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Just Like a Movie: The Art History of the Catastrophe

How do images and narratives of the end of the world mediate real disasters? This paper explores the art history of the catastrophe by drawing down exemplar traces from media sources. In the first instance, accounts from survivors and witnesses that use film narratives and mediation to make sense of events. In the second, how media (broadly and then specifically) require other media presence to regulate events into suitable formats. Much like Sydney's 2009 dust storm, while not catastrophic in type, was catastrophic in style. Its art history is in science-fiction, in painting, in paranoia - and the dread which the real event generates is amplified by entertainment cultures which trade on narratives of panic, destruction and oblivion.

In producing this art history, this paper will refer to much of the research on media and film realisms (Leon Hunt, Tanya Krzywinska, etc) and trace research histories around the 'cinematics of history' (ref: Allan Feldman). Finally, an examination of how narrative cultures and catastrophe have intertwined their histories, ceding ground to each other in the manner that novelist Don DeLillo once remarked; 'what terrorists gain, novelists lose.'