

Cinemediacy:

Theorizing an Aesthetic Phenomenon

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Among the many popular terms describing experiences with media, I make the pedestrian judgment that “immediacy” is one of the more prominent. I have argued elsewhere that I believe the core meaning of immediacy has been hollowed, and the term has grown anemic over the last few decades.¹ Yet, at the same time, there is potential for the term to regain its epistemological weight, and thus its utility, in both theory and practical use. Indeed, I feel it must do so, as so much remains unexplained about certain areas of pre-verbal and supra-verbal knowledge, and the styles of some of our greatest filmmakers rest on an intuitive understanding of this concept.² This essay is a step toward that rehabilitative end, as I believe immediacy can articulate some fundamental truths about our experiences with art and the world, areas left hazy and murky by other paradigms that had a telling linguistic bias.

Immediacy has, at its etymological core, the idea that mediation is negated. A positive conception of the term asserts a certain directness in the conveyance of something, and in this essay I am referring to cinematic instances that may be said to communicate with some unique directness of meaning and effect. However, even the use of the word “conveyance” belies a certain mediation, and so one of the central issues surrounding immediacy becomes obvious. Let me quickly dispatch with this problem by saying the notion of “directness” must be conceived as a use term. That is, “directness” is always “directness in comparison to something less direct.” Those who object to immediacy as I describe it have often suggested various levels of mediation, in the mechanics of filmmaking, the social and cultural histories of the subject, etc. I do not

¹ See “Contemporary Media and the Evolving Notion of Immediacy” (*Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, forthcoming).

² See chapter 2 of my book *Krzysztof Kieslowski: The Liminal Image* (London: Continuum, 2004), for a discussion of the styles of Kieslowski and Andrei Tarkovsky in this regard.

dispute this, as a general principle. It is nearly always theoretically possible to break down various “stages” between the self and the world perceived, partly because there is disagreement about what the “self” is (a metaphysical commitment), much more to learn about what actually happens in the brain during perception, and a lack of clarity regarding where “higher-order” categorical and linguistic concepts and other sorts of cognitive concepts begin and end. These issues will probably not be resolved any time soon, so we must conceive of immediacy as a relative position along a continuum of directness. Even so, some filmic experiences really do seem to be more direct than others, and so the term remains useful.

For the sake of focus, I will limit its definition here and center it on the question of ineffability, a characteristic most of the popular definitions of immediacy share: that is, immediacy is a relatively direct type of communication that defies linguistic categories and yields expressive and emotionally powerful impact. There are likely several varieties of immediacy, and all of them are worthy of consideration. This essay will only lay the foundation for a few general classifications.

Immediacy began as a mystical and romantic concept in 17th and 18th century British aesthetics. For instance, the British aesthete Archibald Alison saw the term as a mimetic concept, directly communicating the admirable and pleasurable imaginative properties of the world (The Great, the Uncommon, and the Beautiful) that he believed resided in the material things themselves (circa 1712). By the time we reach Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s Biographia Literaria (1817), the term refers to a direct, quasi-mystical trip into the ambience of the artist’s invention (Jackson 106, 111).

As we arrive at 20th century aesthetics, the application of immediacy becomes less romantic and extends from art in general to the cinematic image. Cinema appeals to the

extraordinary sensual reach of vision and sound combined, promoting an “immediacy” (at least in some instances) of sensual power which appears to function like primary epistemological stimulus, rather than secondary codings (like words). Flowing out of this, I maintain that the immediacy has survived as a cinematic aesthetic term largely because what Bill Nichols has called “the indexical bind” (149). However, the first section of the essay will survey this foundation for the term and reveal it to be helpful in a supplementary fashion, but ultimately inadequate for describing the essence of immediacy. The second section will outline a more promising option: a cognitive and phenomenological basis for calling certain experiences in the cinema “immediate.”

Indexicality and Immediacy

Indexicality begins with ontology, in that it is the semiotic evidence of something having existed, cinema being the photographic trace of an object’s existence created through a purportedly unhindered causation mechanism (photochemical registration of light). Indeed, my discussion here will hinge on two of C.S. Peirce’s famous semiotic classifications: iconicity (as per likeness) and indexicality (as per causality). Of those critics who have ascribed strong ontological effects to the cinema André Bazin is most often cited. Though I believe Bazin has often been misrepresented on this question (no space to debate this here), the point is that a truly “purist” ontologist believes that the photographic image bears a very strong tie to reality that might be called “pseudo-ontological.”

