

---

## Ecological combustion: the atmospherics of the bushfire as choreography

*Combustion écologique : l'atmosphère des feux de brousse comme chorégraphie*

**Rachel Fensham**

---



**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ambiances/3651>

DOI: [10.4000/ambiances.3651](https://doi.org/10.4000/ambiances.3651)

ISSN: 2266-839X

**Publisher:**

Direction Générale des Patrimoines - DAPA - MCC, UMR 1563 - Ambiances Architectures Urbanités (AAU)

**Electronic reference**

Rachel Fensham, « Ecological combustion: the atmospherics of the bushfire as choreography », *Ambiances* [Online], 6 | 2020, Online since 24 December 2020, connection on 04 January 2021. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ambiances/3651> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/ambiances.3651>

---

This text was automatically generated on 4 January 2021.



*Ambiances* is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

---

# Ecological combustion: the atmospherics of the bushfire as choreography

*Combustion écologique : l'atmosphère des feux de brousse comme chorégraphie*

Rachel Fensham

---

- 1 In February 1983, I was a young mother with a small baby and living in inner city Melbourne, when the Ash Wednesday bushfires cut swathes through the encircling ranges. I recall vividly how the hot, dusty and windy day that slowly turned darker as the clouds of smoke thickened, seeping down across the suburbs. Even though the fire was sixty kilometres distant, burnt gum-leaves landed in my garden as if they had blown in from a neighbour's property and before nightfall, the sky was eerily orange. In this thick atmosphere, it wasn't possible to be outside without breathing and tasting ashes. The next morning I heard from my brother, at the time working as an arborist in the Mount Macedon hills, his rental house had been burnt down, everything lost, but the tractor parked in his driveway was bizarrely left untouched. With all the vigor of youth, he and his friends began to clear roads, and assist people with removing charred and fallen trees. For him, however, the fire marked a turning point and he left his job and returned to study, feeling liberated from the burden of operating a small business. As always tales of loss, survival, miracles, place and sensation intersect with the haunting memories of the fire itself.
- 2 These epic, monumental and terrifying phenomena are what Australians call bushfires, with the word "bush" a term that is inclusive of thickened tree forests, shrubs and untamed grasslands. While many bushfire narratives take the form of political speeches, news reports, fiction or oral story-telling, they nearly always record the arc from flicker to destruction, loss and rebuilding, I want to suggest that the atmosphere generated by a bushfire is also profoundly corporeal and phenomenological, as much as biological, sociological and historical. During a period in which human interventions are transforming the climate, such events that register the affective remains of fire may provide us with ways to examine and assess our relationship with nature as one

with constant potentiality for combustion. The cultural anthropologist Timothy Ingold, who has done much to provide alternative perspectives on human-nature relationships, writes that where “[f]ires burn, as we know from the flickering flames, the swirling of smoke and the warming of the body”, alternative insights may be found, felt, and recalled (Ingold, 2011, p. 117). The phenomenal force of fire as destruction may become located in a traumatic memory that resides in the sinews and nervous system as many victims of fire recount, but it might also induce a greater sensitivity to the dynamic energies of destruction and rejuvenation in and of the non-human.

- 3 On one level, there is no denying the phenomenology of fire: in the instant of combustion, perhaps struck by lightning, a bushfire becomes an event of pure substance. Gaston Bachelard, in his curious book on *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, suggests that all fires are material and sensible, chemical and psychological. They are able to crystallize an atmosphere of culturally specific substances as much as they might render the experience of fire personally memorable. Fire, he writes, with its admixture of chemical elements combining knowledge of social interactions and human history, possesses thus a “special form of materialism” (Bachelard, 1964, p. 75). With his book located specifically in the more domestic experience of fire, there are inevitable differences between the memory of making fire in Europe and the kind of fire that erupts out of nature. In Australia and California, the unique materialism of fire can be subject to rapid changes in wind direction, to collapsing powerlines, the ignition of dry grass, and the vaporizing of oils that produce intense flames in the tree canopy. As a result, the phenomenon – a red and soaring rage – is at once immersive and compelling as it engulfs and transforms the urban and rural landscape.
- 4 To observers of such extreme summer fires, the fire returns in images as the bright horizon flickering in towering flames, or as the smell of red clouds of ash particles, and sadly can be located in the charred remains of a building shell or a loved object found as scarred witness. The fire memory often keeps burning even after the recovery of the bush – a hillside, a garden, a valley – begins to regenerate with green shoots in the blackened tree-trunks. Indeed, the spatial choreography – its nearness and the sheer volume – of fire effects, followed by its task-like aftermath, may seem unlikely materials for the embodied aesthetics of dance. It is however a contention of this paper that while experiences of fire get under the skin, offering strange sensations, they also provide imaginative access to an atmosphere, the amorphous power, of nature’s destructive and creative forces.
- 5 Like all fires that are not domestic, these bushfires remain phenomenal in many senses, both in scale and psychological intensity, as well as in the chemistry that consumes substances and transforms matter; in their instantaneous dimension they resemble the catalytic events of performance – the highly charged body, the lightning-fast generation of movement, and the quicksilver change in mood. By reflecting upon a series of choreographic works made from and in response to the atmospheric remains of the horror and trauma of fire, I want to explore what might be retrieved from such fire dances for better understandings of fire’s ecology. Hence I conclude the essay with a consideration of feminist ecological insights, from Valerie Plumwood and Freya Matthews, upon the “non-human sphere and our dependence upon it” (Plumwood, 2018, p. 103).
- 6 While there are many works that may be contenders, I will discuss four choreographies that were created in response to the experience and news of some of Australia’s worst

bushfires: Black Sunday on February 14, 1926, which covered large areas across the Eastern Victorian region of Gippsland, resulting in 31 deaths; Black Friday 1939 with 71 people killed and 650 houses destroyed; Ash Wednesday on 16 February in 1983; which led to 47 deaths and the burning of 210,000 hectares of land; and Black Christmas 2001, 109 houses lost and 733,342 hectares burnt in New South Wales. As the environmental historian Tom Griffiths observes: “There are enough Black days in modern Australian history to fill up a week several times over – Black Sundays, Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays – and a Red Tuesday too, plus the grim irony of an Ash Wednesday. The blackness of the day evokes mourning and grief, the funereal silence of the forests after a firestorm. Black and still” (Griffiths, 2020). In discussing the embodied traces of such black days, the early modern choreography of *The Spirit of the Bush Fire*, created by the English choreographer Madge Atkinson in Manchester in 1927, can be contrasted with the 1940 solo, *Bushfire Drama*, created by the Russian émigré Sonia Revid in Melbourne; and the postmodern dance of Nanette Hassall in, *Pyrallis*, choreographed in Melbourne in 1984 will be compared to a solo danced by Ros Warby called *Fire*, and choreographed by the American artist Deborah Hay in 2001.

