THE CATASTROPHIC IMAGE & THE SKIN OF YOUR FYF

MOS BIB 006

THE CATASTROPHIC IMAGE

THE SKIN OF YOUR EYE





BLACK TUESDAY

(1967)

ASH WEDNESDAY

(1983)

BLACK THURSDAY

(1851)

BLACK FRIDAY

(1939)

BLACK SATURDAY

(2009)

BLACK SUNDAY

(1926)

What follows is a personal account of events that took place around mid to late January 2020 in Melbourne, Australia during Australian bush fire season.
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"By mid-January, bush fire season was well and truly underway and various fires had been burning for a long time—for weeks. Living in a city (like Melbourne) you feel a certain amount of distance away from the fires because it's not like there's a fire literally on your doorstep. Although there is a dry stillness—this feeling in the air that anything could catch alight at any time.

So you you feel on alert—I think that's the best word—this sense of alarm, or alert, is partially stirred up by the of mass consumption of news and social media. A few weeks in though, and sources published by newsmedia outlets or social sites has become less and less trustworthy... or authentic.

There's also been a growing disinformation campaign that's emerged with the fires suggesting that the reason that this year's bush fires are 'out of control' is because of the Australian Greens party advocating for less 'controlled burnings'.



"Australian's are having trouble with the past. We are not sure if it is over or not."

LESLEY HEAD, AUTHOR OF 'SECOND NATION',
17TH DECEMBER 1997.

"'Controlled burnings' I always associate with a colonial idea of clearing the land in order to take ownership of it.

There's a story about this family called 'The McHaffies', who settled on a small island outside of Melbourne, which became known as Phillip Island. (My own family has a legacy of 'holidaying' on the island, going back at least three generations. Both my aunty and my mother live there now.)

The story of what The McHaffies did on the island has only become clearer in recent times and (as with many of the stories transcribed to history at the time of the European invasion of Australia) would have been previously been covered up or reframed. What has become clear is that at some point the McHaffies set fire to the whole island in order to clear it so they could claim ownership of the land. The whole island was set alight. So, land clearing is not the same as controlled burning.







[Image reference #1: Disinformation]

The 3D rendering shown here was one of a group images circulated during the 2020 Australian bush fire season that were (eventually) accused of creating myths or carrying disinformation about the fires. In truth, this image was best described as a 3D render made by a hobbyist with an interest in polygrammetry and 3D rendering effects and textures. The content of the image was based loosely on factual data, for example, satellite data was employed to create the shape of the land. It was labelled 'a photograph' (in this instance, 'photograph' refers to an event captured by a physical lens) as it was circulated rather than an illustration or graphic and therefore became accused of harboring misinformation. There were more willfully damaging memes circulated as part of attempts to deliberately out to discredit or confuse information people were getting about the bushfires, most used pre-existing imagery without crediting or relating back to their sources.

In T.J. Demos' text 'The Agency of Fire: Burning Aesthetics' Demos starts to describe the culture around 'images of devastation' that are circulated to represent 'burning' events, particularly when referencing the Pyrocene and petrocapitalism.

Naomi Klein identified "orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events" and the treatment of disasters as "exciting marketing opportunities" back in 2007 when she labeled this activity 'disaster capitalism'. And this becomes strarkly evident when facing the disinformation around the 2020 bush fire season and calls for more 'controlled burns' and 'land clearing'.

1.

DEMOS, T. J. 'THE AGENCY OF FIRE: BURNING AESTHETICS'. *E-FLUX JOURNAL*, #98, FEBRUARY 2019. [E-FLUX.COM/
JOURNAL/98/256882/THE-AGENCY-OF-FIRE-BURNING-AESTHETICS]

2.

KLEIN, NAOMI. 'BLANK IS BEAUTIFUL: THREE DECADES OF ERASING AND REMAKING THE WORLD' (CHAPTER). SHOCK DOCTRINE: THE RISE OF DISASTER CAPITALISM. METROPLOITAN BOOKS, NEW YORK, 2007.