The benefits of some sort of ontological communion between image and referent are difficult to describe and apply. Likewise, many would attest to immediate experiences beyond the range of the indexical (in certain well-made digital images, for instance; or to take a different path, certain formal features of Stan Brakhage’s films that do not really hinge on reference to the

material world as much as they do formal vitality). Iconicity seems to be operational here, not indexicality (which has historically leaned upon iconicity as its primary vehicle). Indexicality, it turns out today, is fast becoming a judgment call. Whereas one might have called immediacy “the force of truth crystallized in evidence,” we cannot be so materially-oriented on this term any more.³

Cinema’s extraordinary iconicity effectively, cognitively, co-ordinates with our indexical “sense,” and any indexicality must draw its legitimacy from this verisimilitude. That is, iconicity is a matter of recognizance, a mental faculty that is rather quick, first-order, instantaneous. Indexicality is, however, a subsequent step, not essentially based on sensations but our knowledge of certain facts and a judgment as to whether the iconic phenomena before us correspond to the facts. However, the cues for indexical assumption are iconic: the more faithful a representation is, the more we assume there is an “indexical bind” there, *unless we know otherwise*, and the scrutinizing public, it might be said, is growing a bit more wary.

As we are now in the digital age, where the indexical bind cannot be assumed, we must understand how the indexical sense co-ordinates with iconicity; in fact, we may even begin to understand that immediacy is simply a term for that which is phenomenologically true for us; that is, it’s sensational qualities are not only arresting, invigorating and stimulating, but they sufficiently stimulate our “sense” of the indexical, without necessarily fully engaging that faculty in its fullness. This is an expanded view of what Gregory Currie attests is essential in cinematic spectatorship, an opportunity to run emotions “off-line” (146, 158). In short, we like the incarnational aspect of art because it is vital, and it has the potential of being phenomenologically “true” (that is, faithful to our understanding of aspects of the world) though

³ Indeed, it is possible we were never quite justified in this emphasis on photographic indexicality. See “What’s the Point of an Index? or, Faking Photographs,” presented at the Society of Cinema and Media Studies Conference, March 6, 2004. My thanks to Dr. Gunning for his paper and our engaging personal discussion of it.

we know this “truth” is not necessarily empirically true at all. To give an example, in the latest Harry Potter movie, the creature Buckbeak moves, acts, and appears beautiful. Buckbeak appears to be an actual creature that moves naturally, wondrously synthesizing the features of both an eagle and a horse; Buckbeak is a graceful incarnation of imagination. We know creatures such as Buckbeak do not exist, but we can imagine Buckbeak, and we have extensive representational experiences with horses and eagles. Buckbeak yields an immediate pleasure because she corresponds to our idealizations of eagles and horses and capitalizes on our imaginative impulses. Cinematic epistemology—as scholars as diverse as Tom Gunning⁴ and Mikel Dufrenne (176-98) and Roland Barthes⁵ (6, 80) attest—is a matter of encountering a world, but the success of that world builds on our phenomenological experience of our own world, our cognitive schemata. Cinema is, in this sense, an idealizing art, a dream of the very best order.

So, in short, the question of indexicality remains relevant to immediacy only as supplement (or even a fortification), because immediacy primarily hinges on the tandem work of iconicity and formal vitality. Any added “ontology,” the idea that the artwork reveals something “true” or “real” merely adds to the immediate effect, making it more full and robust; securing the idea that the powerful image before us is not only true phenomenologically, or idealistically (in the way that fictions might truly describe something true of the world), but also ontologically; i.e., it *really* happened historically. In terms of immediacy’s power, the question is not simply one of indexicality (whether one has knowledge that reality in some way “caused” the photograph), and not wholly iconicity (the mere correspondence of features between image and reality). Rather, immediacy describes the phenomenological sympathy between “direct”

⁴ See aforementioned reference to Gunning’s 2004 SCMS conference paper.

