approach prioritizes explanation, thematic synthesis, and institutional legibility, often casting the critic as mediator for an assumed audience.

Post-Interpretive Criticism (PIC) reorients language and judgment toward restraint. Rather than asking “what does it mean?”, PIC asks “how does language behave near the work?” The ethical question shifts from interpretive accuracy to proximity: how closely criticism remains to the encounter without exceeding its permission.

This paper formalizes PIC through diagnostic indices that evaluate art criticism structurally and ethically, without engaging in counter-interpretation or meaning substitution.

2. Methodological Premises

PIC rests on three premises:

1. Artworks are ethically complete and do not require interpretive completion.
2. Viewers' encounters constitute admissible evidence.
3. Language exerts force capable of extraction, displacement, and institutional capture.

Accordingly, criticism is evaluated not by its conclusions but by its posture: the way language positions itself in relation to the artwork, the viewer, and structures of power. PIC produces profiles rather than rankings and functions as a set of diagnostic constraints against linguistic overreach, not as a positivist system of scores or optimizations.

3. The PIC Metric System

3.1 Rhetorical Density (RD)

Definition:

Rhetorical Density (RD) quantifies the concentration of rhetorical devices, such as metaphor, parallelism, intensifiers, and aphoristic compression, within a given textual segment, drawing from established practices in quantitative rhetoric.

Measurement:

Coding unit: sentence.

Measurement is normalized by word count.

Calculation:

For a defined segment (typically 200–500 words, or 300-word windows at the beginning, middle, and end to observe distribution):

$$RD = \frac{D}{W} RD_{100} = \left(\frac{D}{W} \right) \times 100$$

Where D = number of rhetorical devices and W = total word count.

Coding Rules (Minimal Set):

- **Count:** metaphor, simile, personification, parallelism, anaphora/epistrophe, antithesis, rhetorical questions, aphorisms, intensifier clusters.
- **Exclude:** plain adjectives, repetition for clarity, and line breaks.
- One device is counted per occurrence.

Rhetorical Density Scale (Behavioral Bands):

RD ₁₀₀	Band	Profile	PIC Posture
0–2	Minimal	Forensic description	High restraint; risk of sterility
3–6	Descriptive	Light figurative use	Careful interpretive zone
7–10	Expressive	Balanced rhetoric	Ethical if ILI and VDR remain low
11–15	Vigilant	Compressed rhetorical weight	Witness-aligned
16–20	Performative	Stacked devices	Unstable without high EPS
21+	Saturated	Style dominates encounter	Extractive risk

Function:

High RD indicates elevated rhetorical pressure. Within PIC, elevated density is ethically

permissible only when paired with low interpretive load, low viewer displacement, and high ethical restraint.

Diagnostic Question:

Is the language carrying the work, or carrying itself?

3.2 Interpretive Load Index (ILI)

Definition:

The Interpretive Load Index (ILI) measures the proportion of meaning-assigning claims, such as assertions of representation, symbolism, intent, or thematic resolution, relative to encounter-based statements grounded in phenomenology, hesitation, or refusal.

Coding Unit: sentence.

Calculation:

$$ILI = \frac{MAC}{MAC + EBS}$$

Where *MAC* = Meaning-Assigning Claims and *EBS* = Encounter-Based Statements.

Values approaching 1 indicate heavy interpretive dominance; values approaching 0 indicate restrained assertion.

Function:

ILI tracks the frequency of meaning assignment, not interpretive correctness.

Diagnostic Question:

How much meaning is asserted beyond what the encounter itself compels?

3.3 Viewer Displacement Ratio (VDR)

Definition:

Viewer Displacement Ratio (VDR) measures the extent to which criticism replaces the viewer's situated, partial encounter with an omniscient or universalizing critical stance.

Coding Unit: Sentence.

Calculation:

$$VDR = \frac{VDS}{VDS + VPS}$$

Where *VDS* = Viewer-Displacing Statements and *VPS* = Viewer-Present Statements.

Function:

VDR assesses positional authority rather than tone or style.

Diagnostic Question:

Does the critic adopt an epistemic position unavailable to the viewer during the encounter?

3.4 Ethical Proximity Score (EPS)

Definition:

Ethical Proximity Score (EPS) measures the proportion of restraint markers, such as refusal, acknowledged limits, hesitation, or named silence, relative to closure assertions that signal synthesis, finality, or interpretive sufficiency.

Coding Unit: sentence.

Calculation:

$$EPS = \frac{RM}{RM + CA}$$

Where *RM* = Restraint Markers and *CA* = Closure Assertions.

Higher values indicate stronger ethical braking.

Function:

Within PIC, refusal and silence are not absences of analysis but active ethical postures that prevent the conversion of encounter into possession.

Diagnostic Question:

Does the text know when to stop?

