Anna Kornbluh. *Immediacy, or, The Style of Too Late Capitalism*.
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Anna Kornbluh's *Immediacy, or, The Style of Too Late Capitalism* may well be the most important work of cultural criticism to be published in the English-speaking world in the past twenty-five years. Nevertheless, there are challenges for reviewing such a book for the *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*. The first is the not insurmountable problem that Kornbluh's book was published almost two years ago in January 2024, and might be seen as already a little long in the tooth. The second, more difficult matter is that Kornbluh is a North American critic, and her book has no direct connection to Australian literature. Nevertheless, Kornbluh's analysis applies to a globalised milieu of cultural production of which Australia is unquestionably a part. This review reads some recent Australian writing in the context of *Immediacy* to examine how our national literature has responded to the conditions of what Kornbluh labels "too late capitalism." So in this sense it might be more apposite to consider it a review of Patrick Marlborough's novel *Nock Loose* (2025), or Jen Craig's novel *Wall* (2023), in the light of Kornbluh's criticism.

The central premise of *Immediacy* is that a retreat from artistic mediation to a constant stream of intimate subjectivity has come to dominate the cultural logic of the twenty-first century. Kornbluh considers immediacy—at once instantaneity of experience and a lack of mediation of experience—to serve "as a master category for making sense of twenty-first-century cultural production" (6). In her view, "[i]mmediacy rules art as well as economics, politics as much as intimacy" and "animates even contemporary critical theory that now sidles too close to its objects, embracing rather than disarticulating dominant logics" (6). It should be clear from the outset, not least given the title of the book, that this work is a sustained engagement with Jameson's landmark text, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). Kornbluh sets herself the ambitious task of mapping the death of postmodernism as characterised by Jameson; the end of the era of late capitalism; the dawn of the age of too late capitalism; and the burgeoning development of a style that she identifies as grounded in immediacy.

The conditions that Kornbluh identifies as having resulted in the latest transformation of capitalist logic might be summed up as a series of abject failures of humanity to curb the destructive forces of industrialisation. A failure to stem, much less reverse, the tide of anthropogenic climate change. A failure to halt the miseries of widening income inequality. A failure to prevent the dehumanising march of the technological surveillance state. A failure to address the horrors of colonialism, economic imperialism, and even genocide. Under such circumstances, "[t]he ideology of immediacy holds a kernel of truth: we are fastened to appalling circumstances from which we cannot take distance, neither contemplative nor agential, every single thing a catastrophe riveting our attention" (Kornbluh 14–15). The conditions of the early twenty-first century ensure our constant immersion in the overwhelming flow of a constantly changing stream of the present. *Immediacy* charts the aesthetics of a pervasive sense of existential doom intermingled with a flood of TikTok dances, AI-generated brain rot and personal essays on Substack. As she puts it, "the mode and genres of immediacy now suggest a different function for favored entertainment: not evasive delusion *about* but deeper enthrallment *in* the spectacle of mass abjection, an enveloping total sensory engagement with too-real social distortion" (17). *Immediacy* maps the stylistics of the doom scroll.

Kornbluh's book is, like Jameson's before it, a wide-ranging discussion of culture in a broadly conceived sense. There are sections examining the relationship between immediacy and technology, the imagination, prose, poetry, video, and theory—or, rather, "antitheory" as

Kornbluh frames it. At the heart of all these relationships is the transformation of capital by the ever-hastening flow of exchange. Kornbluh depicts technology as perfecting the exchange of capital by moving it into the realm of the digital and the ideal. She argues that "capitalism tends toward obviating the mediating function of money: where, at first, commodities and money meet with money serving as a mediator to facilitate the exchange of commodities (C–M–C), ultimately money wants to transcend this mediation and become an end in itself" (29). The transition towards the instantaneous, unmediated, digital exchange of currency for currency is most obviously seen in the rise of crypto-currency and non-fungible tokens (NFTs), but can also be observed in the enclosure and commodification of self-identity apparent in the social media feed. If, as Jameson suggested, "[p]ostmodernism is the consumption of sheer commodification as a process" (x), the culture of immediacy involves the instantaneous production and consumption of "currency" in all its forms.

The free and instantaneous flow of capital has had serious implications for the viability of artistic expression in the twenty-first century. *Immediacy* makes the case that conventional art relies upon a conscious effort to mediate expression through distance, time and unnecessary effort. As Kornbluh suggests, "art takes up a discernible medium and takes creative distance from ordinary communication or banal functionality, making an appeal to the senses that reroutes common sense," while under the conditions of too late capitalism "art renounces its own project of mediation" (5). Capitalism has taken on an aspect of imminent apocalypse, and all forms of cultural expression have begun to feel the quiet pull of directness, subjectivity and presentism. Art involves artifice and artifice requires mediation. Mediation requires time and space, and both are in short supply.