⁵ Though he is discussing still photography, I contend it is logical to extend Barthes’ remarks to the cinema.

experiences of perceiving reality (that is, those experiences we associate with organic, rather than mediated encounters), and those same experiences in an encounter with the image. That is, those occasions where sympathy hits a particularly high intensity may be characterized as immediate. The issue historically has not been whether audiences were “fooled” into thinking the cinematic image was real (e.g., Lumière’s train! Run!), but rather hinged on the sheer delight of sympathy in these two experiences.⁶ The phenomenologist Mikel Dufrenne’s notion of a “sympathetic” mode of reflection in aesthetic perception holds great promise here, I believe. He describes this as an attitude in aesthetic reflection that is active and participatory with the aesthetic object, yet ultimately submits to its workings, “seeing how it produces and unfolds itself” (393).

A Phenomeno-Cognitive Approach to Immediacy

As mentioned earlier, the breadth of pre-verbal or supra-verbal cinematic instances demands precision in terminology, and I will only have space to explore two promising varieties. The first is the idea that certain visual forms are epistemologically primary, and therefore the abstract image appeals to these very primitive, pre-verbal forms. I will call this formal immediacy. This designation does not refer to all visual forms, as many forms are compendiums of primary forms and would have to be considered second or third order by this argument; some of these, however, might be argued to be sufficiently pre-verbal to still classify most or all of them as immediate, but I am not sure we know enough about the brain to extend the term this widely. The second, a category developed by Diana Raffman in relationship to music, suggests that immediacy could be a case of our cognitive grid being *overwhelmed*, a truly *supra-verbal* experience, which has been known in aesthetics as ineffability. She locates this phenomenon in

⁶ I acknowledge some sympathy with Tom Gunning’s famous “Cinema of Attractions” argument here. See “The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde,” in The Film Studies Reader, eds. Joanne Hollows, Petere Hutchings, Mark Jancovich. London: Arnold, 2000.

the early stages of musical perception, near “to the peripheral sense organs” (688). For reasons that I will make clear, I will call this immediacy of plentitude. Obviously, music and cinema are considerably different media, so we must approach this comparison with some caution, but I do believe, particularly at this cognitive level, there are sufficient similarities to warrant application of Raffman’s theories here.

Formal Immediacy

Three authors have contributed to my thinking in this area: Rudolf Arnheim (particularly Visual Thinking and an essay entitled “The Double-Edged Mind”), and the neuro-scientists Robert Solso and Semir Zeki.

In summary, the human mind is engaged and constructive, and the long battle to endow perception with epistemological status, I believe, has been won; seeing is not simply passive activity or mere stimulus, but it is cognitive work, a searching after meaning, and so the completion of this task is logically the arrival of meaning in the brain. Perception is a matter of stages; Robert Solso lays it out as three: 1) basic analysis of shapes, forms, colors, 2) “primitive information is organized into fundamental forms” (75) (which, he maintains, are perceived mostly without prior learning or experience), and 3) fundamental forms are given meaning through association with previous knowledge of the world stored in long-term memory.

Immediacy could be said to be part of the first two-stages (the pre-verbal, certainly, and perhaps even the pre-categorical). Artistic encounters may work on a bottom-up level (say, the first two stages first, then the third), or a top-down level (with the higher-order processes engaged and “at the ready” before the encounter). Both operations happen regularly in perception, and may, in fact be two different systems of brain activity (though this sort of classification is still controversial). This idea (like many in cognitive science, I might add) was presaged in Edmund

Husserl, who distinguished between sensibility and understanding, but considered them both bound together and operational in perception. Rudolf Arnheim called this “the double-edged mind” (13) and labeled the systems the intuition and the intellect, and many contemporary scientists hold to a similar idea (e.g., Zeki describes this in terms of sensation and understanding⁷). Immediacy, then, is a matter of *emphasis*; it is not that the categorical, linguistic, or top-down system is ever entirely absent, but that it is not appealed to as strongly as the bottom-up process in certain sensory situations. Sometimes it is even thrown into a kind of stasis (e.g. “what am I looking at?”), creating a fascinating perceptual dynamic where the burden of perception is thrown upon the bottom-up system.

