Bruce Robbins

Everything Everywhere All at Once All of the Time

The style of the present

Athlete running, Eadweard Muybridge. | Library of Congress

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Immediacy, or The Style of Too Late Capitalism by Anna Kornbluh. Verso, 240 pages. 2023.

Readers of Fredric Jameson's 1984 essay "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" will recall that he devotes a number of vivid pages to the Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles. The hotel, Jameson observes, has no clear entrances; it has elevators that shoot up through the ceiling, a reflective facade so you can't see in, a color-coded lobby where you can't get your bearings, and shops on different levels that are impossible to find your way back to a second time. The visitor will feel bewildered. The name of this bewilderment, Jameson says, is postmodernism. Postmodernism "has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world." The hotel is a symbol or analogue of "the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves as individual subjects."

Readers of Anna Kornbluh's *Immediacy, or The Style of Too Late Capitalism*, a tribute to and update of Jameson's period-defining essay, are offered a similar performance of allegorical description, this time taking off from the opening credits of the Safdie brothers' 2019 film *Uncut Gems*. "Zero in on an Ethiopian miner's hand holding a beige rock, an implausible neon lagoon glinting at its center, and delve deeper into the glittering facets, blur the tight focus, transgress the flat surface, seep into a volume of cloudy color, swerve to a quick black and gush of red." The shot goes on, showing us darkness, then letters assembling into the film's title, which gives way to pearls and polyps, then tissues and veins, before ending on a computer screen and a voice over: "Now reaching the right side of the colon." Welcome to "colonoscopy cinematography," a novel technique for producing immediacy.

Immediacy is what Kornbluh proposes as the signature effect of our period, her candidate to replace postmodernism as the key to what's wrong with our very bad times. The meaning of the word is not self-evident. Immediacy, Kornbluh tells us, means the denial of mediation. And what is mediation? It's a difficult Hegelian concept, and Kornbluh shows respect for her readers in hanging her argument on it. In layman's terms, mediation refers to the process by which you collide with that which seems to oppose and obstruct you. These forms of seeming otherness get in your way, but (so it turns out) you have to take them on or go through them, Hegel says, in order to get anywhere worth getting to. *Immediacy* is a gripping and invigorating work of synthesis, and a very ambitious one. Examples are various, and in this book they spray out in different directions. They include the material world, both natural and socially produced; other people; generalization and abstraction; media platforms; art (which would seem like special pleading for a literary scholar, except for all those recent forms of art which try to deny they are art); and institutions like unions and universities. It's tempting to want to skip over these obstructions on the premise that you yourself are all the real you need. But they are not as alien as they seem. And trying to skip over them in favor of the immediately available is a, or the, characteristic post-postmodern pathology.

The opening credits of *Uncut Gems* are just as disorienting as the Bonaventure, maybe even more so, but what Kornbluh diagnoses in the film is less disorientation (not being able to figure out where you are is more likely a positive in an artwork than in a hotel) than immediacy. The film invokes immediacy in two senses. Sense #1: the realest version of the

self is the body. In order to know who or what you are, there is no need to take into account the other people, the social relations that mediate between you and the world. Following the camera up your large intestine, viewers are treated to the erroneous idea that in this instant, nothing is getting in the way; they are seeing you as you really are. Sense #2 is the more colloquial connotation of immediate—that is, urgent: "the hurry-hurry that compresses time into a tingling present."

Uncut Gems, which stars Adam Sandler as a jeweler and gambling addict trying to make a big score while pursued by mobsters to whom he owes money, must be one of the most stressed-out films ever made. What the film feels like, in Kornbluh's words, is "constant movement, beating pulse, clenching bowels, gasping breath, vibrating phone, deadline ticking." In this film, there is no respite, and there is no privacy. Sandler is constantly threatened with violation by the implacable pressures of an outside world that seems itself to be twisted in knots by the same pressures. (Set in 2012, the film can be taken as an account of the Great Recession.) As the colonoscopy suggests, the outside world is inside you. You are also worried about the test results.

Immediacy is a gripping and invigorating work of synthesis, and a very ambitious one. As in Jameson's essay, the ambition shows in the wildly disparate objects the book gathers up into its title category. The book starts with *#ImmersiveVanGogh*, an exhibition which dictates that you take in the hugely magnified visuals while doing yoga exercises and inhaling the piped-in aroma of lavender from Arles. The assumption, Kornbluh observes, is that merely looking at a painting in a frame just doesn't cut it anymore. What we think we need from Van Gogh is a total immersion that engages all the bodily senses: "Van Gogh's quotidian images, utmost color saturation, and mental distress are not enough to generate an adequate sensory encounter." Immediacy of another sort is the aim of Marina Abramović's *The Artist is Present*, an eight-hour chair-sit complete with a bed pan under the chair to guarantee that the audience is getting the actual artistic presence it paid for. You may not pass through the artist's alimentary tract yourself, but you are certainly reminded of it.