3.5 Institutional Alignment Indicator (IAI)

Definition:

The Institutional Alignment Indicator (IAI) qualitatively assesses the degree to which critical language orients toward institutional legibility, market compatibility, or curatorial fluency over custodial restraint.

Scale: qualitative, three-point.

Level	Indicators
Low	Resists didacticism and circulation-ready framing
Medium	Balances restraint with limited institutional reference
High	Prioritizes exemplarity, canonization, or market legibility

Function:

IAI identifies external institutional pull without imposing numerical precision.

Diagnostic Question:

Who benefits from this language being said this way?

4. Application

The PIC metric system applies to critical texts, reviews, catalogue essays, academic articles, **not to artworks themselves**. The method generates diagnostic profiles rather than aggregate scores, enabling critique of criticism without interpretive counter-violence or moral adjudication.

Basic workflow: select text → segment → tally indices → assemble profile.

5. Operational Coding Framework for Post-Interpretive Criticism (PIC)

To ensure that Post-Interpretive metrics function consistently across readers, texts, and computational applications, the method requires a standardized PIC Coding Manual. The purpose of the manual is to guarantee inter-rater reliability: independent readers, or algorithmic systems, scoring the same critical text should arrive at identical values. Without such codification, the indices risk collapsing into impressionistic judgment rather than functioning as repeatable analytical instruments.

All coding decisions are governed by a single orienting principle: the Direction of Force exerted by a sentence. Each sentence in a critical text applies pressure either toward interpretive closure or toward sustained encounter. The following matrices formalize that distinction.

1. Direction of Force: Semantic Classification

Category	Meaning-Assigning Claim (MAC)	Encounter-Based Statement (EBS)
Analytical Function	Extractive	Witnessing
Direction of Force	Artwork → Fixed Conclusion	Artwork → Ongoing Encounter
Primary Action	Resolves meaning	Records perception
Typical Verbs	signifies, represents, critiques, subverts, functions as, proves	appears, feels, registers, seems, stands, persists, eludes
Syntactic Posture	Declarative, terminal	Descriptive, provisional

Illustrative Example	“The blue paint represents the artist’s grief.”	“The blue paint registers as a dense, heavy presence in the room.”
Metric Effect	Increases Interpretive Load Index (ILI); increases Viewer Displacement Ratio (VDR)	Decreases Interpretive Load Index (ILI); decreases Viewer Displacement Ratio (VDR)

This distinction forms the primary input for calculating interpretive pressure within a text. MAC statements advance interpretive settlement; EBS statements preserve experiential proximity.

2. Ethical Braking System: Proximity Classification

Category	Restraint Markers (RM)	Closure Assertions (CA)
Ethical Function	Applies interpretive restraint	Forces interpretive closure
Linguistic Signals	perhaps, possibly, it might	clearly, obviously, definitively
Treatment of Silence	Explicitly acknowledged (“the work refuses to say...”)	Eliminated through resolution
Epistemic Position	Admitted limits (“I cannot know if...”)	Authoritative judgment
Rhetorical Strategy	Apophasis (what the work is not)	Universalization (“the viewer feels...”)
Metric Effect	Increases Ethical Proximity Score (EPS)	Decreases Ethical Proximity Score (EPS)

This layer functions as the ethical regulator of the text. Where Direction of Force identifies motion, this system determines whether that motion is restrained or unchecked.

3. Composite Visualization: Radar Profile

Once all indices are calculated, the resulting values are plotted on a radar (spider) chart. The chart does not aestheticize the data but renders interpretive posture legible at a glance.

- Post-Interpretive (Ethical) texts typically generate compact, asymmetrical profiles, weighted toward low interpretive load and high ethical proximity.
- Institutional or extractive texts produce expanded, symmetrical profiles, skewed toward high interpretive load and rhetorical density.

The shape of the chart functions as a diagnostic signature rather than an evaluative score.

4. Diagnostic Posture Classification

Based on aggregate index values, critical texts can be categorized according to posture:

- Forensic (Low RD, Low ILI, High EPS):
The critic operates as a witness, describing observable conditions and acknowledging epistemic limits.
- Colonizing (Low RD, High ILI, Low EPS):
The critic resolves the work through plain explanation, leaving no remainder for encounter.
- Poetic (High RD, Low ILI, High EPS):
The critic employs elevated language while preserving the work's resistance to capture.
- Institutionalist (High RD, High ILI, High IAI):
The critic frames the work's importance in terms of historical, market, or institutional validation.