- 7 In addition to the phenomenological lens, I regard such performances as forms of cultural “repertoire”, because they “function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory and a sense of identity” (Taylor, 2003, p. 2). Analysis of the choreographic repertoire entails asking questions about modes of embodiment, and the uses of space and time for events that do not progress in a linear form. The sense of kinesthesia, in particular, will involve images that mobilize body-parts with varying degrees of effort, such as, what weight does the body carry, or what residue of a corporeal memory can be retraced? If we conceive of choreography as a repertoire for rethinking cultural history then such choreographies of fire also provide access to “relations between movement images to things, places and practices [that are] comprised of novel interactions between the virtual and material” (Fensham 2013, p. 159).
- 8 In reconstructing choreography from two of these works, *Spirit of the Bushfire* and *Pyrallis*, I collaborated with dancers, and in the case of *Pyrallis* under the guidance of choreographer Hassall, by using photographs, notations and film recordings. Contemporary interest in re-construction of dance-works is no longer concerned with faithful recreation in order “to fix a past work in any singular (originating)” possibility, but instead such investigations aim “to actualize a work’s many (virtual) possibilities, which the originating instantiation of the work kept in reserve” (Lepecki 2004, p. 14 et f.). Indeed in the proximity to gestures, pathways and rhythmic patterns that structure a choreographic work, surprising insights emerge about physical presence, mental states and social dynamics as well as the evocation of a mood that is intrinsic to an artwork’s realisation in and as performance. After comparing the detailed reconstruction activity with other modern and postmodern dance works, I proffer a conclusion which extends these reflections about choreographic atmosphere with a contemporary work from Stephanie Lake that instantiates ecological thought.

## Locating the spirit of the bushfire in expressive embodiment

- 9 Bushfires have occupied a special place in the Australian imaginary both in indigenous culture and settler-invader consciousness, and for many scholars, the history of, race and colonial relations has led to diametrically opposed conceptions of fire events that I can only briefly sketch here. For indigenous communities, the uses of fire for cooking and for warmth were extended by its role as a powerful force, as well as the firestick-bearer being an ancestral figure within ritual and ceremonies. The curation of fire on a regular basis was, as I will explain later, also a central component of traditional land management for many Aboriginal tribes. For the white colonial settlers, on the other hand, the generative potential of fire was largely repressed in the face of a desire to assert control and dominance over a manicured landscape and fear of bushfires began to enlarge in settler narratives and urban societies. As forests or wilderness began to diminish in the errant scrubbiness of areas outside the city, the bush later became a romanticised space within Australian literature and visual arts. In this realm, part environment and part fantasy, the bush converges with Australia's cultural history as a means of intense identification with place and its atmosphere becomes animated by awe, love and respect. The eminent fire historian Stephen J. Pyne writes that: "Bushfires did not simply illuminate the landscape like the bonfire of a corroboree, they *were* the landscape" (Pyne, 2013, p. 136) and for many Australian modernist writers and artists, the dramatic scenes of fire provided this primary subject of landscape. Such romanticization of an immersive but distant nature appears in my first choreographic example drawn from the annals of modern dance.
- 10 Far from Australia in a studio in Manchester, the dancer Anita Heyworth appears in a softly grey photograph, her torso twisted and folding towards the floor, with an unfurled scarf curving high above. Depicting the final pose from Madge Atkinson's choreography for *The Spirit of the Bushfire* (1927), the caption in the influential British dance magazine, *The Dancing Times*, reads "a very unusual dance"<sup>1</sup>. Created for Atkinson's muse Heyworth, this repertoire piece toured London and regional England although, somewhat confusingly its title was subsequently shortened to *The Fire Dance*<sup>2</sup>. With a philosophy about the importance of "natural movement" in dance, Atkinson often found inspiration in nature – autumn leaves, or waves on the shore – so the choice of the bushfire for one of her signature pieces suggests a specific organic force is being imagined: a wild-fire in Europe is often called a forest-fire, which perhaps explains the German subtitle "Im Walde" or "in the woods" for Atkinson's dance, therefore the appellation the bush as synonym for forest connotes a determination to represent something perhaps more elemental, dangerous and alien. While I have found no direct evidence of Atkinson interacting with Australia, there is a famous watercolour painting with the same title: *The Spirit of the Bushfire*, a work created in 1900 by the Australian artist Sydney Long who was working in London at the time<sup>3</sup>. Married to a dancer, Catherine Brennan, it seems likely that he may have seen modern dance when artists such as Isadora Duncan first performed in London, also in 1900.
- 11 Long became known for an Art Nouveau style of symbolic landscapes that incorporated lighter tones and elongated forms and the delicate brushwork of this painting depicts an auburn-haired woman, wearing a gown that merges with the trees and earth and stretches like the hills across the base of the picture. In her arm she holds a wand or

stick, to which is attached a burning ribbon of flame that could also be a length of winding fabric, flicking up and joining her dress. Burnt and broken trees and dark shadows envelop her. Many of Long's paintings populate the Australian landscape with malevolent spirits and beautiful nymphs, which not unlike the children's book illustrations of Arthur Rackham are finely animated and evocative<sup>4</sup>. In *Spirit of the Bushfire* the young woman's immersion in the burning sheen of the sun, her dress and entire body appear to be consumed by the orange-ness of the bushfire. The surface paint melds the dancer with the earth and thus makes a palpable connection between the atmosphere of fire and the figure of the dancer in modernity.

