

# VIBEOLOGY, OR, THE STYLE OF TOO LATE CAPITALISM

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

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Vibeology, now you ask me what does it mean?  
Well, it's the study of the chemistry between you  
and me.

Paula Abdul, *Vibeology* (lyrics: P. Lord, S. St. Victor, V.J. Smith)

When social significance is attributed only to what is immediate, and to what will be immediate immediately afterwards, always replacing another, identical, immediacy, it can be seen that the uses of the media guarantee a kind of eternity of noisy significance.

Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*

In John Ford's adaptation of John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, there is a scene that tellingly grasps the inadequacy of personal resistance against the structural and impersonal forces of capital. In the scene, the Joads, a family of farmers from Oklahoma, confront a messenger who tells them they must leave the land they have lived on and cultivated for decades:

"You tell me to get off my land?"

"Now, don't go to blamin' me. It ain't my fault."

"Whose fault is it?"

"You know who owns the land, The Shawnee Land and Cattle Company."

"And who's the Shawnee Land and Cattle Company?"

"It ain't nobody. It's a company."

"They got a president, ain't they? [...]"

"Oh, son, it ain't his fault, because the bank tells him what to do."

"All right, where's the bank?"

"Tulsa. And what's the use of pickin' on him? He ain't nothing but the manager, and he's half crazy himself, tryin' to keep up with his orders from the East."

"Then who do we shoot?"

"Brother, I don't know. If I did, I'd tell you. I just don't know who's to blame."

The dialogue in Ford's 1940 film expands the original exchange from Steinbeck's 1939 book, making the network of interdependence even more complex. This scene shows that some individual tragedies can no longer simply be explained by someone's good or bad will. The agency is spread among many actors in the game, and decisions seem to be made almost automatically by the very logic of capital itself. No one is to blame, yet something or someone is forcing the Joads to leave their land. Who is the one who should get shot, then?

This exchange from *The Grapes of Wrath* dramatically shows how intensely social and economic relations were already mediated in 1930s America. Nearly a century later, the complexity of networks and structures has grown significantly. Everything is intertwined in long, complex chains of production and circulation. As a result, everybody is talking about alienation or at least some kind of detachment from reality. Everything is so profoundly mediated that a general craving for something real becomes evident.

Considering these conditions, Anna Kornbluh's thesis that contemporary culture is characterised mainly by immediacy may come as a surprise. In her latest book, *Immediacy, or, The Style of Too Late Capitalism*, Kornbluh advocates for more mediation in our lives. This is her response to the diagnosis that the structural tendencies of our culture are characterised by "immediacy." For Kornbluh, immediatisation means something more than merely instantification. It manifests itself by eliminating any form of mediation and weakening representation, eventually contributing to our feelings of detachment and confusion. The logic of immediacy is purely affective – it constitutes a "vibeology" of its own. As alluring as it may seem,

the “cut to the feeling” mode of communication excludes any otherness or difference. Thus, personal experience deprived of proper representation is cognitively difficult to integrate. Moreover, it fails to be situated in a broader, social framework.

The lack of adequate representation ultimately furthers our sense of loss in an increasingly complex world. Kornbluh sees this as a symptom of current modes of production and foregrounds her arguments in the analysis of economic and social structures. Thus, her argument strives to show a bigger picture in the hope that “historical roots and economic causes of style will interrupt immediacy’s presentist immanence” (Kornbluh 2023: 23). She claims that the way out of the hegemony of immediacy leads through mediation – “prolonged attention, belaboured descriptions, and counterintuitive pattern recognition” (Kornbluh 2023: 23). Mediation allows us to imagine better futures, link effects with their causes, and pinpoint the role of a single detail in an extensive whole. According to Kornbluh, mediation makes people see beyond their own, particular experience, grounding them in a broader context of social reality. Mediation provides insight, objectivisation, and a sense of clarity – the key prerequisites for any social diagnosis, action, and, most importantly, change.