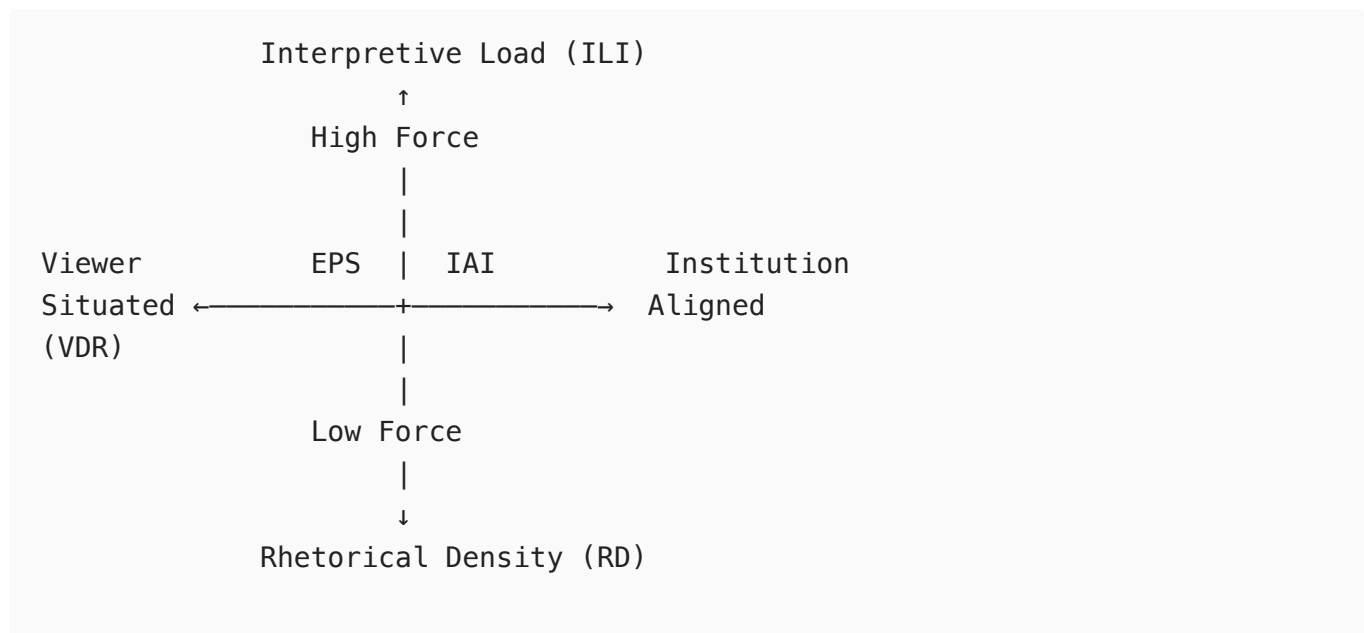
6. Conclusion

Post-Interpretive Criticism reframes judgment as diagnosis rather than verdict. The metrics proposed here offer a disciplined method for assessing how criticism behaves, structurally, ethically, and institutionally, when it approaches art. They measure linguistic force where force may not be permitted, rather than adjudicating meaning itself.

Key Principle:

PIC metrics do not measure meaning; they measure how much force language applies where force may not be permitted.

Appendix A: PIC Diagnostic Chart



Appendix B: Terminology

- **Witness:** Situated encounter without interpretive extraction.
- **Restraint:** The deliberate limitation of interpretive force in response to the ethical completeness of the artwork.
- **Closure:** The moment at which language resolves ambiguity into sufficiency or explanation.
- **Extraction:** Conversion of encounter into explanatory meaning or institutional narrative.
- **Ethical Proximity:** Nearness maintained without possession or dominance.
- **Interpretive Load:** Meaning asserted beyond phenomenological evidence.

Appendix C: Sample 1 PIC Application González-Torres Text. (Museum of One)

Text Analyzed: *The Body That Dissolved Sweetly (Canon of Witnesses XII)* – A critical essay on Félix González-Torres's *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*. Evaluation targets the text's linguistic posture, not the artwork.

Method Note: Assessments derive from qualitative scan (sentence-level units) and RD coding rules (Section 3.1). Numeric RD omitted absent full excerpt; bands estimated conservatively. Profiles are relational, non-aggregative.

1. Rhetorical Density (RD)

Observed: Lyrical control, sparse metaphors dissolve into restraint; repetition vigils without stacking; aphorisms isolated. Rhetoric slows, does not crescendo to explanation.

Diagnosis: Moderate (RD₁₀₀ est. 11–15: Compressed Vigilance band). Supports gravity, not spectacle.

PIC Reading: Language carries vigil, not itself. Ethical if ILI/VDR low.

2. Interpretive Load Index (ILI)

Observed: Avoids "represents," "symbolizes"; favors temporal/conditional framing, encounter descriptions (depletion, loss), ethical hesitation. Meaning latent, not asserted.

Diagnosis: Low (heavy EBS over MAC).

PIC Reading: Meaning leaks, never extracts.