Previous image reposted without crediting source via [twitter.com/rhianna]. 6th January 2020.

At the same time as this tide of disinformation was washing through, there had been a push—as there often is—to find a specific 'hero' image to describe events during bush fire season and summarise what had been going on.

The New York Times located a photographer in Australia and commissioned him to take the picture shown opposite. It features the front of a house enveloped by fire with a kangaroo and some straggly plants silhouetted in front of it.



[Image reference #2: The 'Hero' image]

The image assemblage on the page overleaf is the result of a quick Google search for 'Australian bush fire images'. *The New York Times* was explicit in their seeking of a singular 'iconic' image (or a 'hero' image to use journalistic jargon) that would become a useful signifier of this event. This one image would then be passed around, as the one true image of the event, before bommeranging back to it's source. They even published an article named 'In One Photo Capturing the devastation of Australia's Fires', where they explained how they located a photographer who was in Australia at the time (Matthew Abbott) and commissioned him to go find the one iconic image that would represent this event.

Referring again to T J Demo: this is where "the insufficiency of images" taken to depict catastrophic or pyrocentric events becomes evident. A further extension to Demos discussion would be to say that burning aesthetics are also burnt—they turn to ashes. Their duration is always limited—even with (especially with) repetition. Even though the shown overleaf was churned and churned, it has now dissipated. We burn through burning images. They do not last. In this, they like the things they seek to represent.

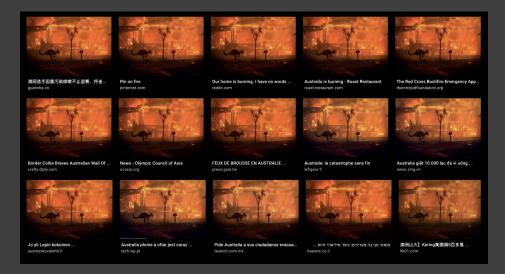
SHIMABUKURO, MARK (WRITER) & ABBOTT, MATTHEW (PHOTOGRAPHER).

'IN ONE PHOTO, CAPTURING THE DEVASTATION OF AUSTRALIA'S FIRES'.

THE NEW YORK TIMES, 9 JANUARY 2020. [NYTIMES.COM/2020/01/09/

READER-CENTER/AUSTRALIA-WILDFIRE-PHOTO.HTML]

4.



Google image search results for 'Australia bush fire', c.February 2020.



Bojkowski, Michael. 'Invasion (Australia) day rally attendee' holding placard replicating image below. 26th January 2020.



Abbott, Matthew (photographer). 'Image of a burning home in Lake Conjola in New South Wales'. The New York Times, 9th January 2020.

"For years, Worthington had relied on the images left on his retina"

DASTON, LORRAINE & GALISON, PETER. 'PROLOGUE'. *OBJECTIVITY*, P.13. ZONE BOOKS, NEW YORK, 2007.

"The Observer now aimed to be a machine."

DASTON, LORRAINE & GALISON, PETER. 'TRUTH TO NATURE'.

OBJECTIVITY, P.104. ZONE BOOKS, NEW YORK, 2007.

"I found myself regularly going outside to look for evidence of what was going on (rather than relying on news or shared media)—evidence that I could see with the skin in my eye.

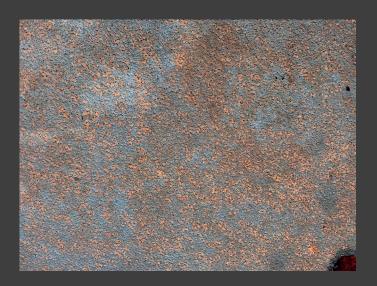
Sometimes I would photograph these and share these observations.

One particular evening I was surveying the sky—because people would talk about the sky and how it was changing. The atmosphere on this particular night had an ominous tinge to it, mostly because it was very it was hot and very cloudy.