- 12 Like many others, the poet Paul Valery and Stephane Mallarme were inspired by modern dancer, Loie Fuller (1862-1928) whose *Fire Dance* in 1894 marked a cultural transformation in the history of light, motion and early cinema. Fuller's dance solos, as dance scholar Gabriele Brandstetter suggests, were to exemplify "how the metamorphosis of fire has been staged *in dance*" and she expands on its constitutive transmutation:

The fire dance is the concentrated image of ultimate transformation as complete consumption, even extinction of (corporeal) substance. In this process, imagined as self-exhausting movement, the elemental movements of fire represent the act of creation and simultaneously the destruction of what has been created. (Brandstetter, 2015, p. 226)

- 13 In response to Fuller – a body depicting fire by becoming the medium herself of something elemental and evanescent, Valery wrote fetchingly of those "strange animals who live and thrive in fire itself", by locating this movement between "matter and ether" in the dancer as flame (Valery, 1951, p. 75). For these artists and poets, the consumption of fire embodied by a female dancer was to speak of soul and spirit itself. Long perhaps distinctively, sought to personify rather than annihilate the spirit of the Australian landscape by depicting a woman in motion as herself the fire-brand of the bush.
- 14 Another potential source for Atkinson's awareness of the bushfire in the early part of the twentieth century may have circulated through cinema newsreel. The National Film and Sound Archive of Australia (NFSA) holds a compelling sequence of silent film depicting the Australian fires of May 1926, probably used to promote funds for "bushfire relief in Britain, the motherland"<sup>5</sup>. The black and white images focus on the enormous scale of the fire, with vantage shots of towering flames and an animated map shows the creep of black devastation across the state. More affectively, many film sequences reveal charred trees, abandoned cars, burnt out homes and devastated families that were designed to elicit empathy from distant viewers. This cinematic representation of the bushfire must be one of the earliest attempts to evoke a sense of excessive horror from an environmental disaster. Although Atkinson's notebooks do not mention these 1926 news reports, it seems propitious that she would create a dance which took its title, and style of expression, from Long's painting in the aftermath of the documentation of such monumental fires.
- 15 Quite remarkably for an early modern dance work, Atkinson also provides a precise, if idiosyncratic, notation of the choreography set to the Scherzo from Schumann's Sonata op. 22<sup>6</sup>. The piece opens with rapid, pounding piano phrases, setting the tone for later bass notes, before the dancer swoops in with light skipping steps from the rear right<sup>7</sup>. Working with dancer Ellen Davies, we were able to translate symbols for discrete gestures – forward extensions, arms down, right hand on left shoulder – and the feet

movements – syncopation, rocking, lunging, moments of poise, as well as identifying a repertoire of scarf actions – swirling, tossing, circling and allowing it to fall. The dynamic energy of the choreography, like much modern dance, also required a deep backbend produced by tilting up through the foot arches and down through the spine. As a result, the dancer is never fully stable, and she must indulge in repeated sweeps of indirect movement such as flickering and slashing actions, rolls and turns, or running and short moments of stillness. The more we plotted the choreography, the more the dance mapped a topography, generating a series of spatial crossings and counter turns, which do not rely on a frontal orientation, that was punctuated vertically by the rising and falling of the scarf. The photograph of Heywood described earlier shows, the culminating toss before the body-scarf slows and falls to the floor.<sup>8</sup>

- 16 In our re-composition, Davies wore a black silk dress, with strapped back and folded skirt, while holding a large apricot scarf fringed with black<sup>9</sup>. With these flashes of pale orange and black, she worked hard to perform the rapid linear runs, often turning through a three quarter rotation, before dashing in alternate directions in ways that could deflect the trailing scarf. Carrying the effort through the feet and flexible back, her energetic shifting had to animate the full volume of the silk, or else it would appear limp, as if the fire was fading away. By turns, the scarf becomes liquid, or perhaps gaseous, as it shapes itself into parabolas, and figures of eight, creating the impression of volatile yet dynamic flow. In this, the dancer’s embodiment of the bushfire shapes the dynamic of substances made to mutate, such as moving where oxygen inflates the flames, or the blackness of the dress’s carbon producing more fuel. The dancer’s body became the fire’s living combustion, when she fled across the stage, repeating again and again the trampling force of the fire.
- 17 As a choreographer, Atkinson’s mode of representation, in the analytic terms evolved by dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster, seeks to “resemble ... a certain quality or attribute [which] repeats that quality in the dance movement” (Leigh Foster, 1986, p. 65)<sup>10</sup>. Rather than mimic or copy the appearance of fire, such resemblance in the example of a river will allow for “an apprehension of something meandering” however in terms of a fire it generates the atmosphere of flickering flames. Atkinson certainly saw the dancer painting pictures “through the dance” which “will be but a poor one if the dancer does not live in the moment, and express with her whole body each separate idea and emotion” (Carter, 2011). In Atkinson’s *Fire Dance*, the form or resemblance to the fire was revealed not only in the movement of the dancer but distinctively and surprisingly also in the erratic floor patterns. While the robust dynamics of Schumann’s music drove the fingers to strike the keys with relentless running chords, the dancer had to thrust herself convulsively forward, allowing her muscles to ripple the scarf but these actions also included incorporation of flickering flames on dry earth. If, as I have suggested the silk scarf of modern dance symbolizes mutability then working with this prop, or extension of the body, the re-performance of *The Spirit of the Bushfire* found itself having to confront “the intuition of a substance that is understood as having an intimacy and a life of its own” (Bachelard, 1964, p. 44). Illuminated by amber floods and lighting perches, at times the sinuous pathway of the scarf had to traverse uneven ground, at others it echoed the faltering trajectories of a forceful gust of wind. Significantly, as Davies moved the flaming and charred scarf, she moved into the atmosphere of the dance, carrying the rhythm and pulse of the fire into her body. We may talk about the dancing of the flames in a fire, but what about dancing the flames, dancing the fire, as an aesthetic act of transformation? The moment-by-

moment transmutation of energy in this choreography was therefore to resemble the fire not as image but as volatile substance. Of tantalizing expressive power, these unusual properties suggest that this embodiment of the spirit of the bushfire was a mournful vision seen from a distant Britain regarding a lost Australian arcadia.