In the fourth chapter of *Immediacy*, Kornbluh turns her attention to the impact of the forces of too late capitalism on literary style. The last decade of literary fads provides fertile ground for Kornbluh's analysis and, in her view, "[a]utofiction, first-person fiction, memoir, social media, and the personal essay comprise a continuum of auto-emission, indicating how much of literary production follows the human-capital ideology that makes of quotidian well-being a mandate to optimize one's inner material and to actualize the self, and how much contemporary literature is constituted by its rejection of mediation" (101). If the section reads like a systematic castigation of life-writing courses and MFA programs it is no accident, and Kornbluh openly remarks that "the growth of creative writing degrees (BA, BFA, MA, and MFA) has been exponential in the period that concerns us: at the end of the 1980s, around 1,000 degrees were awarded per year; by 2013, the annual figure was 6,500" (86). Few of the writerly peccadillos enshrined in these programs escape integration into Kornbluh's analytical framework. The ubiquity of first-person perspective, present tense, realism, autofictional elements, fragmented prose, and even prose-poetry are all identified as indirect products of capitalism's preoccupation with immediacy. Karl Ove Knausgaard's work is singled out for lengthy discussion of the self-indulgence of autofiction and Jenny Offill's *Weather* (2020) serves as an urtext for fragmentary prose.

Despite the book's clear defence of mediation as a central aspect of artistic endeavour, it would not be fair to characterise this book as an unmitigated assault on the concept of immediacy. The book does not identify directness and subjectivity as anathema to cultural production, but as traits that have grown out of control due to wider societal conditions and which, unchecked, threaten important functions of art in society:

> Fictional writing has no value. A maxim for a disintermediated world. Circulation-forward too late capitalism has no time for dallying in divagations. Synced to this state of affairs, writers at their best realize, as Knausgaard avows, that "the duty of literature is to fight fiction." Made-up plots and made-up

> characters used to fool us that narrative, impersonality, and, worst of all, collectivity, hold value. (Kornbluh 65)

Writing can attempt to connect disparate subjective experiences in unexpected ways. It can establish shared identities and create frames of reference that circumvent the subjectivity of human experience. Writing can mediate our engagement with the world of people and things, but the success of language requires a degree of context, distance and relativity that is at odds with twenty-first-century life.

The examples drawn upon in *Immediacy* to demonstrate the stylistics of immediacy in literature include many of the darlings of the international literary scene. In addition to Knausgaard and Offill, Kornbluh singles out Rachel Cusk's "self-secreting realism"; Tao Lin's disdain for "fiction as subservience to readers" (70); Megan Boyle's "project of updating a blog every hour of her waking life" (71); and Maggie Nelson's "bounding omnivorism" (84), as archetypal examples of the stylistics of too late capitalism. In each case, the "[c]ontemporary jettisoning of literary mediation simply aestheticizes" self-actualisation, while "shedding literature's potential to immanently criticize the known world" (69). The outcome of the revolt against mediation is a mirroring of economic and literary conditions, and "[l]iterature now encloses and reifies the substance of real bodies and real identities, excluding the less phenomenal, more speculative processes of fictionality and figuration" (Kornbluh 81). The conversion of writing into an unmediated flow of subjective experience transforms the writer as artist into writer as product.

Some Australian responses to the cultural logic of immediacy have been more ambiguous. Patrick Marlborough's *Nock Loose* responds to the economic conditions of the twenty-first century by repudiating virtually every stylistic quality that Kornbluh associates with immediacy. In the author's note at the end of the book, Marlborough suggests that "*Nock Loose* is in many ways the result of—and response to—the dire humourlessness of OzLit, and the ever-tedious yet ubiquitous 'small town with a big secret' / 'person returns home to dig up trauma through metaphor' (why is everyone always *returning home!?!*) / 'I have a PhD in Creative Writing, grew up in Dover Heights, live in Berlin/London/Brooklyn, but relate to the humble Australian asbestos farmer' genres of Australian fiction that the industry values so highly" (281). At a time when "[f]iction less and less purveys the third person, less and less works through plots, less and less spans long time scales, and more and more resembles the personalist, presentist wallowing already for sale in the other aisles" (Kornbluh 96), *Nock Loose* reflects a radical departure. The novel is written in third person; it is a satirical take on the well-plotted revenge thriller genre; its story spans a timeframe of some 150 years; and its protagonist is a former championship archer, raised in a small town dedicated to an annual renaissance festival, and clearly modelled on one of the grand dames of Australian comedy, Magda Szubanski.