And the clouds were this purpley-orangey-pinky colour. They looked heavy, but they were also this weirdly, bright, luminous colour. I took a photo of the sky and shared it on Instagram. The weather app on my phone was predicting it was going to be around 40 degrees the next day (the weather was becoming harder to predict as patterns changes occurred in shorter and shorter increments so any weather advisory service could only be taken as serving approximate readings).

If it was going to be a really hot day, I would just shut up the house and hide out inside until the heat had passed. So the next morning I set about doing just that. As I was pulling down blinds and shutting doors, I stepped up to the front yard for a brief moment. Recently, the surface had been waterproofed using a pale blue, rubbery-looking substance. It was really bright—like the bottom of a clean swimming pool. And this very fine layer of red dust had settled over everything I could see in the yard. The ground was now an odd, orangey blue colour...

And I took a photo of it.



Bojkowski, Michael. Untitled image. c. January 2020.



But I didn't take it because I wanted to show anyone, and I didn't even take it because I wanted to look at it later. It's an image you shouldn't be able to see, because I didn't take it for you. I didn't even take it for me to look at. I didn't take it for Instagram.

I had no intention of sharing it.

For some reason, it was important to my survival.

I didn't know what it signified for me, or how it was going to help me survive. But it just needed to be seen, to be witnessed—firstly—by me, then secondly—by my phone and my camera and to be recorded.

I will keep it.

I probably won't need to look at it again.

It's not particularly aesthetically appealing.

Doesn't really tell you a lot.

It doesn't tell anyone who's doesn't know why the image was taken a lot.

Also, I don't feel compelled to explain it.

I think the events around it were explanation enough.







Mangan, Nicholas. 'Friday the 13th, 2009'. Posted to Instagram on January 3rd, 2020.

[Image reference #3: Abstraction]

The use of abstracted images emerged as a common tactic for talking about the fires, away from news cycles and social media memes. Because they negated literal readings, abstracted images were useful in pinpointing personal observastioins or specific events or perspectives. The images overleaf were posted to Instagram by Melbourne-based artist Nicholas Mangan. To talk about recent events (in 2020), he chose an image from 2009. This bought to mind a couple of aspects often overlooked when attempting to capture images of catastrophic and/or burning events—that of duration and acceleration

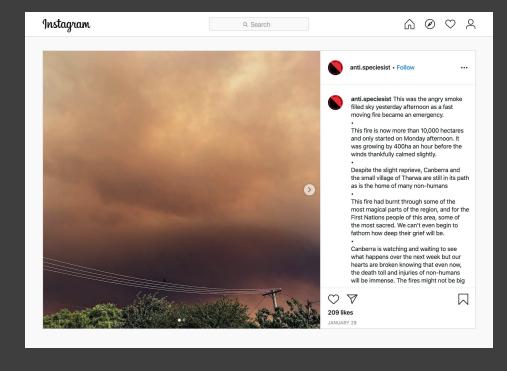
Wild fires require accelerant. This is how they grow and spread. The aforementioned 'controlled burning' has the goal of removing potential accelerant from a bush fire's path. Fires also create accelerant by using combustiable material as fuel. It is the momentum within this relationship that is often the most daugnting aspect of fire fighting.

It was in 1991 that Douglas Coupland released his career defining novel Generation X with the subtitle 'Tales of an Accelerated Culture'. He wasn't speaking literally about fire but the comparison stands. From the perspective of his novel, the essence of acceleration and 'Accelerated Culture' points to a continuum where more and more information, and lived experience, is compressed into shorter and shorter timeframes or durations. And like through just this lens.

In an essay entitled 'Dirty Pictures', artist and researcher Susan Schuppli puts forward a case for the classifying of images of environmental diasters in order to enact a "modest attempt to create a new concept worthy of troubling the events of climate change". She imbues this classification of images with the possibility to "generate novel forms of action" and "give rise to alternate political imaginaries". But her description fails to address the durational aspects around environmental diaster.

