

## NO FUTURE—PRESENCE ONLY

ANNA KORNBLUH

### *IMMEDIACY OR, THE STYLE OF TOO LATE CAPITALISM*

LONDON/NEW YORK: VERSO BOOKS, 2023. 232 PAGES.

ISBN 9781804291351

“Immediacy crushes mediation.” Anna Kornbluh’s new book proposes “immediacy” as the master category for understanding contemporary cultural production. Immediacy, Kornbluh states, rules not just 21st century art and culture in general, but also economics, politics, intimacy—and, in particular, contemporary culture theory. Immediacy is everywhere; it short-circuits and preempts traditional theory’s social process of making representation, connections, meaning. It erases mediation, making it impossible for art to imaginatively break with the merely given. Immediacy is like “eating the real with a spoon.” Immediacy is swelling with “self-identical thisness.”

How come? And what does this mean? Above all, in Kornbluh’s view, it means that to an increasing degree no mediation—no distance in any sense—is to be found between senders and receivers in today’s cultural communication, broadly speaking. We are all online and interconnected in real time, anytime. Presence overflows modality, medium. The gap between presence and representation, between appearance and phenomenon, is about to be eradicated. An overall *de-semanticization* is going on—a shift from indexical communication to iconic (i.e., from words to emojis). All this, of course, relates to the recent development of new technical devices, above all computers and smartphones. Characteristically, we no longer know the codes underlying the function of these devices. What we see, what we get does not appear as mediated communication; it is sheer real world, to which we have access in real-time, and anytime. The signature art genre of 21st century has become the selfie. Kim

Kardashian's blockbuster book *Selfish* (2015), consisting exclusively of her own selfies, has become the new kind of autobiography, according to Kornbluh: "[A]nyone can be highly personal with Kim, and anyone can self-publish their own *Selfish*." The opening shot in the Safdie brothers' movie *Uncut Gems* (2019) is another example of unlimited immediacy, here as the video style: it displays a colonoscopy, the protagonist seen from his own inside. Kornbluh writes that, "colonoscopy cinema is away from networked relations and towards the sensate uncut. *Uncut Gems* telegraphs in its title the unmediated ore with which its visual production aligns."

*Style* is Kornbluh's predicate for this immediacy, allegedly booming from pop ontology to quotidian epistemology, from low art to high theory. Immediacy swallows everything, she writes, but is still discrete, it "ferries the paradox of anti-style." It is a cultural style that imagines itself unstyled.

How come? Capitalism, too late capitalism. Kornbluh subscribes to a classical Marxist understanding of capitalism. The law of the tendency of the profit rate to fall means that capitalism is in a state of crisis; capitalism's "stagnation is a well-known empirical reality." Late capitalist production is becoming still more unprofitable, and the returns from labor compression are decreasing. Therefore *circulation*—understood as a compensatory step for capitalism—is becoming the dominant characteristic of today's economy, instead of production. "Immediacy" as a cultural style can thus be seen as capitalism's answer to its ongoing crisis. Circulation—still more pervasive, still more intensified, still more apparently unmediated and thus "natural"—is what basically feeds immediacy as cultural style.

Capitalism, "late," yes, but why "too late"? For one thing, because capitalism in Kornbluh's Marxist view, it is about to denigrate economically. But too late also because capitalism has already almost ruined our world completely, including in a physical sense. Ecocide, Kornbluh writes, has already taken place. "Lethal deluges, catastrophic droughts, and heat death are already baked into our future." This is the material background for the quest for presence. There is no future, and hence we are now having the party "before the lights come up." Thus, the shift from postmodernism's skepticism and irony—which indeed was a heyday of mediation—to immediacy's negation of mediation in order to effect flow and indistinction. Compared to postmodernism's crisis of historicity (Jameson), immediacy incarnates a crisis of futurity.

On top of her substantiations of the pertinence of immediacy in technical development, in capitalism's current stage, and in the climate crisis we are facing, Kornbluh offers a psychoanalytically informed explanation. Images, she observes, are the dominating medium today, visibility does in many respects function as a surrogate for the other senses. This observation she relates to Jacques Lacan's stage theory, according to which we as individuals basically live through three stages: the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. The imaginary is the early, narcissistic phase, which normally should be developed further to subsequently become connected to the symbolic stage (and a consciousness of the "real"). Today, Kornbluh argues, our immense overload of images entails a weakening of the symbolic as such. The images in our world tend to eclipse the level of signifiers; presence now comes before absence, and plenitude averts lack. Since the symbolic were to refer to the common, this loss of joint referents makes stable interpretation difficult or even impossible. This paves the way for today's interest in "alternative facts," for the vacillating distinctions between good and bad, true and false, in the public sphere. We are, individually as well as societally, about to regress to stages of premature narcissism, primarily interested in the grandiosity of the self: "you are you." The absence or weakening of the symbolic level is a parallel to the lack of mediation. Immediacy leaves us all alone at home without references in terms of symbolic control, stuck to the stage of the imaginary.