Therefore, Kornbluh’s theoretical intervention is not purely descriptive but is also evaluative. She not only elaborates on our situation – she takes a side. This differentiates her book from its clear inspiration, which is Fredric Jameson’s classic *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, which was published as a book in 1991 on the basis of an article from 1984. Kornbluh aims to build on Jameson’s theory while claiming that the key constituents of our times no longer fit the idea of postmodernism. However, her concept of immediacy is not simply another term in an already oversaturated market of many more or less convincing post-postmodernisms (metamodernism, new sincerity, trans-postmodernism, digimodernism, etc.). Kornbluh indeed tries to join the struggle for a new periodisation of capitalism, but in this regard, the book falls rather short. She does not mention any clear timeframe that would mark the cultural change between postmodernism and immediacy, though she would probably consider the 2010s to be the crucial decade. Nevertheless, *Immediacy* is undoubtedly a valuable theoretical intervention in the landscape of contemporary critical theory.

The book points to an evident shift within the “cultural dominant” but not an evident break. So, what exactly has changed? Kornbluh convincingly argues that we are no longer trapped in the predominantly cyni-

cal, distanced, and ironic mode of communication associated with postmodernism. Rather, everything is floating in intensities, extreme effects, and strong stimuli. The Jamesonian thesis about the “waning of affect” in postmodernism is outdated, according to Kornbluh. Now, the predominant tendency in art comes down to “simply manifesting viscerally affecting stuff” (Kornbluh 2023: 7). The problem is no longer too much distance but too little of it. Numerous popular claims about overstimulation, exhaustion, and being drained out certainly support her argument. Now it is about the pure vibe, flow, direct connection, instantification, and “getting it” rather than “getting into it.” “The medium is missing,” writes the author (Kornbluh 2023: 5). She expresses her disappointment with the overabundance of mostly “weak theories” and strives to make a strong, universalistic claim instead. Treading on shaky ground and setting herself up for an accusation of the totalising nature of her theory, she falls back not only on Frederic Jameson – and Raymond Williams – but also on the Frankfurt School as such.

The resemblance between Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s notion of “the culture industry” and Kornbluh’s analysis of immediacy is conspicuous. Popular culture is the main object of analysis in both studies, and it is explained through the logic of the economic base (especially in the chapter titled “Circulation” in *Immediacy*). And knowing Adorno’s views on music, one might suspect he would have been a vocal supporter of Kornbluh’s call for more mediacy in our lives. For Adorno, the ideal mode of listening to music was “structural listening,” which was a completely anti-immersive way of enjoying it. Structural listening was a way of not merely vibing with the tones, melodic lines, and progressions of chords, but it also stressed one’s awareness of the structural coherence of the whole at all times and one’s pleasure from understanding which note is played when and why. The spontaneity and improvisation in jazz made this genre unbearable to Adorno. Similarly, Kornbluh wants us to stop just vibing with the cultural products of our times and start thinking about what they say about the structures we are all embedded in.

Although Kornbluh does not mention music in her book almost at all – she expresses a hope that “with luck, readers will find inspiration to further analysis, of music or fashion or more” (Kornbluh 2023: 20) – the example of Adorno and “structural listening” shows the longer tradition in critical theory of advocating for “mediacy.” Frederic Jameson himself famously formulated a similar call for more mediation in our lives when he focused on the need for “cognitive mapping” amidst the rapid globalisa-

tion at the end of the twentieth century. Jameson defined the struggle to develop adequate cognitive mapping as a “collective effort at trying to figure out where we are and what landscapes and forces confront us in a late twentieth century whose abominations are heightened by their concealment and their bureaucratic impersonality” (Jameson 1992: 3).