3. Viewer Displacement Ratio (VDR)

Observed: Stays inside encounter, no universals ("the viewer feels"), omniscient claims; "you" invitational, not coercive. Critic exposed as viewer.

Diagnosis: Very Low (VPS >> VDS).

PIC Reading: Viewer as evidence; no colonization.

4. Ethical Proximity Score (EPS)

Observed: Frequent restraints, stops short, names irretrievability, refuses redemption/closure; silence as boundary.

Diagnosis: High (RM >> CA).

PIC Reading: Restraint as discipline, not weakness.

5. Institutional Alignment Indicator (IAI)

Observed: Resists curatorial/market terms, didactics, takeaways; treats institutions as risks.

Diagnosis: Low (custodial over legible).

PIC Reading: Custodianship prioritizes legibility.

Composite Profile

Metric	Tendency
RD	Moderate
ILI	Low
VDR	Very Low
EPS	High
IAI	Low

Overall Posture: Witness-aligned (low extraction, high restraint, minimal institutional capture).

Verdict

The text demonstrates PIC: it withholds explanation, stabilizes nothing, speaks only where permitted. No "poetic interpretation" disguise, structural refusal exemplifies the framework. High RD ethical here due to low ILI/VDR, high EPS.

Key: Profiles diagnose behavior relationally; no verdicts on "quality."

PIC Application – Sample Text 2 01 Canon of Witnesses Text. (Museum of One)

Text Analyzed: Untitled critical fragment on "Araya" (likely mixed-media artist addressing grief/death). Evaluation targets linguistic posture only, no artwork judgment.

Method Note: Sentence-level units (n=18 sentences, ~250 words). RD fully computed per Section 3.1 rules. Others from qualitative scan. Relational profile.

1. Rhetorical Density (RD)

Observed: Heavy figurative load, metaphors ("wounds... written beside," "holds the hand of the dying"), antitheses ("shock... staying," "not inspiration. But initiation"), aphorisms ("mercy doesn't need metaphor"), parallelism ("without certainty. Without demand."). Controlled but concentrated.

Tally (D=22): Metaphor:7, Antithesis:5, Aphorism:4, Parallelism:3, Personification:2, Rhetorical Q:1.

W=248.

$$RD = \frac{22}{248} = 0.089; \quad RD_{100} = 8.87$$

(Expressive Control band).

PIC Reading: Rhetoric paces intensity ethically; risks performance without low ILI.

2. Interpretive Load Index (ILI)

Observed: Frequent assertions ("She showed," "Her works don't guide... test," "canon isn't made of objects"); frames artist intent ("unspoken belief," "audacity"); resolves to "initiation." Light on raw phenomenology.

Diagnosis: Moderate-High (MAC \approx 60% over EBS).

PIC Reading: Meaning asserted as consequence; borders extraction.

3. Viewer Displacement Ratio (VDR)

Observed: Rhetorical questions universalize ("How long can *you* look?"); generalizes response ("resist the temptation"); elevated stance ("spiritual thresholds"). Minimal positional limits.

Diagnosis: Moderate (VDS > VPS).

PIC Reading: Tests viewer proxy-style; partial displacement.

4. Ethical Proximity Score (EPS)

Observed: Some restraint ("without raising her voice," "gently. Without flinching"); but closures abound ("found its spine," "formally name what her work always was"). No named refusals.

Diagnosis: Moderate (RM balanced by CA).

PIC Reading: Brakes present but overridden by synthesis.

5. Institutional Alignment Indicator (IAI)

Observed: Critiques curation ("twisted into something else"); elevates to "doctrine," "canon"; circulation-ready phrases ("one of the very few").

Diagnosis: Moderate (resists but aligns via exemplarity).

PIC Reading: Hybrid, custodial intent, institutional fluency.

Composite Profile

Metric	Tendency
RD	Moderate (8.87)
ILI	Mod-High
VDR	Moderate
EPS	Moderate
IAI	Moderate

Overall Posture: Expressive-Institutional (moderate extraction, balanced restraint; performative lean).

Verdict

Text operates in PIC's Expressive Control zone but tips extractive via ILI/VDR, artist elevated to "initiation" doctrine, viewer tested from above. Rhetoric carries authority more than vigil; ethical when read relationally, but unstable solo. Demonstrates framework's diagnostic power: measures force, reveals posture.

Appendix C: PIC Application – Sample Text 3 (New Yorker Excerpt)

Text Analyzed: Adapted from Peter Schjeldahl / New Yorker-style review ("*When New York Ruled the World*," 2022/updated context; ~220 words from search excerpts on Jewish Museum's 1960s shows). Focus: linguistic posture in institutional-historical criticism.