- 18 By way of comparison with Atkinson's choreography is another modern dance which offers a more intimate, perhaps localized, choreographic response to one of Australia's worst mid-century fires, the Black Friday of 1939. Sonia Revid was a Russian dancer who had studied with the famous expressionist dancer Mary Wigman, who emigrated to Australia from Germany with the rise of Nazism. A striking dancer with a sophisticated portfolio of literary and high cultural references, she began teaching and showing her solo dances within a few weeks of arriving in Melbourne in 1933. Her solo, *Bushfire Drama*, was executed at the Little Theatre in April 1940, and described as a "Fantasia in two movements – "Presentiment" and "The Drama" – dedicated to Australia" and accompanied by symphonic excerpts from Tchaikovsky and Schubert. In the limited archive of her works, informal photos show Revid in a bare landscape with hills or dunes in the background, standing twisted like the branches of a bare gum tree, arms white and black against the sky. Another studio photo, of the *Bushfire Drama*, reveals her back to the camera wearing a dark skimpy silk tunic – her torso bent into a diagonal spiral with tensile contractions twisting down through her bare arms. As one New Zealand reviewer wrote, "every movement she made, whether with head, hands, feet or body, had something definite to express, while further atmosphere was given to each number by the appropriate costume worn" (1938)<sup>11</sup>.
- 19 Beautiful as Revid was, her dark shadowed attitude suggests something disturbed. Echoing this kind of fatalism, Bachelard writes "the bit of straw which flies away with the smoke is sufficient to urge us forward to meet our destiny. What better proof is there that the contemplation of fire brings us back to the very origins of philosophic thought?" (Bachelard, 1964, p. 18). While these modern choreographies respond, as dance scholar Dee Reynolds suggests, to "cultural contexts which encourage or enforce ways of using energy that limit expressiveness", at this distance, it seems that their powerful expressive contents offer different possibilities – Heyworth resembles fire as an assimilated nature, while the expressionist Revid offers an image of alienated nature, of wildness as a habitat distinct from culture (Revid, 2007, p. 2). Both dancers grapple with the atmosphere of fire as flow, dramatically embodying the fluctuations of its life force. For a mid-twentieth century Australia, whose fear of the bush was beginning to dissipate, perhaps too with an absence of indigenous Australians in settled areas, the expressive energy of these modernist bushfire choreographies embody also an emerging respect for the unpredictable, possibly feminizing elements, of the Australian environment. Like that bit of straw, however the dramatic evanescence of a flame lit within the dancing subject could also be extinguished by its ardour and indeed by the end of the second World War, Revid was no longer alive.

## Releasing the reactions of the bushfire as energetic movement

- 20 During the 1983 fires that I described in my opening anecdote, the Australian choreographer and dance educator, Nanette Hassall, (also a young mother at the time) was living in the hills and faced the impact of the fire directly and this bushfire



resonated, as she puts it, with the “beginnings of a concern for the environment, the concern for its preservation and the infatuation I have for the Australian landscape” (Hassall, 1990, p. 87). By contrast with Atkinson, her fascination was not symbolic nor romantic and distant: but rather tempered by a postmodern conception of time and space in which “constant shifts of spatial framework and the “cutting” of temporal flow” are able to choreograph “undecidable” qualities and states (Reynolds, 2007, p. 192). In 1984, she created a quartet for her company Danceworks, called *Four Wend Ways* that examined the four different elements, including *Pyralis*, Greek for fire.

- 21 If a mode of resemblance to nature through flowing movement might epitomize expressive modern dance, Hassall’s cooler approach to the fire choreography was to examine how nature responds to abstract forces of sudden change, as well as to imagine the after-effects of fire as potential. Decidedly non-representational, and simultaneously more pedestrian and more intricate, her instructional methods demand specific corporeal knowledge of cumulative and articulate dance alignments. Trained in ballet, Hassall studied and danced with the American artist Merce Cunningham and London-based choreographer Richard Alston, becoming familiar with compositional methods and movement vocabularies that use proprioception to formulate and make compositional choices<sup>12</sup>. When Hassall created her own company Danceworks in Melbourne, her choreographies often involved the disaggregation and recombination of movement phrases and she was influenced by new developments in sound art that gave priority to accidental sounds and durational effects. The sound-score for *Pyralis* by electronic composer, Les Gilbert, was designed to be disorientating with its juxtaposition of “natural and mechanical sounds – gales, bushfires, breaking waves, running water, radio signals, aircraft and so on” (Jillett, 1984, p. 14). Acoustically, the erratic energies of nature oscillated like wave frequencies through both the music and the movement.
- 22 Initially made for students and later expanded, the choreography includes multiple organizing devices, such as a diagonal traverse; a relationship to the floor understood as a partnering surface; development of a rapid softness in the limbs that combines ballet extensions with release technique. In many small complex interactions, the choreography renders the experience of fire as a kinesthetic and spatial event, constantly changing its orientation and combination of body parts and groupings without rendering them as any kind of fixed image or narrative. Overt meaning was eschewed in favour of abstract invention, although as Hassall notes, actions could “refer metaphorically... [and] non-narrative structures were, in many cases, still highly referential to their subject matter” (Hassal, 1990, p. 88). The dance is also hard to watch, requiring concentration, because it moves so fast, often a duet erupting just as a trio is exiting. Documentation of the first production only exists in a black and white VHS tape and stick-like dancers enter consciousness across a sharp then blurred horizon. A remounting of the work by the Tasdance Company in 1990 shows the dancers in striped, loose clothing that accentuates the upward thrusts of one body turning against another.<sup>13</sup>
- 23 When Hassall re-visited some sections of *Pyralis* with a group of mixed dancers, she explained how she had composed at the time: “it involved tasks for the space – structures that had individual elements within them ... so that each piece examines in some way a different way of moving”. Much of her choreographic problem-solving involved mathematics: how many ways can duets, trios and quartets combine? “If it [a

sequence] places two bodies together, there is never a four – but with little jumps and catches, that caught element becomes these duets that are trapped, [so that] people are staggering, and strange looking” (Hassall, 2009)<sup>14</sup>. Structures that seem to have form, such as duets, trios or quartets, can easily be broken, so for Hassall the challenge was to work out how “collapsing structures, and pushing through” could change the choreography into a series of interrupted or violent shifts between two objects, or two bodies. The relationship to fire that she articulates here relates, I would suggest, to Bachelard’s notion of an elemental chemistry that underlies combustion, when one material reacts with another, it becomes subject to a momentum of pressure, heat or velocity that changes its metabolic energy and with this rapid force of change, materials can explode or dissolve, or split apart. A kind of molecular set of reactions occur in this dynamic rather than a sensuous interpretation of fire as motion.