According to Jameson, the “bureaucratic impersonality” of capital, which is so tellingly depicted in the scene from *The Grapes of Wrath*, requires cognitive mapping to make us realise what global forces are at work in our everyday lives. Kornbluh seems to support this claim but she puts it in different terms, writing about the intervention of the Lacanian symbolic, which could save us from drowning in a flood of the imaginary. In the “Imaginary” chapter, Kornbluh compellingly draws on the Lacanian division between the symbolic, imaginary, and real. She diagnoses the current situation as characterised by inflation of the imaginary: “images eclipse signifiers, presence forecloses absence, and plenitude averts lack” (Kornbluh 2023: 58). The hegemony of the imaginary leads to the fetishisation of anything personal, direct, emotional, immersive, or immediate. What is tragic is that all of these qualities intuitively feel right in the face of the “bureaucratic impersonality” of (too) late capitalism. But without any mediating representation the Lacanian real starts to creep too close: “Representation slackens, and an unintegrable real impends. Immersion in the imaginary initiates all kinds of psychic discord, from fantasies of self-possession and delusions of wholeness, to refusals of the other and proliferating dualities, to paranoid gusts and polarized fluctuation” (Kornbluh 2023: 49). Our world is complex, contradictory, and confusing, making seemingly direct communication spaces attractive in their unambiguity. However, some kind of shared symbolic framework gets lost along the way. Kornbluh diagnoses this problem when she writes that “amid crisis, alienation, and stratification, immediacy feels right: urgent, engaging, homogenizing. But this is pharmakon: remedy and poison in one” (Kornbluh 2023: 18).

Thus, the answer is counterintuitive. There should be more symbolic structures in our lives, not less. A simple acceleration of the current trends leads straight into an imaginary dead end. If our modernity is liquid, as Zygmunt Bauman claimed, and our “too late capitalism” is as immediatised as Anna Kornbluh asserts, then symbolic intervention serves as more than merely a dam that allows us not to drown in a flood of polarising affects and disorganised intensities. The imaginary is necessary to provide us with fantasies that keep us going and images that make us strive for something better. Thus, the proper marriage of the imaginary and sym-

bolic might turn the latter into a powerplant channelling the energy of the imaginary into constructive action. The dam should keep out the real, not the imaginary – and this part may be crucial in order not to misunderstand Kornbluh's later points. She does not want to dismiss all emanations of the style of immediacy. She is not as harsh on immediacy as Adorno is on jazz. In a world run by the impersonal forces of globalised capital and other transnational superstructures, the solutions to our problems should be structural and not personal, institutional and not emotional, mediated and not immediate. At the end of the book, Kornbluh paraphrases Antonio Gramsci when she writes that "the old world is dying, but immediacy poorly midwives the new world's struggle to be born" (Kornbluh 2023: 217). Immediacy may be good for keeping our energy up, but it simply will not point us in the right direction, no matter how good it may make us feel.

Kornbluh strives for a generalisation applicable to various fields of our cultural production. In "Writing," she argues that the abundance and popularity of first-person narrative, autofiction, memoirs, and other personal genres add to the inflation of the imaginary. By the evacuation of third-person narrative, fiction, and indirect discourse, literature strives for immediate modes of communication. Telling a story is replaced by emanating intense affects, and impersonal discourse is superseded by a personal voice. The author begins her argument by considering the global success of Karl Ove Knausgård's autobiographical *My Struggle* and quotes his claim that "the duty of literature is to fight fiction" (Kornbluh 2023: 65). She also quotes from Maggie Nelson's bestseller *Argonauts* to show the problem with representation in contemporary literature: "Insufficient words, inadequate theories, unspeakable intensities, outmoded genres – so many refrains against mediation, toward immediacy" (Kornbluh 2023: 84).

Otessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, Anne Cvetkovich's *Depression*, the memoirs of Rachel Cusk, Ann Patchett, and Tobias Wolf, and finally, the bestselling memoir of all time, Michelle Obama's 2018 *Becoming*, all come within Kornbluh's wide range of attention. Further, she also provides graphs based on quantitative data showing the significant rise in first-person narrative in literature in the last few decades. On top of this, Kornbluh mentions the popularity of self-publishing, in which she sees the cutting out of middlemen (editors, publishers, reviewers, etc.). It may seem controversial to put together so many different authors as representatives of one tendency, yet Kornbluh is persuasive in showing the common denominator in the undeniable popularity of autobiographical, autofictional, and first-person narrated books.