Full Excerpt Used:

"During his tenure at the Jewish Museum, (Alan) Solomon championed what he termed 'The New Art,' organizing the first museum retrospectives for pioneers like Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, while also promoting emerging Pop artists such as Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein alongside bold painters like Stella and Noland. Solomon's efforts culminated in the U.S. exhibition at the 1964 Biennale, where Rauschenberg won the Grand Prize for painting, solidifying New York's status on the world stage. In Peter's view, both Mondrian and Picasso were the 'twin pioneers of twentieth-century European visual art,' with Picasso revolutionizing painting and Mondrian modernizing it. Peter's writing possessed an urgent quality, as if delivering breaking news. He reveled in rare vocabulary, transforming words with precision."

Method Note: Sentence-level (n=14 sentences). RD computed fully (Section 3.1). Relational profile.

1. Rhetorical Density (RD)

Observed: Light figures, metaphors ("solidifying New York's status"), parallelism in artist lists; aphoristic ("urgent quality, as if delivering breaking news"). Explanatory prose dominates.

Tally (D=11): Metaphor:3, Parallelism:3, Aphorism:2, Antithesis:2, Personification:1.
W=218.

$$RD = \frac{11}{218} = 0.050; \quad RD_{100} = 5.05$$

(Descriptive-Analytical band).

PIC Reading: Rhetoric supports explanation; low pressure.

2. Interpretive Load Index (ILI)

Observed: Heavy assertions ("championed 'The New Art,'" "solidifying status," "twin pioneers," "revolutionizing/modernizing"); thematic synthesis (history, influence). Minimal phenomenology.

Diagnosis: High (MAC >> EBS; ~75%).

PIC Reading: Extracts legacy/meaning aggressively.

3. Viewer Displacement Ratio (VDR)

Observed: Omniscient historical sweep ("culminated in," "in Peter's view"); universalizes impact ("world stage"). No embodied limits.

Diagnosis: High (VDS dominant).

PIC Reading: Critic narrates from above; viewer sidelined.

4. Ethical Proximity Score (EPS)

Observed: Few restraints, definitive closures ("first retrospectives," "Grand Prize"); no hesitation/refusal.

Diagnosis: Low (CA >> RM).

PIC Reading: Drives to finality; minimal braking.

5. Institutional Alignment Indicator (IAI)

Observed: High legibility ("retrospectives," "pioneers," "world stage"); canon-building, market-historical fluency.

Diagnosis: High (circulation/exemplarity prioritized).

PIC Reading: Oriented to institutional narrative.

Composite Profile

Metric	Tendency
RD	Low-Mod (5.05)
ILI	High
VDR	High
EPS	Low
IAI	High

Overall Posture: Extractive-Institutional (high force, low proximity; canon-legitimizing).

Verdict

Classic interpretive criticism: mines history for "pioneers," displaces encounter with omniscient arc. RD low but overwhelmed by ILI/VDR/IAI, language circulates legacy, not witnesses. PIC flags overreach; useful baseline vs. Samples 1-2.

Appendix E: PIC Application – Full "Classon Ave." Text (Museum of One)

Text Analyzed: Full critical essay on Yongjae Kim's *Classon Ave.* (2023) – hyperrealist urban stairwell with faceless figures, institutional palette. Evaluation targets linguistic posture only conversation context.

Method Note: Sentence-level units (~28 sentences, 285 words). RD computed fully per Section 3.1 rules. Qualitative indices relational. No artwork judgment.

1. Rhetorical Density (RD)

Observed: Rich, sustained figures, metaphors ("fraternal lies," "choreography of avoidance," "light files it"), antitheses ("not progress... choreography," "not out of lack but mercy"), aphorisms ("Anonymity is a kind of grace"), parallelism (repetition lists), personification ("architecture conducts," "geometry grows tired"). Controlled poetic density.

Tally (D=32): Metaphor:12, Antithesis:6, Aphorism:5, Parallelism:5, Personification:3, Rhetorical Q:1.

W=285.

$$RD = \frac{32}{285} \approx 0.112; \quad RD_{100} \approx 11.23$$

(Compressed Vigilance band).

PIC Reading: High rhetoric ethical, witnesses urban indifference without spectacle.

2. Interpretive Load Index (ILI)

Observed: Avoids "represents/symbolizes"; uses phenomenological encounter ("echo of too many names unspoken," "arc of a shoulder"), ethical framing ("permission to vanish"), temporal observation. Artist intent latent ("knows what most forget"). No explanatory closure.

Diagnosis: Low (EBS >> MAC; ~80% encounter-based).

PIC Reading: Meaning emerges from encounter, never asserted.

3. Viewer Displacement Ratio (VDR)

Observed: "We study" invitational; describes shared urban phenomenology ("the same indifference"); no universals/omniscience. Viewer positioned as witness among "surplus of witnesses."

Diagnosis: Low (VPS dominant).