In the domain of literature, which is Kornbluh's home discipline, her targets include the rise of memoir, which sells selfhood with or without self-abjection, and the rise of the personal essay. "Your story is something to own." A less obvious target is writing pedagogy that centers on cultivating the student's unique voice. In poetry, her brief but pointed account of the rise of de-versification counts the line break, abandoned by prose poets, as another lost form of mediation. The prime literary exhibit, however, is autofiction, exemplified by Karl Ove Knausgaard's six-volume novel *My Struggle*. Knausgaard prefers to get along without such mediations as analyses, generalizations, characters, or fictions. The world for him is immediate in the sense that it is all concrete particulars. "Linda isn't a character," he declares. "She is Linda." What declarations like this mean in practice, Kornbluh says, is that we find out nothing about Linda, only about Knausgaard. All that really exists for him, and for his reader, is his own voice.

Things being the way they are, the experience of collectivity is never available anywhere in satisfactory amounts.

Outside the domain of art, the problem with immediacy is its impulsive jump to the question of how to live, as in Sara Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life*. As Kornbluh notes with some acidity, *Living a Feminist Life* was "Duke University Press's best-selling book of the entire 2010s." Let us not confuse market success with genuine value: Kornbluh is also not a fan of so-called autotheory, as in Paul Preciado's "body-essay" *Testo Junkie* and Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*. Too much self, not enough theory. Like Knausgaard, both have lots of fans. The fans, and the fans of Rachel Cusk, Ocean Vuong, Tao Lin, Sheila Heti, Tope Folarin, and others, will have their word to say. (Jameson notes that locals as well as tourists seem to love the Bonaventure.) Doesn't it matter that these genres are especially useful to women and disadvantaged minorities, and to those majoritarians curious about experience that might otherwise be closed to them? For Kornbluh, it doesn't. These are the pleasures people get from the latest thing; they deserve no moral or political authority. The style of immediacy is successful the way any fashionable commodity is successful; it's a good symptom of a bad system.

Of course, seeking counsel on how to live, including how to live with those around you, is one of the biggest reasons why those who still read books do still read them. Give up on that motive, and publishing will find itself in even deeper distress. But life wisdom doesn't benefit from renouncing theory, concepts, and abstractions, as Ahmed does. Ahmed seems convinced that all feminists need is attention to their own experience—what is immediately on hand. "I do not cite any white men," Ahmed writes. Not having the requisite experience, how could white men have done any thinking that would be useful to the project of living a feminist life? Kornbluh speaks up for all those feminists, would-be feminists, and upholders of a fair deal for discriminated minorities who feel no such compulsion to restrict their conceptual resources.

In politics, the problem of immediacy is the lure of zealous but untimely activism. Joining a long tradition of Marxist thought, which applied terms like voluntarism and spontaneism to what Kornbluh calls immediacy, Kornbluh sees such activism as self-satisfying and self-indulgent, a shortcut around the unavoidable complications of figuring out what exactly needs to be done about injustice and where and how to put together the coalitions capable of doing it. Here the main exhibit is Bernard Harcourt's *Critique and Praxis*. Harcourt (my colleague at Columbia University) has defended inmates on death row and has taught his students how to do the same. Kornbluh would presumably not object to that individual initiative, but she permits herself some sarcasm about Harcourt's generalizing of his pro bono experience:

If you rightly thought praxis involved mediations like repetitive genres to scale upward from the individual and buttress a mass—the face-to-face production of using a "we," the narrative of where power lives and how we might want to live, the email reminder to participate in rallies, the phone-bank script, the local op-ed, the concrete slogan around which many can unite—then *Critique and Praxis* is here to set you straight. That old notion of praxis owes too much to representation and synthesis, and yields too much impersonality and mediation. Against such abstractions, praxis must concretize itself, atomistically animating the magnetic "I."

Action, in order to be significant, must be able to convoke others, generalize from one situation to another, persist in the form of parties and movements. However appropriate in

the case of prisoners scheduled for execution, “Act now!” is not always good advice in politics any more than taking out your credit card after watching a commercial is. Immediacy encourages us to forget that moral. With Kornbluh’s help, one can learn not to be surprised that a society of one-click buying, same-day shipping, and on-demand services should disdain, in the realm of politics, “organizations and institutions in favor of organic horizontalism, aleatory uprisings, and local autonomy”—that people should refuse “vehicles of power while enthusing the omnipresence of power, and rhapsodize the immutability of domination, exonerating inertia.”