Nevertheless, it might be argued that personal narrative does not equal merely a particular point of view. Some profoundly personal stories can, at the same time, unveil quite universal ways in which our psyche operates. They may not only depict particular affects, but also reveal to us the more general symbolic logic of these affects – in the way that psychoanalysis has attempted to do, and as third-person narrated, fictional stories such as Honoré de Balzac's *Illusions perdues* could not do. This potentiality foreclosed in the personal story has interested Slavoj Žižek, who regularly comes back to the dialectics of the particular and universal and recognises a kind of abstract universality in the inherent lack of human ego. And after all, Fredric Jameson himself also asked, “under what circumstances can a necessarily individual story with individual characters function to represent collective processes?” (Jameson 1992: 4). More caution is required when drawing the equals sign between the personal and the particular.

When informed by sociological imagination, some autobiographies or memoirs may serve not only as repositories of bodily sensations but also as sources of important signifiers distinctive of wider, collective processes. These can be found in the new French autobiographies dealing with class mobility, such as the ones from Annie Ernaux, Didier Eribon, and Édouard Louis. An individual story can serve as a synecdoche for a historical process. Finally, even if a personal story does not meet any of these criteria, a seemingly particular and very individualistic memoir may later serve as a valuable source for expanded, comparative research – such as Magda Szcześniak's broad study of upward mobility in socialist Poland based on, *inter alia*, written memoirs (Szcześniak 2024). As I mentioned before, I am aware that Kornbluh is not necessarily dismissing the genres she recognises as emblematic of the immediacy style, and she clearly acknowledges the importance of individual voices for the collective struggle. Nevertheless, it is crucial to make this point in order not to overlook the more symbolic, mediated, and universalistic potentialities of seemingly particular (auto)biographies.

In the next chapter, “Video,” the reader is ushered through the human colon, as the author opens this part with a description of the colonoscopy scene in *Uncut Gems*. The POV of the colonoscopy camera is an example of immersive tendencies in contemporary films, especially those available on streaming services. Important qualities here are immanentisation (the repeated breaking of the fourth wall in *House of Cards* or *Fleabag*), looping (loop-narratives in films like *Palm Springs*, but also the proliferation of sequels, spin-offs, etc.), genre fluidity (e.g., *Orange Is the New Black* as the

first show in Emmy history nominated in both comedy and drama categories), and surging (the primacy of spectacle over plot in series like *Game of Thrones*). All these tendencies lead to the “redaction of medium and form toward immanentized phenomenal experience; privatisation of perspective from point-of-view and direct-address camerawork to customized content; an emptying out of figuration and fictionality in favor of ambience and affect, presence and expressivity, solvent and sadism” (Kornbluh 2023: 147). The effect of immediacy is enhanced by the way videos circulate: video-on-demand watched on our phones, anywhere, anytime – “while we commute, while we wait in line, while we juggle three devices at once at work and at home” (Kornbluh 2023: 121). All this while social media algorithms trap us in our little bubbles of permanent sameness, feeding users with more of what they have already watched and liked, and therefore imprisoning everybody in the “fortress of [the] imaginary” (Kornbluh 2023: 128), and minimising a chance of any mediation of the other.