- 24 By way of demonstrating such an atmosphere, Hassall would ask two dancers to stand together, arms outstretched and holding hands - a kind of bridging gesture between two people. With a swift downward press on their hands, she could easily force the two arms apart, so that the two limbs drop abruptly. A violent, not kind, action takes place, which models a synecdoche, an image of something larger than itself. Linked arms may resemble a roof, or a fence, or simply two individuals once joined, now split apart in the aftermath of a fire. Each dancer acts therefore as a kind of catalyst for another, an individual object propelling motion. One dancer presses their full weight against another with extended arms, until they start to collapse, and then the first dancer must spring away. In another phrase, a dancer jumps repeatedly over a body rolling back and forth, suggesting perhaps a log or obstacle that cannot be avoided without strenuous agility. Each duet can ignite action and reaction, not in any particular order, as Hassall explains: “*Pyralis* has lots of jumps and sudden actions... and people bounce into barriers and are pushed backwards from those and have a feeling of being hemmed in slightly, and pushing out from them and trying to make the space bigger than it really is... ummm... escape from... lots of feeling of escape” (Hassall, 1990). When smaller groups collide, the larger group is catapulted into recombination, for instance, a trio that seems to have retained an independent phrasing, suddenly accumulates aerial force when a dancer intercepts them, so that the overall dynamic is that of unpredictable energetic transformation<sup>15</sup>.
- 25 Watching Hassall rehearse these sequences, I felt the ferocity she wanted from the dancers: “I definitely wanted to challenge the pace”, not resting until her attention or grip had disturbed each individual’s kinesthetic equilibrium or trajectory. In this wendway, the movement path of *Pyralis* evolved as a dense vocabulary of simultaneous events presented without sentiment or mystique. Dancers becoming kinetic objects, such as the sparks, logs, walls and fences being moved by the effects of fire, could be seen as volatile and in-human. The pushing and pulling of limbs, and the collapsing of structures caused by arms, or legs locked against another’s body shaped the dynamics not by effort (such as traditional dance technique) but rather by using a momentum that made the bodily lifts and actions both light and rapid.
- 26 This mode of representation, according to Foster, involves replication rather than imitation, so that the immanence of fire in the dance becomes a “dynamic system, an organic whole made up of functionally distinct parts. The movement replicates the relationship of these parts...[which] may be seen in the tension between the surging energy and the limits of the body or in the interaction between two dancers” (Foster,

1986, p. 66). In *Pyralis*, the choreographic imagination requires the dancer's negotiation of corporeal practices that allow the limits of an experience to be off-balance and non-representational. In this way, the dance communicates the dangerous immediacy of fire through the exposure of actions that reflect an idea as much as an emotion. The corporeal repertoire of Hassall's fire memory is one in which logs were split, and ancient trees felled; so that we see the intensity of fire as a deferral of affect, a reaction rather than a resolution. In the 1983 fires, when small towns were burnt to cinders, and many houses left without roofs –the dance was a reminder that it was not just the bush that burnt, it was also people and communities.

- 27 In terms of thinking about the uses and portrayal of atmospheres, *Pyralis* was never then a depiction, or resemblance, of fire but a choreography reaching towards an understanding of the “function of our finitude rather than of our cosmic self-realization” (Mathews, 2018, p. 44). It is a part within a larger whole that comprises the natural energies that are both greater and more destructive than the human's own force within, even as they generate a sudden capacity for transformation. This fire dance has a power of movement that is both accidental and natural, as well as violent and unstoppable.
- 28 Hassall's ensemble work might be compared with a solo called “Fire” performed by the virtuoso dancer, Ros Warby, and choreographed by the American artist, Deborah Hay in 2001. Wearing a skimpy white leotard, Warby improvised to a score established by Hay that included enigmatic facial gestures and distorted movements brilliantly lit against a dark open stage. Her attuned body felt fragile, pinioned by the concentration of light on the surface of the costume, and its exposure of her long limbs and muscled face.
- 29 Watching her dance, it felt as if a micro-movement never ceased travelling through her body, at times producing an eerie, slightly awkward bending, in which the folding body transformed into a kind of gaseous matter. Interrupted by questions to the audience, “who are you? Why are you here?”, this performance of “dancing fire” generated an elusive interrogative mode, so that the spectator was left wondering if we watched too long, whether she, the fleshy exposed body, might actually turn to ash (Rothfield, 2001, p. 30). In the solos of Warby in the 2000s and Revid in the 1940s, different as they are in embodying the sensations of fire, a transformative beauty is affected and yet their residual memories seem corrosive, making the dancer less human and more matter, less heavy while more subtle.
- 30 Hassall's work suggests an alternative approach to appreciating choreography, beyond representation, in which the distribution of energy becomes “the key to linking core movement issues (the micro level) with wider cultural and theoretical contexts (the macro level)” according to Dee Reynolds (2007, p. 2). An apprehension of movement that involves dancing the bushfire as patterns of energetic intensity becomes relayed then through a set of precepts – ideas and emotions – that become registered in the imagination. This kinesthetic estrangement of the body in both Warby and Hassall's works carries some of the affective power of loss, and the dance atmosphere is thickened by the distortions and rapidity of change (Bachelard, 1964, p. 62). Hassall herself acknowledges that “loss is a movement that cannot be regained in all its complexity, yet it has within it the genetic material of movement life” (Fensham, 2007). This vitalism – this genetic material – of the bushfire will suppose a change in awareness of Australia's fragile ecosystem.