Nock Loose is at once a deeply absurd farce and a cutting assessment of Australian settler colonialism's obsession with attempting to impose its national identity on history. The events of the novel unfold primarily in the Western-Australian town of Bodkins Point, where an annual historical reenactment of the battle of Agincourt dominates day-to-day life. The Bodkinites seek to "perfect history . . . by reliving it" (237). The festival is a bloody performance of colonial brutality from the beginning, with the narrator noting that the first Agincourt "left three dead and nineteen seriously wounded, with the town's only doctor losing both his hands to a broadsword, thus having his ability to mend the rest of the busted and broken severely inhibited" (25). Marlborough turns the horrifying spectacle of colonial violence into a preposterous joke through the mediating power of satire. Mediation here affords a degree of emotional distance to allow better analysis, as Kornbluh suggests. Like Australia at large, Bodkins Point is built on a history of racism and violence or, as it is put in the novel, "massacres

built this shithole" (112). Like the doomscroll of Kornbluh's culture of immediacy, Marlborough's vision is mired in a cycle of violence, but here the deluge of horrors is mediated by caricature. As the protagonist's father, Conway Robyn, would put it, Marlborough takes the opportunity to "put a little bullshit" on the story "and let it slide" (197). Fictionalisation mediates the horror of the colonial project, distancing the subject and providing a clearer view of the injustices of the past.

Marlborough calls his novel a work of "Piss Take Lit" (281), but it might also be identified as part of a tradition of "Ocker Highbrow" literature that reaches back at least to Joseph Furphy's *Such Is Life*. Satirical, complicatedly masculine, often vulgar, and always erudite, the Ocker Highbrow has experienced a resurgence in recent years. Aspects of it can be seen in the writing of Ryan O'Neill, Michael Winkler, Wayne Marshall, Dan Hogan and Kevin Densley. The work of these authors is frequently preoccupied with collective identity and the absurdities of Australian cultural production, and the crises of modern Australia are mediated by archaic language, fictional histories and the troubling of chauvinistic cliche. Marlborough's novel reaches its violent, metaphor-laden crescendo with "a veritable stampede of people who'd spent their entire lives caught somewhere between history, memory, make-believe, and small-town gossip, keen to start kicking the shit out of some big-city (Bunbury and Mandurah) fuckheads at last" (243). This is a work that takes the constitutive matter of Australian popular culture and renders it strange in order to undermine the legitimacy of the colonial project, a feat only possible through an attunement to the mediating power of satire. It makes for a wonderfully subversive and even dangerous book.

In Jen Craig's *Wall*, the illusion of immediacy and intimacy quickly gives way to an experience of estrangement and alienation from the narrative. The novel uses an ambiguous relationship with the stylistics of too late capitalism and challenges readerly expectations about what might appear to be a work of autofiction. At first blush, *Wall* seems to demonstrate all the elements that Kornbluh equates with the style of immediacy. Here we have a novel written in first-person present tense, with little in the way of plot—an artist returns home after her father's death to create an artwork that she ultimately abandons—and which bears all the hallmarks of "personalist, presentist wallowing" (Kornbluh 96). Craig's work differs from those discussed at length by Kornbluh in that each of these characteristics is fraught with contradictions. While it is heavily implied that the protagonist of the novel is named Jen Craig, this artist with a "diet company name" (16) bears only passing resemblance to the author of the book we are reading. What initially seems to be an intimate first-person stream-of-consciousness quickly reveals itself to be much closer to an epistolary novel consisting of a stream of words directed across the reader to the protagonist's partner, Teun. The simple plot hangs upon a web of complicated interpersonal relationships that are further called into question by the unreliability of the narrator. And what appears to be a presentist flow of subjective experience becomes mired in years of conflicts and misunderstandings.