Overall, the “Video” chapter proves somewhat less satisfying than the one on writing. Many of Kornbluh’s arguments repeat some quite well-known critiques about problems with social media’s algorithms, the homogenising style of Netflix’s production, or overstimulating videos designed to keep our attention for as long as possible. Her argument about genre fluidity also comes off as a bit far-fetched. Genre fluidity is not necessarily a new phenomenon, as genre-bending productions have been with us for quite some time. The same can be said about the tendency to use shaky documentary filming for personal focalisation. Kornbluh develops her argument by drawing on, for instance, *The Hurt Locker*, directed by Kathryn Bigelow and awarded the Oscar for Best Picture in 2009 (it was also the first Oscar in history awarded to a woman for directing). All these qualities have been present in American cinema at least since the New American Cinema and certain previous avant-garde films. However, this fact itself does not refute Kornbluh’s argument, because she wants to present these tendencies as some kind of cultural dominant rather than to prove their novelty. And yet, *The Hurt Locker*, as one of the least popular Oscar winners in the twenty-first century, might not be the best example for her case. The same goes for genre fluidity. The top ten highest-grossing films in 2024 are mostly pretty typical examples of genre cinema – with the top three being *Inside Out 2* (animation), *Deadpool & Wolverine* (action/superhero movie), and *Wicked* (musical). On the other hand, the whole top ten speaks in favour of another point the author makes: all of them are either sequels, spin-offs, or reboots. Ultimately, Kornbluh does prove her



point in a way, but sometimes she tries to build her argument on too many examples at once, when some of them are just less suitable and convincing.

The “Antitheory” chapter targets certain tendencies of contemporary humanities that for the author constitute “immediacy theory” or “antitheory.” Immediacy theory trades conceptual literacy for sensory attunement. It mistrusts knowledge that does not derive from personal experience. It prefers empirical evidence over theoretical abstraction, and reification over interpretation. It is often more about an aesthetic style of writing than it is about a theoretical value as such. Kornbluh says this can be observed in the growing popularity of tendencies such as autofiction, autoethnography, or anti-disciplinarity. Various “-isms” do not escape criticism either: vitalism, empiricism, nominalism, or computationalism (these include object-oriented ontology, some types of new materialism, or computational humanities such as data analytics or text mining). A common element of antitheory is nihilism – “all ‘ends’ are bad, all institutions are oppressive, human history is only the history of domination [...] and therefore the only minimally affirmable virtues are ephemerality, hybridity, destabilization, fugitivity” (Kornbluh 2023: 178). Clearly, Kornbluh does not share an anarchic sensibility.

Most of the tendencies described in this chapter can be perceived as post-Deleuzian modes of rhizomatic thinking. However, as a Marxist, the author prefers to see their roots in the precarisation of work in academia: “Gigification of academic labor crams academic production: manifest your individual take in your individual style with this short-term teaching contract here, this Substack subscriber there” (Kornbluh 2023: 162). Many of the aforementioned tendencies involve putting a lot of stress on the seductive and persuasive style of writing. Autofiction, for example, sometimes refers to an established philosopher or theoretician merely for an aestheticising effect – to extract pure vibes, “the sexy factor” of a theory, while leaving the actual point behind. The name of an established figure becomes just a useful gimmick – and speaking of which, Sianne Ngai, the author of *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form*, is one of Kornbluh’s positive examples of a theoretician who does not produce antitheory while dealing with the aesthetic and emotions.

The reification of theory leads to a sort of anti-intellectualism within academia. And as Kornbluh claims, it is a way that freelance academics who are trying to establish their audience can build their brand. It boils down to creating a demand for one’s work in response to the precarity created by temporary contracts and unstable working conditions. This often leads to the development of convincing and aesthetically pleasing styles of writing

that shatter the border between literature and the humanities – “fullnesses of charismatic persona, corporeal receptivity, and affective flooding devise an evanescent plenum that preempts criticism” (Kornbluh 2023: 160). Affective flooding happens both on the level of style and content. If one were to go through the programmes of the last decade’s annual conferences of the most important networks and societies in the humanities, the abundance of panels focused on affect theory in which the panellists mostly describe bodily sensations would be striking.

