

immediate, immediacy

"There are several small paintings by Chardin...Nearly all represent fruit and the accessories of a meal. They are nature itself; the objects seem to come forward from the canvas and have a look of reality which deceives the eye...When I look at other artist's paintings I feel I need to make myself a new pair of eyes; to see Chardin's I only need to keep those which nature gave me and use them well...."

--Denis Diderot, 1763

Immediacy : An Impossible Absolute?

In the above quotation, the realistic depiction of the fruit serves as a [window](#) onto the actual, tangible experience of fruit. The recognition of the fruit seems so real to Diderot that he says it is even deceiving. He does not need to apply any other interpretations that may aid his vision of the fruit: he sees them clearly and immediately just by looking. Is this a state of immediacy? Is the experience of the fruit so real that the medium itself, the painting, disappears? While a medium is often depicted as a window onto a vision or an experience, immediacy is the absence of that window and is instead the presence of the viewer within the vision or experience itself. Yet the 'disappearance' of the medium not only affects the viewer, but the producer as well. In fact, the change in emphasis from the immediacy of the experience on the part of the viewer to that of the producer is a key shift in the conception of media over the last hundred years. If mediation is the manner in which, according to Raymond Williams, the producer becomes alienated from his product, then immediacy is an absolute state in which the producer and production becomes unified into one seamless line. [1] Therefore, 'immediacy' connotes a fusion of elements where the fusion itself is not simply invisible, but non-existent. Arising within a critical debate in art history, the concept of 'immediacy' is itself often alienated from its essentially strict meaning of the absence of media. The concept of 'immediacy' is often manipulated--used to describe a state in which the influence of any mediating factors is rendered invisible--and subsequently attains a utopian connotation of artistic creation. Therefore, 'immediacy', so rarely used in its absolute form, becomes a relational tool: often, the usage is such that one thing is more or less immediate than another, yet neither can ever exist in a state of immediacy. The idea of 'immediacy'--the condition of being immediate or unmediated--comes up not only as an influential term in the course of art history, but as a model within the discourses of linguistics, logic, philosophy, psychology and cultural studies, among many others. By its very definition, 'immediacy' through a manipulation of either time or space, connects two distinct entities, thus negating binary oppositions. The oppositions of artist/audience, time/space, cause/effect, artist/medium, action/stasis, real/abstract are all sent into far more confused and clouded relations once immediacy enters and the producer or observer attempts to connect the opposing elements. Thus, the debate that arises then over the concept of 'immediacy' often revolves around the [purity](#) of the absence of mediation, or, more explicitly, the "return" to the precise definition of immediacy.

The definition of immediate asserts that within a relation of a person or thing to another there exists no intermediary or intervening member, medium, or agent. When two things have a relationship of immediacy, they are in actual contact or direct personal relation. [2] Essentially, immediacy is the negation of media. While media are the mechanisms through which connections are made and meanings are understood, immediacy is the manner in which the media are abbreviated and hidden. Therefore, the inherent paradox within the relationship of media to immediacy is that while immediacy is the abridgement of media in favor of the connection between the elements that are being mediated, immediacy relies on the existence of media to further reduce the theoretical distance between those same elements. This paradox can be illustrated through the concept of a highway: while a highway

is an intervening medium that accelerates the connection between two points, thus generating immediacy, this immediacy nonetheless relies on the highway as a medium to diminish the [temporal and spatial](#) distance between the same two points.

An analysis of 'immediacy' can begin with Plato's conception of purity of experience. Speech, he maintains, is more immediate than [writing](#), because of the authenticity and credibility of the words as emerging from the speaker's mouth and mind. Yet both speech and [language](#) are themselves media, which thus mediate the conditions of the dialogue. Even in this idealized [form](#) of unmediated communication there exists a number of intervening factors between speaker and listener, thus further emphasizing the placement of 'immediacy' as a contextual tool: speech is immediate only in its comparison to the more highly mediated communication of writing. [3] On the other hand, Aristotle seems to be entirely aware of the impossibility of the absolute absence of mediation within art. The very definition that Aristotle offers to begin devising a theory of art is that all art forms are practices of imitation. This imitation (see [mimesis](#)) requires a means--an intervening force--in order to duplicate. The epic poem relies on language to imitate; the tragedy relies on its actors. [4] Marshall McLuhan advances this concept of the impossibility of the absence of mediating factors by asserting the inherent "nesting" contained within this imitation: McLuhan ascertains that the language that Aristotle asserts is the method of poetry nonetheless relies on words, which rely on the understanding of symbols as a medium in and of itself. [5]