Greyhound running, Eadweard Muybridge. | Library of Congress

Kornbluh’s entirely judgmental line of anti-immediacy argument will provoke resistance. From a dialectical perspective, it probably should, at least some, even if one takes pleasure (as I do) in watching some of the public’s more irritating idols fall. Sometimes good things come out of bad things. In fact, that’s the only place good things *can* come from.

In any given case, Kornbluh’s argument has a better chance of working on you if you can be induced to accept a standard by which your pleasures deserve to be judged. In politics, that standard is totalizing analysis and collective action. In fiction, the standard that backs up Kornbluh’s denunciations of inflated selfhood is a bit of a surprise: good old-fashioned third-person narrative. Third-person narrative seems to have gone out of fashion, she says.

But it had a virtue that is missing from much first-person writing, which deprives us of "a mode of thought unavailable to us in everyday lived experience," that is, an experience of multiple voices and multiple minds, a social multiplicity through which we have to find our way. One of the basic techniques of third-person writing is indirect discourse, in which the voice of a character and the voice of the narrator mingle uneasily and readers are hard pressed to know whose thoughts they are sharing. By means of indirect discourse, third-person fiction confuses us about where we are, and this mediation, as Kornbluh says, provides a valuable experience of collectivity.

Things being the way they are, the experience of collectivity is never available anywhere in satisfactory amounts. If we can get it from art, so much the better, even if getting it from art means that social confusion may not be as morally and politically debilitating as Jameson's take on the Bonaventure suggests. Keep the credits of *Uncut Gems* in mind.

The movie begins not with a rock in an Ethiopian miner's hand, but with a wide shot of the Ethiopian mining camp, identified by place and time. Tiny figures, seen from above, scurry around responding to what will turn out to be a mining accident. There is a close-up: a miner with a bloody leg, clearly in a lot of pain, is being carried out. Angry miners are pushing and shoving, barely held in check by their Chinese managers. This is an identifiable sociopolitical landscape. And it's at this moment that two miners, taking advantage of the chaos, return to the mine and steal (we assume) the rock bearing the black opal into which the camera will dive and around which the plot will turn.

So what do the credits accomplish? On the one hand, they draw attention to the dangerous and politically fraught labor that brings uncut gems into the market. On the other hand, they show us workers taking advantage of the chaos, and of the suffering of another worker, for their own off-the-books profit—a foreshadowing of the role played by the jeweler protagonist, played by Sandler. When the camera looks into the depths of the opal, which it does again, it doesn't just reveal Sandler's bowels and a possibly dangerous polyp. It reveals a fair amount of global interconnectedness and collective history. It does some orienting, or what Jameson calls cognitive mapping.

In hitting all her nails with the immediacy hammer, Kornbluh arguably misses moments of mediation in these works which undermine such straightforward readings. For all its confusion, *Uncut Gems* displays aesthetic and political virtues. I would say the same about other cultural objects of which Kornbluh disapproves, like *Killing Eve* and *Fleabag*. "Fleabag opens herself to a relationship with the camera," Kornbluh writes, "in ways she will not with the real people in her diegetic world; she shares her opinions, desires, and fears with the camera but not with her own sister or lovers or friends." It may well be that, in the age of TikTok and other social media, when everyone has become accustomed to an excruciating superabundance of frontal address to the camera, Fleabag's speaking into the camera no longer counts as a device-baring alienation effect. But it doesn't follow that her intimacy with the viewers (us) must come at the expense of her intimacy with everyone else, or that it's a sign of the emptiness of her on-screen existence. Among other things, the emptiness of her on-screen existence is a premise of her rousingly satiric comedy. Complaint about modernity's overwhelming of the sensorium goes back at least as far as the anti-urban diatribes of the Romantics.

Those who suffer from the stress that Kornbluh describes so well throughout the book may not be relieved to hear that, despite what everyone says about the effects of social media, relentless acceleration and overstimulation are old news. Complaint about modernity's overwhelming of the sensorium goes back at least as far as the anti-urban diatribes of the Romantics. Wordsworth could find London good to look at only when it had not yet awakened, as in "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge": "Dear God! the very houses seem asleep; / And all that mighty heart is lying still!" Cue Benjamin on Baudelaire for some of the same sentiments, accompanied by a sense that there were also unfulfilled promises in the modern city's undeniably new nervosity.