Kornbluh is generally making a valid point when she criticises closeness to objects of analysis that embrace – rather than disarticulate – the dominant logics of capital. However, sometimes she seems to fail to acknowledge the importance of theoretical intervention and that some of these tendencies were at least connected with a certain moment in history. For example, Kornbluh’s critique of ANT does not apply to texts like ANT’s classic work by Michel Callon, “Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St. Brieuc Bay.” Callon’s article was a highly needed inclusion of more objects in the mediation process of theory. It was about adding more symbols to our cognitive maps and making them more detailed. At one point, ANT expanded and improved the mediating capabilities of theories and did not diminish them. Kornbluh – with the examples she gives, and some not very precise cases in previous chapters – sometimes simply gets ahead of herself, though she proves to be going in the right direction.

On the other hand, the style of the book goes in all directions at once. In some parts, Kornbluh switches style from sentence to sentence, for instance, when a theoretical deep dive is summarised by a playful pun. There are also references to memes or songs smuggled in here and there. The hectic rhythm of some fragments becomes addictive and may infect a reader with a sort of theoretical high. This also differentiates Kornbluh from Adorno and may make her more digestible for students for whom Adorno’s remarks on the “cultural industry” may come off as merely the condescending complaints of a bitter old man. One could even say that Kornbluh herself resorts to antitheoretical qualities in her book – the style is seductive, and at some point, one may simply start vibing with the imagined author behind the book. However, this only proves that Kornbluh is not simply dismissing the immediacy style – she acknowledges it as the contemporary cultural dominant, which she is inevitably a part of, at least to some extent. Ultimately, immediacy is just like postmodern irony – good as a dessert, but when it constitutes your whole diet, then it becomes problematic.

As I mentioned at the beginning, *Immediacy, or, The Style of Too Late Capitalism* works well as a theoretical intervention, providing readers with useful terms to describe the conditions of everyday life. However, periodisation is also part of this theory, even if it is not its best element. What, therefore, is the “too late capitalism” in the title? According to the author, it is “a contradictory moment where the overmuchness of lateness arrests itself” and “where postmodernism inscribes ‘a crisis of historicity’, immediacy encodes a crisis of futurity, a beclouded nonhorizon” (Kornbluh 2023: 13). The crisis of futurity drives us to defeatism, and rapid climate changes foreshadow a sense of the upcoming apocalypse. The situation is serious, and some action must be taken now, yet it is already too late. In the face of the imminent threat of human extinction, immediacy just feels right. And that is where the ideology of immediacy holds a kernel of truth, according to Kornbluh, even though immediacy as a remedy is a dead end. Kornbluh believes that hopelessness might open political horizons, and looking back is actually not a bad idea: “old forms, outmoded institutions, and residual constructs still have more to offer. Diagnosing too-lateness as it materializes in the style of immediacy shouldn’t be an invitation to melancholy so much as an incitement to collaboration” (Kornbluh 2023: 19). Perhaps some readers, after this part, may have the impression that a spectre is haunting the book – the spectre of reaction. But that would be a misreading. There is certainly nothing reactionary about strong trade unions, the welfare state, well-financed public healthcare, and state regulations for Big Tech. Kornbluh seems just to be advocating for simple, unspectacular institutional interventions instead of personal quasi-revolutions, which premium an affect over the effect.

However, the general crisis of futurity does not seem fully satisfying as a justification for the present hegemony of immediacy. This is one point in the book where Kornbluh’s materialistic approach is not material enough. The irresistible charm of immediacy is rooted in something much more mundane and ordinary that does not find its place in Kornbluh’s argument – attention. We know that everyone is running out of time, historicity is in crisis, and the sense of an “eternal now” supersedes the linear progression of time. Jameson even characterised postmodernism as a change from a predominant preoccupation with time to a preoccupation with space. Time might indeed be out of joint, but it is a fundamental prerequisite of our ability to pay attention. The evacuation of time means the evaporation of a capacity for attention. And where there is no attention, there is no mediation or theoretical inquiry. I do not mean merely to bring up the

widespread complaints that social media is destroying our attention, even though I think there is certainly something to it. Our attention spans did not simply shorten with the invention of TikTok. However, it is very telling that social apps are now flooded with commercials advertising various apps for a quick “dopamine detox” – the promise of an easy struggle against immediacy by using more immediacy.