Formal immediacy might then be found in certain modes of abstract art, a heavy emphasis in Semir Zeki’s book Inner Vision: An Exploration of Art and the Brain. Often times abstract art causes a stall in the higher-order processes, a bracketing of identification, throwing emphasis on the more direct, fundamental forms with great intensity; the ambiguity of classification creates, in Zeki’s opinion, a rich plentitude of possible associations that can be (in certain situations) not so much frustrating as liberating and fully imaginative (25-26). Avant-garde filmmakers often take full advantage of this power, as Edward S. Small has described (xv, 10-11). Outside the avant-garde, one might consider the carefully placed, striking abstract images throughout the films of Michelangelo Antonioni, Andrei Tarkovsky and Krzysztof Kieslowski. These filmmakers absolutely understood the power of the abstract form in the narrative context.

Immediacy of Plentitude

Lying at the same primary level, there is another cognitive variety of immediacy. It does seem to me that what Kristin Thompson describes as the “excess” in tension with film’s narrative

⁷ Chapter 8 of Zeki’s book is dedicated to this issue.

elements (130) might be more narrowly focused in its connotation to help us with this problem. In short, the excess that defies narrative schema may also include and describe perceptual input that exceeds cognitive schemata. Thompson was drawing from Barthes' concept of "the third meaning," but seemed reluctant to call excess *meaning*, perhaps because she was referring to a wide variety of material outside the narrative, or that such a designation might distract from the points she was trying to make about narrative meaning. In our more narrow focus, however, I do not hesitate to call immediacy knowledge or meaning (though it is important to differentiate between levels of knowledge, as I have described).

In her article "Toward a Cognitive Theory of Musical Ineffability," Diana Raffman makes three essential points about musical ineffability that have value and applicability to some filmic instances. First, the "shallow level" near the sensory organs is where the initial reception of music (and, by extension, all initial perceptions of visual art) occurs. She calls this object "the literal pitch stream" (henceforth LPS), and it is, essentially, the fullest, most (relatively) uncompressed, unmolested mental representation of music we have in any given musical experience (694-95). It is, essentially, perception itself at the fullest magnitude our senses permit.

Second, it is *not* the type of faculty that contains "mental cubbyholes" (694-95). In other words, it is pre-verbal, and even pre-categorical to some degree. Mental cubbyholes are secondary, chunky repositories of categorization—schemata—that are not fine-grained enough to adequately contain the full LPS or do justice to it. You might compare this with high compression in digital video, which makes large mathematical generalities at the expense of fine, voluminous detail.

Third, the LPS is knowledge; we cannot describe the LPS (see point #2 above), but we know it when we see it or hear it or encounter it. She actually divides this type of knowledge into two subgroups: enduring sensory perceptual knowledge (the memory before further compression in linguistic categorization), but also, most importantly, a Cavellian idea of “knowing *is* seeing,” that is, the mental work that happens in the encounter that cannot be fully contained by memory of any sort. This is what Raffman would call “occurrent sensory perceptual knowledge (700). It is a type of ostensive knowledge; we know it, we experience it, but we can only point to it. It is knowledge because it is cognition, but it is evanescent—it is the reason, I maintain, why we continue to seek out new music, new films, new paintings, new aesthetic experiences rather than resting content with all those we have remembered.

The immediacy of plentitude flows from the richness of the aesthetic encounter that bests cognitive schematic assignment. A correlate of the LPS for cinematic perception would be, simply, the plentitude of stimulus a cinematic image conveys to us, overwhelming our ability to remember it or describe it. All cinema has this capacity, to some degree, but some cinematic instances specialize in this operation (the immediate appeal of grand cinematic spectacle, for instance). We come very close here to the related idea of the sublime, a well-trod aesthetic concept in the history of aesthetics, but all too quickly dismissed by many modern cultural theorists. There is not space here to fully explore the relationship of the immediate to the sublime, but some recent scholarship shows this to be a promising, renewed line of inquiry.⁸

Conclusion

Before concluding I should mention that I am not suggesting anything talismanic about art. People may experience a range of cognitive dissonances or competing priorities when