These are Kornbluh's headlines arguing for "immediacy" as the master concept for contemporary society and culture.

On the face of it, her analysis may seem strikingly adequate. We are indeed being drowned in images at all levels. The time/space-configuration of our experienced world has altered dramatically; we are literally connected to everywhere at any given moment. We are potentially capable of witnessing whatever happens wheresoever, in real-time. We do share our lives and experiences with everybody else in real-time through social media. There are no filters, no visible mediation: it all just happens, and the images flow. We each have our separate truth, and "now" is always the very decisive moment. "Thisness" has the highest priority. Authenticity—reality—is exclusively to be found here and now.

But is mediation, in an overall sense, actually disappearing for the benefit of "immediacy" in contemporary artifacts—in arts and literature, in video, and in cultural theory? Kornbluh substantiates her

hypothesis through concrete examples and observations in all three areas.

## WRITING

“Fictional writing has no value. A maxim for a disintermediated world.” The point of departure for this conclusion in Kornbluh is Karl Ove Knausgaard’s understanding of his work *My Struggle*. “The duty of literature is to fight fiction,” Knausgaard says. His 3,600-page account of his own life, “as it is”—including its immense international success—serves as a perfect illustration. This is immediacy as literary style, in Kornbluh’s view: unmediated presence, the elimination of mediation. The name is *autofiction*. Kornbluh traces the history of this concept from its introduction in the 1970s to its blooming dominance nowadays. Based on documented examples (primarily from the US), she shows how traditional “fiction” apparently is about to disappear all the while alleged non-fictional “reality” is celebrated in manifestoes. Serious writing, she notes through quoting influential voices from the debate, must cast off the bondage of fiction, must promote “a blurring to the point of invisibility of any distinction between fiction and nonfiction; the lure and blur of the real” (David Shields). “Blur,” Kornbluh states, is an adequate master image of immediacy. Knausgaard has been scholarly esteemed as “the central realist innovator of our time,” autofiction itself is a “neorealism [...] that can jump the gap between the sign and the referent” and “thereby gain access to the real itself” (Taylor Johnson and others).

To Kornbluh this celebration of autofiction is part of a broader development towards what she calls a new hegemony of first-person narration. This is a “dramatic change of the novel,” since third person, to Kornbluh, has been the norm of the novel since its rise in the 18th century. She quotes an analytics expert (Ted Underwood), who has conducted an investigation of the historical relationship between third-person and first-person novels in English-language fiction. According to him, a consistent dominance of third-person persists until the last quarter of the 20th century. First person then increases from around 1970 and is raising dramatically in the 21st century. Kornbluh identifies this “first personalism” in the novel to be an “overarching mutation,” part of a “much wider representational tendency to redact the very impersonal, antiphenomenal, speculative point of view that defined the novel across its history.” The reason for this change, Kornbluh once again sees in ruling capitalism’s shift of emphasis from production to circulation. “Economic

premiums on speed, flow, and auto-actualization inscribe themselves into literary style; immediacy writing's antirepresentational, antifictional centrifugality of charisma aestheticizes this capitalist base," she writes.

To Kornbluh, this development is intimately connected with institutional changes, for example at universities' departments of literature. Disciplinary boundaries are falling out; university professors are publicly bragging that they can teach whatever they want to (Maggie Nelson). All this is part of a "wilding against genre, against theory, against fiction, against mediation," according to Kornbluh. The dramatically increasing popularity of "creative writing" as a discipline and even as formalized BA and PhD programs in American universities is part of the same tendency. This reflects, in Kornbluh's view, the broader culture of privatization and personalization, also detectable in the so-called mental health epidemic in the Western world, in the growth of the self-publishing sector, and of course in the self-expressions on the SoMe-platforms, where "writers and readers alike enjoy real-time wish fulfillment". Memoir is becoming "the dominant genre of contemporary literature" (New York Times), cf. Michelle Obama's 14 million copies—and we are all memoirists at social media. All in all, "immediacy writing collapses into self-identical emission: 'This!'," Kornbluh concludes.

While Kornbluh does not treat the visual arts in the same detail as literature and writing, she sees the same tendencies to de-mediation here. The case of NFTs she considers a good example: NFTs are stripping away the dimension of aesthetic value from art by reducing it to sheer unreplicable code. Art is drooping; the medium is the missing. Buying Beeple, we just invest securely, Kornbluh states.

## VIDEO

Video is the art form par excellence of late capitalism, as has been claimed already by Fredric Jameson. Kornbluh agrees: in video, we meet the same stylistic tendencies as in contemporary literature and art. Take, for example, the colonoscopy in *Uncut Gems*: the sensate uncut, unfiltered authenticity—"you are here."