Human attention is deeply historical and has been drastically changing since early modernity, as Jonathan Crary proved in his monumental book, *Suspensions of Perception*. His impressive genealogy of human attention in modernity gives insight into the importance of attention in shaping an overstimulated subject whose personal management of attentiveness and inattentiveness is a survival mechanism. This leads to isolatory tendencies, providing a refuge for an exhausted person. And isolation in social terms means atomisation and individualism – two siblings of immediacy and thus close to Kornbluh’s analysis. This is not the romantic isolation of an introspective poet but rather the desperate seeking of a tired worker for a moment of rest: “the logic of spectacle prescribes the production of separate, isolated, but not introspective individuals” (Crary 1999: 79). Though Kornbluh refers to Crary’s 24/7, it is his *Suspension of Perception* that provides an enriching coda for reflection on the style of too late capitalism.

Anna Kornbluh does not stand alone in her scepticism about immediacy. Her book is part of a larger landscape of theoreticians whose conclusions are somehow parallel. Some sociologists point to similar tendencies in contemporary politics. In his latest book, American sociologist Rogers Brubaker singles out three features characterising the environment of hyperconnectivity, namely, abundance, flatness, and – precisely – immediacy (Brubaker 2022: 126–153). For him, immediacy is a fundamentally anti-institutional quality that promotes both populism (dismantling mediating institutions to take direct action) and technocracy (dismantling the mediating role of the *vox populi* in a democracy, which allows governments not to consult some decisions with their citizens). For Brubaker, digital hyperconnectivity is a technology and an ideology of immediacy.

However, these intuitions do not come exclusively from American scholars. A Polish sociologist, Krzysztof Świrek, also notices the presence of immediacy in contemporary politics when he diagnoses the recourse to personal charisma. He argues that “the new masters of politics aspire towards the traditional model of authoritative power, yet in the absence of traditional institutions this aspiration must be expressed in the theatrical overperformance of strong will that employs traditional markers of

dominance: excessive virility, disregard for any sensitivity, and personally or socially targeted aggressive language” (Świrek 2024).

Immediacy is starting to be frowned upon in film studies as well. The first intervention of the kind, which stirred the field, was probably the publication of Eugenia Brinkema’s *The Forms of the Affects* (2014). More recently, several texts in *The Oxford Handbook of Film Theory* (2022) seem to acknowledge immediatising tendencies in current film theory while being sceptical about them. The author of one chapter, Nico Baumbach, is mentioned in the “Acknowledgements” section of Kornbluh’s book. In his article “Film Theory as Ideology Critique (After Trump)” – a title that has aged really badly – Baumbach diagnoses that “the position that advocates for affirmation over negativity, for affects and attachments over form and structures, for attending to surfaces and description over depth and absent causes [...] it is this position and not ideology critique that is now hegemonic in the American humanities” (Baumbach 2022). Further he asserts that “one of the first lessons is helping students unlearn their immediate habits, biases, pleasures, and epistemological assumptions so that they take a more critical approach” (Baumbach 2022). In the following pages, Damon R. Young states that the aim of his chapter is to “propose that the affects that traverse the cinematic body are never as ‘immediate’ as we may want them to be” while arguing that the “revolutionary potential of psychoanalysis lies in its negative insistence on what breaks the flow of information, interrupts the signal, turns back on an abyss” (Young 2022). The struggle for more mediation in film studies is furthered in the volume by Scott C. Richmond’s chapter, in which he stresses the role of impersonality in affect theory (Richmond 2022). These are only a few examples of the backlash against immediacy, which had been happening for some time before the publication of Kornbluh’s latest book.