If viewed through the perspective of Aristotle, the development of the concept of immediacy in the course of art history is a consequence of the desire of the imitation to be rendered identical. Mechanisms of narrative, painting and sculpture often desire as realistic depictions as possible in their effect. In this sense, 'immediacy' takes on the connotation of the journalistic intensity of these realistic products. However, the very basis of these products as imitations uncovers their nature as mediated by the essential mechanisms of its production. The eyes of the painter, the experience of the painter, the brush, the easel, the paint all serve to mediate the relationship between the viewer and the original subject. The artist thus attempts to create immediacy through emotive and symbolic [gestures](#) within the work: gestures of ceremony allude to a narrative that could be understood 'immediately' from the gesture. [6] Gestures become indexical of experience. [7] Nicolas Poussin can be seen as key figure in the advance toward 'immediacy' through the manipulation of expression rather than dictated emotion. Poussin presents a representation that shuttles between what C.S. Peirce defines as icon and index: the observer is alerted to emotion not by its physical imitation, but by the *possibility* of imitation [8] . Poussin thus exemplifies the transformation to an unmediated sensory relationship with form. [9] (see [painting](#)) Form became not simply a means to a direct representation, but an area of exploration, in which form could produce an emotion that was not presented within the confines of the frame. This projected an immediacy that bridged the viewer and the viewed. Yet the concept of immediacy in realism transforms itself from a direct course between subject and viewer to a direct course between artist and medium. The development of new technologies within the medium of paint--the growing popularity of the more 'immediate' methods oil sketches, watercolor and acrylics--was indicative of the desire for the artist to imitate not what he saw outside of himself, but what was contained within. [10] Understanding 'immediacy' as "uninterrupted in course" and "direct", the Impressionists attempted to create an unmediated course between their vision and their product. Immediacy came to describe the desired and absolute relationship between an artist and his medium, unhindered by the necessary mediations of the elements of production. [11] The Impressionists thus focused what Poussin began: the specific instant of time that the Impressionists bound up in their canvases where icons of a moment, but also, and more importantly, the depiction of the moment became and index of the painter's presence within that moment.

Specifically, the art of the 20 th century has dealt with the concept of immediacy as a manner of manipulating media in order to gain access to another realm of creation or understanding. The Surrealists, using the concepts of Automatism, attempted to achieve immediacy in their work: the two points that they wished to have an immediate relationship were their unconscious and their product. Surrealism saw the self as a mediating factor, and attempted to negate expected configurations of content in favor of submitting the self to impulse and intuition. A fantasy world of immediacy developed, in which paintings were made of dreams and the conscious world was bypassed. The relationship of media in Surrealism, then, was not between the artist and the paint, but rather between the artist and himself. Yet the 'highway' to the vision of the subconscious was, of course, the mediating world of paint, canvas and self. [12]

Alternatively, the state of 'immediacy' that was desired within Abstract Expressionism was a physicality of paint. Instead of being mediated by subject matter, and even form, the painter allowed himself to experiment in a direct discourse with the paint and the canvas. A proclaimed independence from political and social restrictions pushed the Abstract-Expressionists to explore their relationship with their craft without the mediation of a message. Jackson Pollock, the major example of Action Art, negated the brush, the easel and the wall to establish a physical contact and directness with the paint, thus allowing him to depict the act of 'immediacy'. It is here that the concept of immediacy revolves back onto itself, with the fusion of media not for the immediate effect of the viewer, but for immediate depiction of immediacy itself. What is crucial to understand about the changes in the art historical definitions of immediacy is the relationship of the elements of cause and effect that are fused through the employment of immediacy; while realism attempts to display an immediacy of experience--the viewer is immediately transported into the atmosphere depicted while both the painter and the medium are rendered invisible, abstraction attempts an immediacy between the painter and the medium--the concept of the viewer is entirely phased out. The negation of the media between painter and viewer eliminates the necessitation of the viewable in art. Thus, the artist does not attempt to communicate something to anyone but himself. [13] . The artist is no longer sending a message through the paint or the canvas; by deleting the receiver from the communication model, the artist thus engages in a dialogue with himself--with paint as the method of speech. It is with this understanding of 'immediacy' that formalism can be best approached. Formalism, as an emphasis on the formal qualities of line, color, texture and value, nonetheless deals with the representation of immediacy. In much the same way that Action Art is inherently self-referential, this representation refers back to itself as an imitation of the sensuousness of the medium itself.

An example of the circuitous argument that is inherent in any debate regarding immediacy is that of photography, specifically 'instant' photography. Polaroid cameras, which still rely on the media of light, film, shutters and subjects in order to produce an image, have been deemed 'immediate' because of the abbreviation of time: a subject can be transferred to a printed photograph within seconds, simply by the click of a button. However, this kind of immediacy circles back around to William's concept of alienation: the advance toward immediacy has displaced the process through which, over time, the artist refines his product. In a similar manner, an 'immediate access store', which, in a computer is "a storage space whose access time is negligible," develops a sense of technological immediacy in the user, yet at the same time alienates the user from his own memory. [14] It is here that the employed form of immediacy, as a method that alters time and space but does not altogether negate them, is most diverted from its absolute meaning as a fused course between elements.

While the usage of the word 'immediacy' in the course of political history may be essentially dead, an investigation into its political connotation arouses an understanding of further

layers of power and control. In this conception, 'immediacy' describes the condition of the relationship between a person who is subject to a superior power. Existing primarily in the feudal context of Medieval Europe, 'immediacy' describes the essentially binding relationship of the tenant to the landlord, or the vassal to the sovereign. [15] The understanding of 'immediacy' in such a manner fades out of the lexicon in direct correlation to the political diminishment of the feudal 'holding' of a person within one's power; yet the appropriation of this political connotation in the contemporary art historical debate leads to a more complex reading of the relationship between artist, media and audience. Who controls whom? And if money is the medium by which the landlord controls the tenant, what is the medium through which art is controlled?

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