Video has literally "absorbed" both film and TV. Video is cheaper to produce and much easier to operate, and technically it has a wider variety of potential functions—let alone its speed of up to 120 frames per second (against film's standard 24). In traditional theory, film has been seen as the very media that produces "immediacy" to the

beholder. But temporality, Kornbluh claims, following among others David Rodowick, is now basically being transformed in the shift from film to video. While film “always returns us to a past world, a world of matter and existence [...] in video [...] what is captured amounts to a different temporal regime—one not of pastness but of simple duration or the real time of a continuous present.” Video is simulation of presence, while cinema is represented time.

These technical differences go hand in hand with very fast changes in the market conditions. Kornbluh describes the swift development from physical videotape rental stores in the 1990s to the worldwide online streaming services like Netflix of today—platforms that themselves contribute to the ongoing transformation of temporality. A significant detail is the absorption of the camera into phenomenality, the *immanentization* of the camera which has become a defining feature of immediacy video style, according to Kornbluh. A primary example is *House of Cards*, where the protagonist’s direct addresses to the audience with extra-diegetic meta-commentaries. This has by now become something we expect from a streaming show: “direct address, leveled gaze, face framed, tight shot, a cinematography of interpellation that is now ubiquitous,” Kornbluh writes

All in all, the immediacy of video style entails what is called an immediate symmetry between transmission and reception; a negation of mediation while essentializing presence; an “emptying out of figuration and fictionality in favor of ambience and effect.”

#### ANTITHEORY

Even theory itself is “submerged by immediacy” in Kornbluh’s view. Once again, it is a question of de-mediation. The very project of representation has become illegitimate; universality is replaced by particularity, she writes. Theory increasingly takes the form of an “anti-authorizing, lyrical, fragmented first-personalism.” A flat ontology—“everything is everything.” Our culture is correspondingly becoming one of post-truth and anti-expert populism, so Kornbluh.

Since theory, basically (Kornbluh asserts with Hegel), should originate in a critique of immediacy by establishing a meta-level of reflection, immediacy theory of today has in fact become “antitheory.” Kornbluh documents her critique through extensive examples of named theoreticians. She points out how the term and the phenomenon of “autotheory” has become prominent, meaning (here in

Paul Preciado's words) "a personal, confessional, playful presentation of the self." The above-mentioned Maggie Nelson and her prize-winning *The Argonauts* (2015) is another example. In Kornbluh's view, autotheory are texts that "rebuff systematic elucidation. Fullness of charismatic persona, corporeal receptivity, and affective flooding devise an evanescent plenum that preempts criticism." Immediacy in theory is "this argumentless intensity immured from dissent," Kornbluh states. Autotheory wishes to take theory "back to life" (Sara Ahmed), claiming that "theory can do more the closer it gets to the skin. The personal is theoretical." Kornbluh concludes that autotheory's skin-to-skin contact negates the mediating diversions of theory.

Kornbluh sees Bruno Latour as a "regnant theological guide" for a new kind of anti-mediation "realism"; he performs an "and-ing" horizontalism and vitalist immanence, calling it "a more realistic realism"—in Kornbluh's view resulting in "surface reading," and in a "metaphysics of proximity, flatness, and intimacy." These are thoughts, she writes, about the real "emancipated from the cumbersome thickets of mediation and interpretation." Rita Felski, in Kornbluh's view, is another prominent exponent of the blurring of disciplinary boundaries, notably in her commitment to, what she calls, "the irreducible nature of phenomena," and to "combatting the intellectualism of recent theory" in her approach to artworks. This results in "long streams of unanswered, ungeneralizable, and even rhetorical questions," Kornbluh writes. Text-mining, another approach a la mode, to Kornbluh is just one more example of antitheory, using "quantitative processing to join immediatist theory's dethroning of interpretative, qualitative inquiry."

"Aboutness" is a key critical concept in Kornbluh characteristic of contemporary theory. Aboutness "becomes the way that art and literature are admitted to conversations in public health or policy or design at the expense of their own mediacy." Concordantly, universities increasingly are organized in what is called "post-disciplinary programmes" instead of disciplines. Once again, the ambition of immediacy theory is "indistinction." And, Kornbluh states, by negating mediation current theory performs immediacy rather than interpreting it. Theory should not reproduce the given but rather bring into thinkability what is not given, Kornbluh states. She concludes that it is bad for a culture to fail the bar of immanent critique; that it hits even worse when theory also fails, but it hits worst of all when that failure is celebrated.

To Kornbluh this is the case today: antitheory is celebrated.

#### TO CONCLUDE: IMMEDIACY?

Is Kornbluh right? Is “immediacy” actually the overarching, all-dominating “style” today—in a too late capitalism?