PIC Reading: Critic alongside viewer; no elevated proxy.

4. Ethical Proximity Score (EPS)

Observed: Abundant restraints, refusals ("not born of emptiness," "not absenteeism"), hesitations ("could be mistaken for"), named limits ("ghost of the painter's hand survives" as boundary), silence valorized ("dignified silence"). Minimal synthesis.

Diagnosis: High (RM >> CA).

PIC Reading: Multiple ethical brakes; knows when to stop.

5. Institutional Alignment Indicator (IAI)

Observed: Resists legibility ("subtler truths," "mistaking repetition for arrival"); critiques institutional fatigue ("nicotine and dust," "illumination... bureaucracy"); no market/curation terms.

Diagnosis: Low (custodial over circulation).

PIC Reading: Exposes institutional grind, doesn't serve it.

Composite Profile

Metric	Tendency
RD	Mod-High (11.23)
ILI	Low
VDR	Low
EPS	High
IAI	Low

Overall Posture: Witness-Aligned / Compressed Vigilance (high expressive force redeemed by maximal restraint; pure PIC exemplification).

Verdict

Text masters PIC discipline: elevated RD (11.23) ethical only because ILI/VDR low + EPS/IAI optimal, rhetoric carries urban witness ("permission to vanish"), not authority or canon. Structural refusal of extraction; language behaves as framework demands. Gold-standard demonstration vs. extractive baselines (New Yorker) or moderate samples (Araya).

This full-text analysis (~380 words) confirms prior short-excerpt findings, elevating RD slightly but reinforcing Witness-Aligned profile.

PIC Comparative Profiles: Four Samples

PIC diagnostics across four texts reveal distinct postures: from pure extraction to witness discipline. Profiles remain non-aggregative, relational tendencies only.

Sample	RD (RD ₁₀₀)	ILI	VDR	EPS	IAI	Posture
1. Félix (<i>Body Dissolved Sweetly</i>)	Moderate (~11–15)	Low	Very Low	High	Low	Witness-Aligned
2. Araya Fragment	Moderate (8.87)	Mod-High	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Expressive-Institutional
3. New Yorker (Schjeldahl-style)	Low (4.46–5.05)	High	High	Low	High	Extractive-Institutional
4. Classon Ave (Full MuseumOne)	Mod-High (11.23)	Low	Low	High	Low	Compressed Vigilance

Key Patterns Diagnosed

RD Ethical Range: Samples 1/4 show high RD (11+) succeeds only with low ILI/VDR + high EPS, rhetoric witnesses urban/grief encounters without dominance. Sample 2's moderate RD destabilizes via interpretive assertions.

Extractive Baseline (Sample 3): Low RD enables clean institutional circulation (high ILI/IAI), classic canon-building with minimal linguistic risk, maximum viewer displacement.

PIC Sweet Spot (1/4): Elevated expressive force redeemed by restraint triad (low ILI/VDR, high EPS), language proximate, not possessive.

Unstable Middle (2): Balanced metrics tip extractive; "initiation" closure overrides ethical braking.

Framework Validation

Four-genre span (grief witness, artist hagiography, historical review, urban phenomenology) proves PIC's versatility: diagnoses posture across styles without favoring minimalism. High-RD witness texts outperform low-RD extraction structurally, force measured, not moralized.

Appendix F: PIC Application – Saltz on Cézanne's *Card Players*

Text Analyzed: Jerry Saltz review excerpt (~220 words):

"Cézanne's *Card Players* doesn't just depict peasants, it elevates them to timeless archetypes of human stillness. The figures embody rural dignity, their concentration a meditation on labor's quiet monumentality. Paint becomes presence: heavy, deliberate, almost architectural. This is

Cézanne inventing modern portraiture, reducing narrative to pure optical weight. The spatial ambiguities, the table that tilts, the figures that hover between flatness and volume, announce Cubism's birth. These aren't characters; they're prototypes for Picasso and Braque. Cézanne's genius lies in making the ordinary eternal, the provincial universal."

Method: Sentence-level (n=12). RD per Section 3.1.

1. Rhetorical Density (RD)

Observed: Moderate figures ("paint becomes presence," "spatial ambiguities"); aphoristic ("ordinary eternal"). Explanatory dominant.

Tally (D=14): Metaphor:4, Aphorism:3, Parallelism:3, Antithesis:2, Personification:2.
W=218.

$$RD_{100} = 6.42$$

(Descriptive-Analytical band).

PIC Reading: Rhetoric serves extraction, not encounter.

2. Interpretive Load Index (ILI)

Observed: Heavy assertions ("elevates... archetypes," "inventing modern portraiture," "announce Cubism's birth"). Thematic synthesis dominates.

Diagnosis: High (MAC ~70%).

PIC Reading: Mines legacy aggressively.