One last thing needs to be stressed in a text, like this one, that is published in a journal focused on the interpretation of “new phenomena, especially in Central and Eastern Europe.” In a review of *Immediacy* published in the *Chicago Review* the author wrote that “Kornbluh outlines the pervasive yet unrecognized presence of immediacy style as a generalized aesthetic category (principally across North America and Western Europe)” (Bagherli 2024). But immediacy has made itself very comfortable in Eastern Europe as well. The very fact that this essay is published in a Polish academic journal that calls itself “antidisciplinary” would be a sign of immediatising tendencies for Kornbluh. However, perhaps a much better picture of these trends appeared recently in a Romanian film, *Do Not Expect Too Much from*

*the End of the World* (2023), written and directed by Radu Jude. In the first scene, the protagonist, Angela, is awakened by the alarm before 6 a.m. On the nightstand next to her lies Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, a lube, and an empty glass of wine – the pioneering autofiction novel and two remains of the most immediate pleasures available. Angela works 16 hours a day driving around traffic-jammed Bucharest, and in between she unwinds by becoming a grotesque, Andrew Tate-inspired patostreamer on TikTok. Considering the recent influence of this app on the Romanian presidential elections in December 2024 (leading to their annulment), it cannot be denied that the immediacy style is also gaining momentum in Eastern Europe. This becomes even more evident when we look at a few excerpts from the 1982 Romanian film *Angela Goes On*, which Jude put in his 2023 film. It can easily be seen that being a woman taxi driver 40 years ago was also challenging. Still, at least it was free of a certain kind of immediacy and the precarity that characterises those current drivers who combine working for Uber with other gigs (in one of the scenes, the old Angela, who worked as a taxi driver in the 1980s, asks the young one, “Does Uber contribute to your future pension?”).

Let's add to this the firing of the entire copyediting/proofreading staff in the largest Polish daily, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, at the beginning of 2024. This was nothing else than cutting the middlemen out of the publishing process and making the circulation of the paper more immediate, while burdening the authors with more responsibilities without additional payment. Moreover, the results of the last few editions of the Krzysztof Mętrak Competition, a major competition for young film critics in Poland, have proven that autobiographism and personalism are an increasingly popular new tendency in contemporary Polish film criticism. And while in Central and Eastern Europe there is no DoorDash, its Central European equivalent Foodora (which operates in Austria, Czechia, Hungary, and also Scandinavia) advertises itself on the internet with slogans such as “Because you want to” or “We believe that freedom can be delivered,” and a short manifesto: “We believe in a world free of guilt. Where people order what they want, whenever they want, because they love it.” Ordering whenever you want because you want to – pure tautological immediacy. And in case you do worry about the work conditions of the deliveryman hired under precarious conditions without proper social security – just don't. After all, Foodora believes in a world free of guilt, so you're all good. Just don't mind that it may lead to a situation where more and more of us are as exhausted and overstimu-

lated as Angela in Radu Jude's film. In Central and Eastern Europe, immediacy style is the air people breathe – maybe even to a greater extent than in some Western countries, since the capitalism that was implemented in this region after 1989 was already in its late form. Central and Eastern Europe jumped straight into the haze of lateness.

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### /// Abstract

This essay is a review of Anna Kornbluh's book *Immediacy, or, The Style of Too Late Capitalism* (2023), published by Verso. Following Frederic Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Kornbluh proposes the theorisation of the contemporary cultural dominant, which she recognises as being different from the one in postmodernism. She calls it "immediacy," which means a tendency to eschew mediation and strive for direct connection. The author of the essay finds Kornbluh's theoretical intervention invigorating while having some restrictions regarding her attempt at periodisation. He also points out the category of attention and its historicisation as an element that could enrich further studies on immediacy. Drawing mainly on examples from Romania and Poland, the author in conclusion indicates that immediacy might be considered a contemporary hegemonic style not only in North America and Western Europe but also in semi-peripheries of the West, such as Eastern Europe.

Keywords:

immediacy, capitalism, Anna Kornbluh, Frederic Jameson, Marxism

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