⁸ See Cynthia Freeland’s essay “The Sublime in Cinema,” in Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

perceiving art; they may decide, for instance, their interest in glorious aesthetic encounters is trumped by their interest in lunch. The top-down process can always take precedence, but what phenomenologists have suggested for decades is that an attitude, a certain posture of viewership can encourage the aesthetic experience. Likewise, certain forms, aesthetic strategies, etc. can encourage bottom-up cognition. It could be that some larger aesthetic modes (such as music) may be more suited for the ineffable because of a biological factor (e.g., perhaps we are mentally fine-tuned to categorize visual experience more than aural experience). If that is the case, specific attention would need to be paid to the particulars of each art, and what ways the equivalent of a “literal pitch stream” might be manifest in other arts; for example, we might venture that the multi-valence of the cinematic experience, its capacity for sensory plentitude, can be something like the LPS (perhaps this would be an immediacy of spectacle).

In conclusion, we might say that formal immediacy relies on the anteriority of primitive forms; that is, the fact that some forms appeal (and are processed) more immediately than others, which cognitively build upon them. Perhaps this primacy is enough to generate an epistemological effect that we can sense, or, as Raffman, Arnheim, Ernst Gombrich, and many others have said, we *know*; and this may be what many have called immediacy in the past. The immediate of plentitude variety is also anterior, but relies primarily upon the richness of the initial percept, which Raffman argues we really do know but cannot articulate due to cognitive limitations.

Why, in the end, does all this matter? Let me venture a few suggestions. First, Viktor Shklovsky maintained that art exists “to make the stone *stony*” (11-12). One of art’s functions is to highlight the sensory and emotional aspects of the world for us to enjoy. Immediacy describes a particularly intense occasion of the sensory. It also carries with it a plentitude of experience

before the reductive codes of language and long-term memory. It seems important that we rescue this idea from a film theory that is overly-enamored with linguistic and text-based models.

Second, the cinema has particular formal powers: time, motion, synthesis of aural/visual experience, etc. The immediacy it presents is unique, particularly as regards its ability to synthesize many sensuous qualities (sound, image, evoke synaesthesia, etc.). This essay, I hope, gives us a new way of approaching and beginning to understand them.

Third, immediacy as described moves toward something of a universal foundation for aesthetic appeal. I simply do not believe that culture is co-extensive with all experiences of the world, and immediacy helps me to articulate at what levels culture is introduced, at what innate level I might hope for the New Guinean aborigine and myself to enjoy the same aesthetic experience. This essay will not settle any particulars of this controversial issue, but it begins the discussion anew.

Fourth, immediacy tells us something about the world *and* ourselves. It describes a basic existential communion that we take for granted, but cinematic art gives us occasion to contemplate and appreciate. It also highlights the bottom-up process of perception that secures so much of what we consider moving, stimulating, and emotional. My language throughout this essay has, no doubt, betrayed my phenomenological bias: words like encounter, bracket, and immediacy itself. With all due respect to constructivism, I follow the phenomenologists, who maintain that meaning lies not in the mind alone, nor the world alone, but in the intentional *relation* between the two. This approach to all aesthetic topics, including immediacy, may keep us from the Scylla of idealism and the Charbydis of a sterile ontological realism. I do not go to films (primarily) for political critique, post-structural textual games, irrational desires, etc. Neither do I go to films because I'm eager for my synapses to fire or my schemata to be defied. I

go to the movies because aesthetic experience, meaning of many varieties, calls to me, invites me into relation with the world. I know such anthropomorphisms do not sit well with scientists, but I'd venture to say that such talk is what maintains our relation with the world and keeps us from retreating into a cold, objective, lifeless mode of analysis. Life is lively, after all, and oriented toward meaning.

Finally, the limitations of our cognitive equipment point us to a larger objective world. We may fear it at times, feeling somewhat insecure about our limitations. Yet, what continually amazes me is how often we seek experiences that highlight this limitation. The ineffable, the immediate, the wondrous, the transcendent; all these related concepts lie at the very heart of human living and experience. In this light—at the risk of making Derrida into a straw man—I take issue with a popular Derridean phrase: there seems to be much, so very much, outside the text.

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