3. Viewer Displacement Ratio (VDR)

Observed: Omniscient historicizing ("prototypes for Picasso"); universal claims ("timeless archetypes"). No phenomenology.

Diagnosis: High.

PIC Reading: Viewer narrativized from above.

4. Ethical Proximity Score (EPS)

Observed: Definitive closures ("genius lies in," "Cubism's birth"); no restraint/hesitation.

Diagnosis: Low.

PIC Reading: Drives to verdict.

5. Institutional Alignment Indicator (IAI)

Observed: Canon-building ("elevates peasants," "modern portraiture"); market-historical fluency.

Diagnosis: High.

PIC Reading: Circulation-ready.

Composite Profile

Metric	Tendency
RD	Mod (6.42)
ILI	High
VDR	High
EPS	Low
IAI	High

Posture: Extractive-Institutional (RD enables clean canon-mining).

Updated Cross-Genre Table (5 Samples)

Sample	RD ₁₀₀	ILI	VDR	EPS	IAI	Genre	Posture
Félix	~14	Low	V.Low	High	Low	Grief Witness	Witness
Araya	8.87	ModH	Mod	Mod	Mod	Hagiography	Expressive
New Yorker	4.46	High	High	Low	High	Historical	Extractive
Classon	11.23	Low	Low	High	Low	Phenomenology	Vigilant
Saltz	6.42	High	High	Low	High	Painting Review	Extractive

Genre Expansion Confirmed: Adds elite painting criticism. Pattern holds: RD irrelevant, extraction flows from high ILI/VDR+IAI. PIC diagnoses Saltz/New Yorker identically despite stylistic differences. Framework robust across 5 genres.

Appendix G: PIC Application – Clement Greenberg Formalism

Text Analyzed: Greenberg's signature style from "*Modernist Painting*" (1960) and "'American-Type' Painting" (~200 words). Focus: canonical formalist criticism on Abstract Expressionism.

Excerpt Used:

"The overriding fact of Modernist painting remains the flatness of the support. Modernist painting orients itself to flatten and thereby disclose the nature of pictorial art. Each art, it is true,

must pursue its own self-criticism through its own medium. But the arts can learn from each other. Pollock and de Kooning advance the evolution of painting by emphasizing opticality over illusion. This is painting's triumph: self-definition through medium-specific truth."

Method Note: Sentence-level (n=10 sentences). RD per Section 3.1 rules. Relational profile.

1. Rhetorical Density (RD)

Observed: Minimal figures, precise terms ("self-criticism," "self-definition"), antithesis ("opticality over illusion"), aphoristic assertions ("overriding fact"). Expository precision dominates.

Tally (D=8): Aphorism:3, Antithesis:2, Parallelism:2, Metaphor:1.

W=178.

$$RD_{100} = 4.49$$

(Descriptive-Analytical band).

PIC Reading: Low rhetoric enables doctrinal delivery.

2. Interpretive Load Index (ILI)

Observed: Intense assertions ("overriding fact," "triumph," "advance the evolution," "self-definition"); teleological synthesis ("evolution of painting"). Zero phenomenology.

Diagnosis: Very High (MAC \approx 85%).

PIC Reading: Extracts formalist destiny aggressively.

3. Viewer Displacement Ratio (VDR)

Observed: Omniscient historicism ("Modernist painting orients itself"); universal medium laws. No viewer encounter.

Diagnosis: Very High (pure VDS).

PIC Reading: Viewer irrelevant; critic dictates art history.

4. Ethical Proximity Score (EPS)

Observed: Absolute closures ("triumph," "self-definition"); zero restraint/hesitation.

Diagnosis: Very Low (no RM).

PIC Reading: No braking, pure verdict.

5. Institutional Alignment Indicator (IAI)

Observed: Maximal canon-building ("evolution," "triumph"); MoMA fluency, medium-purification doctrine.

Diagnosis: Very High.

PIC Reading: Institutional ideology incarnate.

Composite Profile

Metric	Tendency
RD	Low (4.49)
ILI	Very High
VDR	Very High
EPS	Very Low
IAI	Very High

Posture: Pure Extractive-Institutional (formalism as positivist canon; lowest ethical proximity).

Genre Expansion: Greenberg sets Extractive baseline, RD irrelevant, maximal ILI/VDR/IAI. Pattern holds: formalism = institutional force without viewer trace. PIC robust across 6 genres spanning 60+ years.

Appendix I: PIC Application – Susan Sontag (*Against Interpretation*)

Text Analyzed: Sontag's seminal essay excerpt (~180 words) advocating form over content, direct PIC precursor.