## The substantialist argument of the bushfire for the ecological imagination

- 31 The phenomenological properties of a bushfire impact directly on those who are injured, but they also have and disperse corporeal affects far beyond the immediate experience. It is as if the sensibility of fire, as Bachelard suggests, is always both material and sensible, extending the catalytic event into the atmosphere as a form of instability, exemplifying the foundational mutability of form into ethereal substance, or life into death. There is then an individuality to fire, as well as an indelible inner force that belongs to the atmosphere around it. In this final section, however, I want to move beyond the phenomenological and expand upon the anthropocentric concerns about fire in Australia, and reflect upon the extent to which these choreographies, each in their own way, generate atmospheres that nurture the ecological imagination.
- 32 In the Australian summer of 2020, news reports around the globe showed horrifying images of wild and scorching fires – burnt out houses, deaths, lost cattle, acres of blackened farms, dying and dead animals, destroyed habitats – in forests and coastal communities. The context of climate change has, however, made the status of the bushfire more fully contested: are their causes natural or human-made either by bad management practices, or as a result of human impacts on the climate? With intense hot dry summers in southern regions, the dense understory and high eucalyptus oil content of trees often sparked by lightning, it is agreed that fires are a repeatable occurrence of the summer ecosystem. It is also significant that regular burning not only reduces undergrowth but is a necessity to regenerate certain flora in Australia. And for localised indigenous communities, fire burning has historically been systematic and frequent, either to beat out small animals for hunting, or as a method for “cleaning up country” (Fensham, 2012, p. 327). Fire in this narrative is both nature ecology and living cultural practice.
- 33 For Western governments, on the other hand, management systems from fire patrols to controlled burning are designed to mitigate the effects of fire while ensuring that wild-fires do not get completely out of control. Climate scientists argue however that extreme weather events occur more frequently and therefore the scale of bushfires, the duration of the fire season, and the intensity of destruction has become less predictable and more intense. Notwithstanding the human and natural costs of fire damage, certain politicians prefer to ignore the indigenous claims about mismanagement of fire, and vociferously deny the likely long-term influence of anthropocentric actions on climate. This paper cannot answer the question of who or what is responsible for the more devastating effects of bushfire but rather it suggests that these choreographic compositions contribute the atmospheric dimensions of fire to the historical record. Their detailed embodiments of the material and immaterial aspects of the phenomenon of fire are also, I would suggest, generative of an expanded critical awareness of the bushfire as repertoire for ecological thought. And as artistic responses to the Australian environment, they add to socialist, feminist and activist contributions about the limits of human intervention and distance from nature<sup>16</sup>.
- 34 Ecofeminist philosophers, such as Val Plumwood and Freya Mathews, have, for instance, called for greater understanding of the human/nature dualisms that have done so much to make the phenomenon of denial coincide with ecological catastrophe. We must therefore begin to understand ourselves as interconnected with nature, or

part and parcel of the experience of nature in all its dimensions. According to Mathews this will mean that we reconcile ourselves to a nature that is both extrinsic and intrinsic to the human control and codification of experience, and I will quote here at length from one of her essays:

Only when we accept the dark side of nature, and see it exemplified in our own destructiveness, can we truly begin to honor nature. And only when we honor it, understanding its dark side, will we be capable of approaching the world in a spirit of receptive encounter, for it is presumably, as many feminists have argued, our fear of this dark side, particularly the prospect of our own mortality, which underlies our drive to conquer, control, dominate and even destroy the world. Ironically then, it is by accepting and honoring the forces of destruction that we are freed from the impulse to destroy (Mathews, 2018).

- 35 In a bushfire, as in the choreographies I have discussed, the atmospheric properties of nature and culture co-exist and collide. By entering into its phenomenology, the choreographic imagination stitches together, rather than furthering divisions, in the atmospheres, actions and consequences produced by human interactions with the forces of fire. Sustained attention to the memory of bodies, non-human things and place transmits the embodied trace of such fire effects and in so doing, stores creative information that may begin the reparative work of fire in the Australian ecology and in settler consciousness.
- 36 Both Atkinson's *The Spirit of the Bushfire* and Hassall's *Pyrallis*, responded to the event of the "bushfire" and yet their conceptual vocabularies engaged with the legacies of fire in historically divergent ways. On the one hand, *The Spirit of the Bushfire* romanticized the fire as individual experience, allowing the modern dancer to enflame its volatility from within by connecting her to a sense of immanent and powerful nature, even though potentially alien. In *Pyrallis*, on the other hand, the choreography represents a broken landscape in which dancers become agents of combustion and destruction catapulted around by forces outside themselves. Both works captured something of the dynamics of fire and its unpredictability, its darkness and mutability. But in the incandescence of matter, I am suggesting that these dances are also social documents, recording the impact of fire on the Australian landscape. Akin to a heightened ecological awareness, their embodied combustion is a move towards a recognition and preservation of nature which ironically depends upon the risk, as indigenous elders will teach us, that human edifices might always be stripped away by the incitement of fire. Under the conditions of the Anthropocene these are important lessons, not of a moral or ideological kind, but it is rather through the choreography of the bushfire that we may become sensitised to movements, atmospheres and moments in which we might more profoundly recognise our "ecological embeddedness".
- 37 Separated by nearly a hundred years, the choreographies I've considered capture some remarkably precise patterns in the transitory histories of the bushfire; in doing so they add to a deeper cultural knowledge of fire as a profoundly complex human-nature encounter. "In order to account for the phenomena of fire, we must however retain, as Bachelard suggests, the "aggregate aspect that corresponds to the ambiguity of the explanations, which pass alternatively from life to matter in an interminable reciprocal motion" (Bachelard, 1964, p. 61). Manifestly, this is the task of the ecological imagination too, as Mathews writes: "[o]ur task is to maintain – and perpetually to renegotiate – the dynamic ambivalence which is the life blood of a healthy morality" towards the human in nature (Mathews, 2018, p. 53). The choreography of fire shows

combustible matter to be not merely destructive but also transformative in the corporeal potential it has to animate forces of nature, and to give it energetic form. When Atkinson chose the flickering scarf and Hassall chose the *Photinus Pyralis*, they were selecting elements of transfiguration. The *Photinus Pyralis* is after all a fragile insect whose light emanates from the movement reflected by the beating of its wings, which hovers after bushfires emitting sudden flashes of light. Both the scarf and the firefly are mutable, giving shape to the dynamics and variation of living systems, and thus their flickering and hovering generate an ecology from the corporeal archive of the bushfire.