Anyone who has hung out in the vicinity of the humanities over the past decade or three will have encountered the fetishism of the body: the body imagined narcissistically as the final and uncontroversial site of the world's true meaning. Elaine Scarry's 1987 book *The Body in Pain*, which offers among other things a body-centered allegory of Marxist exploitation, is a locus classicus. In 1992, Ann Cvetkovich published *Mixed Feelings*, a devastating takedown showing how for Marx the suffering body of the worker on the factory floor is not, after all, the key to exploitation, which can only be explained by means of an abstraction (labor power) that cannot be seen or smelled or felt. The concept of labor power is a textbook example of what Hegel and Marx meant by mediation—a made-up abstraction, unavailable to the senses, that you absolutely need in order to understand how the world works.

This is to say on the one hand that Kornbluh is right on target, but on the other that her complaint is not as new as she claims. Nor is what she is complaining about. Other things that are not as distinctive of our period as Kornbluh thinks they are include the uneasiness of what she calls "cringe," which comes out of "melodrama, pornography, and horror." All of these genres have a long history. Ditto for "genre fluidity," including the confusions of comedy with drama (and even with tragedy). Dramedy is what the French classicists complained about in Shakespeare. As for artistic forms that require "a low degree of attention," that may well be a mark against what she calls (after Anna McCarthy) "ambient television," but it's also what Benjamin (again) said about architecture. As for the existence of money-making sequels and prequels, that goes back long enough for Cervantes to be complaining about it in *Don Quixote*.

These are more than quibbles only because the intellectual enterprise at issue here is the naming of the present, a high-stakes, prestige-garnering operation, and that operation has to be carried out with a maximum of precision. The things Kornbluh names are real, and many of them are worth denouncing, but many are not new. Hence they don't really distinguish the present from (say) the period forty years ago that Jameson was trying to describe in his postmodernism essay. How deep have capitalism's transformations actually gone in these years?

Kornbluh is wonderfully enlightening on structural changes in the culture industry, like how Netflix went from a DVD-subscription service in 1998 to the streaming and production monster it has become. But are the new digital technologies and their new business models only doing to us what capitalism was already doing, except maybe making us like it more? Or is the fact that we like it more (if we do) a fact of political importance that

Kornbluh is indirectly confronting, impatient as she clearly is with our daily pleasures? To name a cultural tendency, even a dominant one, is not to perform the same intellectual task as to tie that cultural tendency to a stage of capitalism, thereby bestowing on it an additional political significance. Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp," which momentously named a style or sensibility in 1964, didn't try to do what Jameson took on in the postmodernism essay twenty years later, let alone what Naomi Klein did in 1999's *No Logo*: to correlate an emergent style or sensibility with an understanding of capitalism's transnational, outsourced, brand-dependent sector as well as an activist movement against that sector, if not against capitalism as such.

Kornbluh's project is to tie all these cultural phenomena to what she calls "too late capitalism." Too late capitalism riffs on Jameson's late capitalism, with its cheery if uncharacteristic (for Jameson) suggestion that capitalism was on its last legs. For Kornbluh the primary referent of "too late" is not capitalism's stages (industrial, post-industrial, transnational, financial, neoliberal, whatever); it is capitalism-induced climate change and the uh-oh feeling that climate change is already happening and it's now too late to do anything meaningful about it. "It is too late. Ecocide has already taken place." The pessimism may well be warranted, but it's not illuminated by Kornbluh's (not entirely original) account of the stage of capitalism we are in: "an intensification of the circulation (but not the production) of value." There's a certain bending toward activist immediacy on her own part when she speaks of a "radical hopelessness" that looks beyond the capitalist model of unlimited growth. "It's not too late—things can still be less worse." A more strenuously dialectical approach might have dictated that she look about for immediacy's possible political advantages.

It might also have suggested some direct engagement with a competing category like neoliberalism, with its model of entrepreneurial selfhood. A flow-centered description of the global system too conveniently justifies the political significance Kornbluh ascribes to blockades, even if they sometimes seem local and aleatory, to use her terms, or politically misguided, like the 2022 trucker protests at the U.S.-Canada border against Covid-19 vaccine mandates. There is a lot in the index about immersiveness, but nothing about the flow of immigrants. When capital is free to move and people aren't, capital wins. The flow is not always your enemy and those who block it are not always your friends. Kornbluh would better her chances of being assigned to the fight-the-power lineage of Naomi Klein rather than the name-the-culture lineage of Susan Sontag if she could see that she has friends among the immediacy consumers, including those who are trying to find words for, and politicize, first-person experience.

Still, *Immediacy* is very, very good at giving us what it promises: the style of the present, the feel of streaming (of goods and information as well as the products of culture) as a deluge that crushes and paralyzes and teaches us to like feeling crushed and paralyzed. Its prose has some of the same exhilarating adrenaline rush that it wants to stop us from admiring. In that sense it has a kind of dialectical richness: an immediacy that makes the reader reach for mediation.