No doubt, Kornbluh’s analysis is adequate in many respects. Her observations of the altered meaning and status of the “now” in our culture are often strikingly precise. Our relationship to time and thus to “mediation” indeed is about to change. The technical and economical properties of our media landscape in general have changed dramatically—and so have the ways we inhabit this landscape. The status and range of subjectivity as such is about to alter: the interrelationship between individuality and our supposed obligations and attitudes towards the common, to communities apparently is becoming at least more unstable, more—literally—subjective. “Truths” are about to change status, even so-called facts are becoming part of the sphere of the individual, and thus subject to personal interpretation. Truth is becoming my truth more than our truth. This is obviously the case at a societal level, for example in politics, and as expressed broadly for instance in the social media.

Today, we meet similar tendencies in general theory, not least in highly profiled university humanities. Widespread skepticism about concepts, outspoken lack of respect for discursive rules of the game, a deliberate blurring of disciplinary boundaries, tendencies to include “everything” in highly subjective approaches, based on distinctively personal experiences and/or more or less explicitly ideological points of view. “Auto-theory,” antitheory, de-mediation. Kornbluh is definitely right to identify these tendencies, and her examples are often strikingly adequate.

On the other hand, Kornbluh’s examples are also highly selective and often appears designed to fit into her concept of “immediacy” as a kind of “one size fits all,” in terms of a general characteristic of today’s culture. Some of her substantiations are even misleading, or at least not too convincing on a closer look.

For one thing, her general concept of “art” appears strangely archaic and right up incongruent with the critical historicity of her general approach. When she identifies NFTs as a new phenomenon “stripping the dimension of aesthetic value from art,” she seems to oversee the existence of readymades, *objets trouvés* and concept art as

important parts of the art institution already for decades. Several of her concrete analytic observations in artworks are similarly misleading. For example, she makes a main point out of the historical transition from third person to first person narrative in English language fiction, construing this as a proof of a new dominance of un-mediated subjectivity. With Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle* as her prime example, she argues that this development exemplifies the disappearance of mediation, a sheer melting together of production and reception.

She is evidently not right about this. First-person narration has a long tradition in the novel's history of creating exactly marked distance by questioning the narrator's level of epistemic competence, in other words, by installing epistemic distance between implied and explicit reliability in the narrative structure. Even in the concrete case of Knausgaard, she is wrong: although he proclaims his work as an "end of fiction," this is obviously not the result. And, by the way, Knausgaard himself has subsequently written first-person novels with marked distance to the personal narrator as well.

Similarly, several of Kornbluh's observations from the world of film and video are at least rather unconvincing. For example, she construes the extra-diegetic breaks of the fictional level in *House of Cards* as proof of the "immanentization" of the camera, and thus as a core part of the immediacy effect. But this (here and elsewhere) might perhaps far more plausibly be seen as a distinct *parabasis*, i.e., as a device that intrusively creates distance and hence objectifies the fictional universe to the beholder.

On a more general level, Kornbluh sees the general style of immediacy as substantialized objectively both as a societal stage of capitalism—and as a kind of individualized stage of psychoanalytical development. Neither of these contextualizations are strikingly clear nor convincing. This applies to the thesis about capitalism's general switch to circulation economy as a necessary, compensatory answer to its final crisis—and of this "forced" emphasis on circulation as the real basis for the technical developments in media towards immediacy. That our image-swollen society furthermore should be conferrable to a kind of individual regression to the stage of the imaginary in a Lacanian understanding is thought-provoking but remains rather strange in its unsubstantiated conflation of societal and individual areas of development.

Kornbluh seems to claim that aesthetic relations in general are about to vanish, since aesthetic value basically requires mediation, an “active process of relating,” as she rightly remarks. But is it true that we are all unconsciously drowned in immediacy, that all mediation whatsoever is fading away in favor of immediate “this-ness,” indistinction, real-time connectivity? The fact is that today we also (still?) encounter high-quality, ultra-complex artworks in film, literature, music, theater, visual arts and all kinds of amalgamations. Perhaps, then, Kornbluh’s assertion of “immediacy” as an all-including, pervasive phenomenal “style” of our time should at least be nuanced. No matter how far it may reach, however, there is no doubt that with “immediacy,” Kornbluh’s book critically describes very important tendencies in contemporary culture. In the arts, in mass media, in society’s economic and political circulation. And—unfortunately—not least in trending theoretical approaches, the ones supposed to critically lay bare what is going on.

Laying bare is what Kornbluh does in this book. Although not waterproof in all respects, *Immediacy* is compelling, seductive and very well written. It is a convincing dementia of its own assertion that today “everything is everything.” Fortunately, critical analysis persists.

*Morten Kyndrup*