Looking through the lens of Generation X, from back in 1991, the 'Dirty Pictures' Schuppli describes already appear outmoded and slow. Too slow to be able to accurately describe the catastrophe or disasters or events they portray. Even whilest attempting to define and discuss the genre, Schuppli finds herself seduced into staring at the "natural chromatic potential of hydrocarbon atoms ... activated by the change in density of the oil film's molecules" producing "rainbow-like effects". The image is now rendered devoid of urgency—any urgency around the subject matter disappears.

The definitions around 'Dirty Pictures' probably need to be expanded if these images are to have any potency. Looking at like tools that are inherent to image making may offer a way through. Tools such as 'before and after' images or 'after images' (those flashes of images that are retained as bright shadows on the retina) or the use of images within sequences. All these tools help in giving a sense of duration or urgency—of an event that is escalating or accelerating.





Possibly when you're facing the kind of acceleration that comes with catastrophe, you're not going to have time to share an images. The image I took is not going to form part of a thesis. It's not going to provide some sort of activism. It's not going to do anything other than confirm what is happening in front of you. And that is the truley catastrophic image—the one your see, firstly, with the skin of your eye and then with the lens of your phone... and that's it.



ADDITIONAL NOTES

"Phillip Island: Land Rights for Penguins

The houses perch on the clifftop and dot the plateau behind. Most are ugly rectangular boxes, by turns craning their necks for a glimpse of the sea or huddling against the wind behind the tea tree. They face obstinately in one direction, often the wrong one in the changeable regimes of wind, rain, and sun. They have names such as Aqua Vista, White Horses, Sea Shanty. Electric wires sing and gardens struggle in the wind. Fibro, galvo, and weatherboard are all stained by the weather. By any modern understanding of the concept, they do not belong in the landscape.

The putative deflowering of Summerland Peninsula began in the nineteenth century with the McHaffie brothers, who cleared the whole of Phillip Island for "pasturage and cultivation": "On their first arrival the brothers cleared the island by setting fire to its scrub, a fire that enveloped the whole island. Its extent and density attracted attention for several days and nights on the adjacent continent and far out to sea" (Gliddon 1958, 169).

In a scene to be reenacted around Victoria, there was a ballot of applicants when the island was opened for free selection in 1868. Whether the Melbourne Argus was as mindful of the heritage

values of other parts of the state as it was of Phillip Island is not known, but there was a clear awareness on Monday, 3
November 1868, that something had been lost in the ballot two days before:

"Although it is to be regretted for more reasons than one, that the island is not to be retained as national property, there is this much to be said—nearly the whole of the land selected yesterday has undoubtedly fallen into the hands of persons who intend to settle upon and cultivate it. Nearly the whole of the applicants were farmers, farmlabourers and hard-working men. (Seddon 1975, 70)" "

EXCEPRT FROM 'SECOND NATURE: THE HISTORY AND IMPLICATIONS OF AUSTRALIA AS ABORIGINAL LANDSCAPE' BY LESLEY HEAD (1999).

DR TIM ENTWISLE,
DIRECTOR OF THE ROYAL
BOTANIC GARDENS IN
MELBOURNE. 'SPRINTER AND
SPRUMMER: WHY AUSTRALIA
SHOULD SCRAP THE FOUR
SEASONS'. RADIO NATIONAL,
29 AUGUST 2014.

RANNARD, GEORGINA.
'AUSTRALIA FIRES: MISLEADING
MAPS AND PICTURES GO VIRAL'.
BBC NEWS, 7 JANUARY 2020.
[BBC.COM/NEWS/BLOGSTRENDING-51020564]





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THE CATASTROPHIC IMAGE & THE SKIN OF YOUR EYE IS A BREIF DISCUSSION ON THE URGENCY OF IMAGES WHEN FACING CATASTROPHIC EVENTS, TOLD FROM THE VANTAGE POINT OF THE 2020 AUSTRALIAN BUSH FIRE SEASON. TEXTS DISCUSSING 'BURNING AESTHETICS' AND 'DIRTY PICTURES' ARE ANALYSED. **IMAGES ASSOCIATED WITH THE** DISCUSSION ARE ALSO INCLUDED. MICHAEL BOJKOWSKI, 2020.

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