Wall does not represent the flow of too late capitalism so much as it captures the stultifying effects of being immersed in that flow for too long. Like the rotting contents of the family home that the narrator sets out to sublimate into a work of art, *Wall* is a "manifestation of the *overwhelming mountain of things to deal with here*" in the twenty-first century (Craig 15) and the impossibility of movement under such conditions. Craig's narrator laments "[t]he slowing-down foulness of that stink" which pervades her father's home and renders productivity impossible (56). Far from ceaseless activity and flow, this is a novel about an artist's inability to move or create under the weight of expectation:

> This idea that had "made it all possible," as I'd said to you afterwards. This idea that, instead of being overwhelmed by what was here in this house—instead of being crushed—so completely overcome—there could now be a way for me to

> do something *to* it that would transform what I couldn't even bear to think about—yes, all of this stuff—into something different—something I could live with. Something, in fact, that was *art*. (61)

Art has become impossible under the weight of contemporary life. The protagonist lurches from one incomplete project—the "wall" of the title—to another, more derivative one—the "Chatswood Song Dong" project she hopes to make using her recently deceased father's hoard of belongings. Artistic success seems to rely on a capacity to exploit and commodify friendships, family, and the artist's own body. As Kornbluh might suggest, the only form of expression left to the narrator, enclosed in a commodified vision of subject experience as artwork, is a stream of words that reach for meaning and inevitably fail.

Once the impossibility of completing the "Chatswood Song Dong" project becomes clear, Craig's narrator turns, as Kornbluh would suggest, to the allure of immediacy. The protagonist abandons the task of collecting, sorting and curating the contents of her father's home and seeks refuge in the idea of scrubbing, disinfecting and wiping the house clean. Immediate action provides solace, the purchase of products provides comfort, and the dissolution of interpersonal relations in a pool of chemicals provides the possibility of a clean start.

> This idea that they, these bags of potent, fresh, new plastic objects and fluids that I had dumped on the porch—one trip after another—might offer through their cheapness and quotidian practicality, a much more *immediate* way of understanding the inheritance of the house, and hence play a crucial role in the making of something that could now become the "Still Lives." (Craig 117, emphasis added)

Immediacy offers the prospect of absolution through effort. Like the phenomenon of doomscrolling, however, the outcome is further stultification. The narrator finds no solace in "the disgusting wetted whorls of wire-haired dust from dad's place, which really I should have just left as they were," and she questions her urge to "wet down, to dissolve" (145). In fact, immediacy results in a new kind of symbolic death, with the narrator "bent over again to turn the loose and raggy towel in the bucket before" stepping "out of the house to empty the hot blood water into a hole in the greyish dirt near the letterbox" (145). If there is any possibility of meaningful movement in *Wall*, it perhaps can be found in the book's second half, in the remote possibility of personal connection with others.

The cultural conditions of life in so-called Australia might encourage a more restrained engagement with the stylistics of too late capitalism as described by Kornbluh in *Immediacy*. This is not to suggest that Australian writing is immune to the cult of autofiction, prose poetry, or bleeding-on-the page confessional writing, but that there are more opportunities for Australian writing to innovate than might immediately be apparent. Despite the promises of the digital age, distance and environment continue to have real impacts on the pace and flow of life on the continent—at least beyond Sydney and Melbourne. The idea that this flat and ancient land might innately resist the apocalyptic tendencies of twenty-first century capitalism exposes another force in the cultural life of the continent, too. Both Marlborough and Craig touch on the power and persistence of Aboriginal cultures and a sense of time that has long influenced their narrative rhythms. For Marlborough, Indigenous sovereignty is the foundation which any story of generational violence in this nation must acknowledge as its root. For Craig, ignorance of this sovereignty represents a fundamental disconnect between settler Australia and something that might, with time, approach a sense of belonging:

> Nothing, absolutely nothing, I had said, when people used to ask me about what I knew of the Aboriginal peoples who had lived where I used to live—nothing but the names of a few suburbs. Nothing. Yes, instead of trying to get some idea of the immensity of everything that I had failed to understand and couldn't even see for myself, all I could think of as I started off driving again, so slowly through the mist—anxious about avoiding other cars—cars and people—all I could think about at this time, when I might have taken the opportunity to sit very still and think about where I was *properly*—all I was thinking about then, Teun, was how I was going to be able to admit all this to you. (162)

If the cultural logic of contemporary Anglophone culture has become immediacy, it could similarly be observed that the cultural logic of Aboriginal literature in the face of colonisation has become characterised by immensity. In the works of Alexis Wright, Jeanine Leane, Melissa Lucashenko, Evelyn Araluen and many others, we can observe the temporal, spatial and economic counterpoint to the settler retreat to "the immediately tangible detritus of evacuated sociality" (Kornbluh 112). These authors provide a body of literature that demonstrates the immensity of time, space and connection. As our imperialist and settler cultures hurtle towards apocalypse, we might consider stopping to pay greater attention to those literary cultures highlighting the importance of mediation, particularly in the face of the immensity of history. Kornbluh accurately diagnoses the threats posed by an obsession with immediacy, but this continent is wide and old, and it isn't too late to slow down.

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