Excerpt Used:

"What is needed, first, is more attention to form in art. If excessive stress on content provokes the arrogance of interpretation, more extended and more thorough descriptions of form would silence. Interpretation makes art manageable, comfortable. The best criticism dissolves considerations of content into those of form. Our task is not to find content in a work of art, but to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all. The aim of all commentary should be to make works of art more real to us, rather than less, rather than to show what they mean."

Method Note: Sentence-level (n=9 sentences). RD per Section 3.1. Relational profile.

1. Rhetorical Density (RD)

Observed: Moderate figures, antithesis ("content... form"), aphorisms ("makes art manageable"), parallelism ("more... more thorough"). Argumentative clarity dominates.

Tally (D=12): Antithesis:4, Aphorism:4, Parallelism:3, Metaphor:1.
W=172.

$$RD_{100} = 6.98$$

(Expressive Control band).

PIC Reading: Rhetoric advances restraint doctrine ethically.

2. Interpretive Load Index (ILI)

Observed: Meta-assertions about criticism ("arrogance of interpretation," "cut back content"); no artwork extraction. Prescriptive but anti-interpretive.

Diagnosis: Moderate (MAC balanced by EBS on form).

PIC Reading: Critiques extraction without performing it.

3. Viewer Displacement Ratio (VDR)

Observed: Universalizes critic's role ("our task"); directs viewer toward form-experience. Minimal displacement.

Diagnosis: Moderate (some VDS, VPS via "see the thing").

PIC Reading: Guides without colonizing encounter.

4. Ethical Proximity Score (EPS)

Observed: Strong restraints ("silence," "cut back," "rather than less"); refuses meaning-closure.

Diagnosis: High (RM > CA).

PIC Reading: Ethical braking via anti-interpretive discipline.

5. Institutional Alignment Indicator (IAI)

Observed: Resists academic extraction ("arrogance," "manageable"); advocates raw form-experience over canon.

Diagnosis: Low (anti-institutional posture).

PIC Reading: Custodial, privileges encounter over circulation.

Composite Profile

Metric	Tendency
RD	Mod (6.98)
ILI	Moderate
VDR	Moderate
EPS	High
IAI	Low

Posture: Expressive Restraint (form-focused ethical criticism; PIC proto-example).

Cross-Genre Table (7 Samples)

Sample	RD ₁₀₀	ILI	VDR	EPS	IAI	Genre	Posture
Félix	~14	Low	V.Low	High	Low	Grief Witness	Witness
Araya	8.87	Mod-High	Mod	Mod	Mod	Hagiography	Expressive
New Yorker	4.46	High	High	Low	High	Historical Review	Extractive
Classon Ave	11.23	Low	Low	High	Low	Phenomenology	Vigilant
Saltz	6.42	High	High	Low	High	Painting Review	Extractive
Greenberg	4.49	V.High	V.High	V.Low	V.High	Formalist Theory	Pure Extractive
Sontag	6.98	Mod	Mod	High	Low	Anti-Interpretation	Expressive Restraint

Framework Revelation

Sontag validates PIC perfectly: Her "erotics of art" = low ILI/VDR + high EPS. RD enables ethical force without extraction. Greenberg/Saltz/New Yorker cluster as extractive; Classon/Félix as witness. Sontag bridges theory-to-practice, the metrics quantify her manifesto.

Susan Sontag appears here as a presence the framework quietly recognizes. Her call for an *erotics of art*, so often cited, so rarely practiced, finds an unexpected clarity when approached through diagnostic attention rather than theoretical allegiance. What she named as an ethical demand appears, in this framework, as a posture that can be observed: language that remains close, that resists settlement, that allows sensation and uncertainty to persist without translating

them into conclusions. Low interpretive load, minimal displacement of the viewer, and a sustained ethical proximity mark this orientation not as virtue, but as behavior.

Rhetorical density, long mistaken for excess, reveals itself here as morally neutral. In certain hands, it becomes a means of sustaining pressure without extraction, of speaking richly while refusing possession. In others, it accelerates explanation until the work is replaced by its summary. Over time, and across a wide span of published criticism, these tendencies begin to form recognizable constellations. Some modes of writing incline toward capture, toward resolution, toward institutional fluency. Others linger. They hesitate. They leave something intact.

The diagnostic framework does not resolve Sontag's argument, nor does it seek to vindicate it. It does something quieter. It allows her intuition to be seen at work, not as doctrine, but as residue, traced across decades of criticism, across shifting styles and cultural moments. What emerges is not a new theory, but a bridge: a way of moving from philosophical insistence to critical habit without collapsing one into the other.

If this framework reveals anything, it is not the correctness of an idea, but the fragility of a posture. An erotics of art does not disappear because it is wrong; it recedes because language forgets how close it can stand without claiming what it touches.

7 genres × 60 years: Robust. Post-Interpretive Criticism isn't theory, it operationalized Sontag.

Museum of One|Written at the Threshold

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18155622>

2026-01-06