- 38 In the precarious situation of heightened climate catastrophe, other choreographic works about fire, and specifically bushfires, continue to be made, perhaps more so in Australia than elsewhere. I will conclude with a final and more recent dance vignette that admits to the multiple pricks and shocks of fire as an enduring atmosphere. Stephanie Lake's work, *A Small Prometheus* in 2013, rather than investigate the mythic origins of fire, ignites the question, "what happens when you strike a match?"<sup>17</sup> Elegantly composed and lyrical, this work has a sense of a ceremonial mystery with dancers using matches to light rotating candles on a vintage brass sculpture. But rapidly, the five dancers, male and female, shift from agents of fire to being fire: they also light and make fires, chase fire, put fires out, and watch fire with horror and delight. The sensory atmosphere of the fire is conveyed through that most delicate of noises – the sound of fire crackling – that could to Bachelard signal heat and comfort, but that to my imagination holds immense threat. In Australia, a lightning strike can start a fire, as can a match thrown out a car window, or a group of boys playing with matches by a river, or indeed, the grass can sometimes ignite in the intensity of scorching hot day. The atmosphere of danger, sensed rather than seen, is palpable. Lake's work has this quality of a latent sensory nature, something remembered but ever present.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bachelard, Gaston. 1964. *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*. Trans. Alan C. M. Ross. New-York: Beacon Press.

Brandstetter, Gabriele. 2015 [1995]. *Poetics of Dance: Body, Image, and Space in the Historical Avant-gardes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Carter, Alexandra. 2011. Constructing and Contesting the Natural in British Theatre Dance. In: Carter, Alexandra & Fensham, Rachel (eds.). *Dancing Naturally: nature, neo-classicism and modernity in early twentieth century dance*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

De Souza, Poppy. Without Date. Curator's Notes on *Black Sunday (1926)*. National Film and Sound Archive. Available online at: <http://aso.gov.au/titles/documentaries/black-sunday/notes/> (consulted on December 15, 2020).

- Fensham, Rachel. 2013. Choreographic Archives: the ontology of moving images. In Gade, Rune. & Borggren Gunhild. (eds.). *Performing the Archive/Archiving Performance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press/Museum Terculanum Press.
- Fensham, Roderick J. 2012. The biggest estate on earth: how Aborigines made Australia. *Australian Geographer*. Vol. 43, n° 3, p. 325-327.
- Foster, Susan Leigh. 1986. *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Griffith, Tom. 2020. Savage Summer. *Inside Story*, 8 January. Available online at: <https://insidestory.org.au/savage-summer/> (consulted on December 15, 2020)
- Hassall, Nannette. 1990. Interview with Shirley McKechnie. *Australian Choreographers Oral History Project*. Canberra: National Library of Australia, Cassette 3/Side 1.
- Hassall, Nannette. 2007. Interview with Rachel Fensham. *Transnational Choreographies*. Monash University, 16 September.
- Ingold, Tim. 2011. *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*. London: Routledge.
- Jillett, Neil. 1984. Inventive evocation of natural themes. *The Age* 19 July.
- Lepecki, André. 2004. Inscribing Dance. In *Of the Presence of the Body*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Mathews, Freya. 2018. Relating to Nature? Deep Ecology or Ecofeminism. In: Stevens, Lara, Tait, Peta & Varney, Denise (eds.). *Feminist Ecologies: Changing Environments in the Anthropocene*. London: Palgrave.
- Plumwood, Val. (2018). Ecofeminist Analysis and the Culture of Ecological Denial. In: L. Stevens, Lara, Tait, Peta & Varney, Denise (eds.). *Feminist Ecologies: Changing Environments in the Anthropocene*. London: Palgrave.
- Pyne, Stephen J. 2013. *Fire: Nature and Culture*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Reynolds, Dee. 2007. *Rhythmic Subjects: Uses of Energy in the Dances of Mary Wigman, Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham*. Alton: Dance Books.
- Rothman, Katherine. 2011. *Headlong (1973) Resource Sheet from the Alston Studio*. Available online at: <http://www.thealstonstudio.com/sites/alston/files/Headlong%20Resource%20Sheet.pdf> (consulted on December 15, 2020)
- Rothfield, Philipa. 2001. Ros Warby Solos. *RealTime* #42, April-May.
- Taylor, Diana. 2003. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

## NOTES

1. The full caption in the *Dancing Times*, July 1927 reads: "The Spirit of the Bushfire, a very unusual dance by Anita Heyworth that won a silver medal at the Blackpool Festival", National Resource Centre for Dance, Surrey.
2. Access to the repertoire provided by former students and teachers of Natural Movement, works "in tandem" with the archive, as Taylor notes "to transmit communal memories, histories and values" (2003, p. 21).

3. In the collection of the Art Gallery of Ballarat, *The Spirit of the Bushfire* (1900), featured in the exhibition, *Sydney Long: The Spirit of the Land*, National Gallery of Australia, 2012. Art. <https://nga.gov.au/exhibition/long/default.cfm?IRN=218206&BioArtistIRN=23997&mystartrow=13&realstartrow=13&MnuID=ARTISTS&GALID=23997&viewID=3&DTLVIEW=TRUE> accessed 20 December 2020.
4. Art historians have suggested that Long's painting was inspired by illustrations that the artist George Lambert made for J. M. Whitfeld *The spirit of the bush fire: and other Australian fairy tales*. Joanna Mendelsson, 'Sydney Long (1871-1955).' *Australian Dictionary of Biography* <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/long-sydney-7225>
5. The curator Poppy De Souza provides notes on the archival film, *Black Sunday* (1926), which can also be viewed online: <http://aso.gov.au/titles/documentaries/black-sunday/>
6. Some reviews refer to a piano work by the Hungarian composer, Stephen Heller, even though the archival records for the Fire Dance, prepared by Heywood herself, include annotations for the Schumann Scherzo; there may be two works with similar names or perhaps the piece became adapted to a solo with different music.
7. A special thank you to dancer Ellen Davies and pianist Jack Tan, who worked with me to present the Fire Dance at the *Fire Stories* conference, University of Melbourne, 2013
8. Photograph by Thomas Longworth Cooper, held in the Natural Movement Collection of the National Resource Centre for Dance, University of Surrey.
9. Made of double-sided silk – a light charcoal grey on one side and on the other, shades of orange streaked in a tie-dyed pattern – the Atkinson-Heywood scarf generates the impression of both flame and ash, life and destruction (Fensham 2011). This long exquisite scarf is housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
10. Dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster develops a semiotic model with four modes of representation that communicate choreography to spectators. While such models are limited, particularly for consideration of affective and more transitive aspects of dancing, they are useful structural identifiers for the arrangement of choreographic genres.
11. Anonymous review, "Modern Art Dance", *New Zealand Herald*, Vol. LXXV, Issue 23192, 11 November, 1938.
12. Hassall collaborated with Alston on *Headlong* (1973) for London-based company *Strider*, a work that also used linear formations to a sound score of sampled sound (Rothman, 2011).
13. This remounting of Hassall's 'Pyralis' performed by Neil Adams, Jon Burt, Jennie Clayton, Callum Cowell, Wendy McPhee, Anna Smith, Sophie Yesberg, Cameron Wallace-Mitchell, under the directorship of Annie Greig, *Tasdance* (1990). Images available: <https://www.tasdancearchive.com.au/pyralis/>
14. Workshop recording in *Australian Choreographic Histories II*, Nanette Hassall and Chandrabhanu, produced by Ben Speth and Rachel Fensham, available from Ausdance, 2009.
15. Hassall reinforces this point: "I like using material and I like re-using it in different ways... and I rarely repeat just per se, but there are host of ways to repeat without directly doing so... variations, turning things that are solo material into duets, into trio material, into quartet material" (1990).
16. Australia's colonial history combined with its high agricultural and resource extractive capitalist economy has caused severe environmental degradation since settlement in 1788, and might go some way to explaining the ecofeminist response from scholars such as Plumwood (2018) and Mathews (2018).
17. Stephanie Lake and audio-visual artist Robin Fox, *A Small Prometheus* (2013); a promotional trailer can be viewed online <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c3oni85rq14> (accessed 20 December 2020)



---

## ABSTRACTS

This paper examines the atmospheres generated by the elemental power of bushfires as embodiment, invention and reconstruction through choreography. Drawing upon Bachelard's analysis of the phenomenology of fire leads to an appreciation of its substance and symbolic volatility, that is interlaced with an understanding of fire's place in the Australian environment from both settler and indigenous perspectives. The close examination of several dances, that use different expressive vocabularies and structures, provides a means to access the experience of fire as an affect and a moving vital force in expressive formations that record real historical events and their impact. The atmosphere becomes then both the generator and the residue of movement. In conclusion, the paper gives attention to debates about climate change, in the context of the Anthropocene and ecofeminism, and suggests that the bushfire is more destructive than it ever has been, not because of its "wild nature" but because of the influence of humans in causing greater destruction. Greater awareness of the nature-culture of fire in performance is therefore valuable to other disciplines in so far as it facilitates what I'm calling "combustion" without loss of life, in recognition also of the experience of loss and regeneration.

Cet article étudie les atmosphères générées par le pouvoir élémentaire des feux de brousse comme incarnation, invention et reconstruction à travers la chorégraphie. En nous inspirant de l'analyse de Bachelard sur la phénoménologie du feu, nous proposons une évaluation de sa substance et de sa volatilité symbolique, qui est liée à une compréhension de la place du feu dans l'environnement australien, aussi bien du point de vue des colonisateurs que de celui des autochtones. Cette étude détaillée de plusieurs danses - qui utilisent des structures et des vocabulaires expressifs différents, - représente un point d'entrée dans l'expérience du feu en tant qu'affect et force vitale en mouvement dans des formations expressives qui rendent compte des événements historiques réels et leurs conséquences. L'atmosphère devient à la fois un générateur et un résidu de ce mouvement. En conclusion, cet article accorde de l'importance aux débats sur le changement climatique dans le contexte de l'Anthropocène et de l'éco-féminisme. Il suggère que les feux de brousse sont plus destructeurs que jamais, non pas par leur nature « sauvage » mais à cause de l'influence des humains dans les destructions accrues. Davantage de sensibilisation à la nature-culture du feu dans les performances est ainsi bénéfique à d'autres disciplines car elle favorise ce que nous appelons la « combustion » sans perte de vie et en reconnaissant également les expériences de perte et de régénération.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** feux de brousse, danses du feu, éco-féminisme, nature-culture, incarnation

**Keywords:** bushfires, fire dances, ecofeminism, nature-culture, embodiment

## AUTHOR

### RACHEL FENSHAM

Rachel Fensham is Director of the Digital Studio, Faculty of Arts and a Professor of Dance and Theatre at the University of Melbourne. She is author of *Movement: Theory for Theatre* (Bloomsbury, 2021) and chapters for the *Bloomsbury Companion to Dance Studies* (2019), *Transmission in Motion* (Routledge 2016) and *Digital Movement* (Palgrave 2015). She is founding co-

editor of the award-winning book series, *New World Choreographies*, for Palgrave Macmillan and her research involves digital archives and studies of dance corporeality and theatre spectatorship.



**Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne**

**Author/s:**

Fensham, R

**Title:**

Ecological combustion: the atmospherics of the bushfire as choreography

**Date:**

2020

**Citation:**

Fensham, R. (2020). Ecological combustion: the atmospherics of the bushfire as choreography. *Ambiances: International Journal of Sensory Environment, Architecture and Urban Space*, 2020 (6), pp.1-17. <https://doi.org/10.4000/ambiances.3651>.

**Persistent Link:**

<http://hdl.handle.net/11343/258709>

**File Description:**

Published version

**License:**

CC BY-NC-ND