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Ecstatic Documents

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There is a practically unconscious sentiment, a vague consensus that things—any and all things—should be described and documented appropriately. Fittingly. *Empathically.* We like to *know what we are talking about,* and we signal our knowing by letting it inflect our recollections and communications. When we aspire to show, and not only to tell, we assume a knowing role. One could even claim that this knowing protocol is visual communication's lowest common denominator, its vernacular. It explains why amateur archaeologists, when they dig some indistinct lump from the ground, feel compelled to wield it like a prehistoric weapon or covet it like a votive, as they present it to a companion's camera. It explains the "mindsmile" elicited by discovering the arrow—that internationally-recognized symbol of the courier—hidden with intent in FedEx's typographic logo. Ultimately, it explains why (as per the classic Reddit meme) people do simply prefer *aesthetic water* and find it more *watery* than *generic water.*

FedEx might have come to dominate mindsmile mindshare, but it is very much a gateway drug. Its thrill is superficial: pleasing, but one-dimensional. Something more compelling, more addicting, awaits beyond. Beyond the plainly appropriate a latent, unreasonable, *ecstatic* energy resides.

In the southern hemisphere summer of 2016, an innocent tourist photograph of the sun setting over Darwin Harbour became a viral image on Facebook. The photographer, Kelly Matthews from Derby, Western Australia, didn't realize what an extraordinary image she had produced until friends began commenting on her post. Matthews's image artfully frames the landscape through a canopy of trees in its foreground, and, especially at thumbnail-scale, that silhouetted frame coincidentally creates the familiar outline of Australia, the entire cartography of the country, as seen from above! A God-like, omniscient view! A most Australian image! Matthews apparently did not have ecstatic designs in that decisive photographic moment, but just as the creator of the FedEx logo had been, she was attuned, attentive, receptive: "I've visited every state and territory in Australia now, so it's like the map is complete, it's perfect," she told a journalist from *Northern Territory News*. Perfect, as if in a vision.

■ *fig.* 1

Moving decisively beyond the innocent, artist and researcher Susan Schuppli coined the term "material witness" to describe media which have been indelibly marked by contact with reality. A material witness is a kind of informed document that, through its being in the presence of a particular phenomenon, becomes encoded with information, often extraneous to the information which it might originally have been intended to retain. Schuppli's most ecstatic case study

concerns Soviet filmmaker Vladimir Shevchenko's 1986 film, *Chernobyl: Chronicle of Difficult Weeks*, whose production began just three days after the explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in April of that year. Shevchenko had official access to the site, and was able to fly over the thirty-square-kilometer exclusion zone by helicopter and document the aftermath of the explosion and the impending meltdown of the nuclear fuel in the destroyed reactor building. As Schuppli tells it:

> When Shevchenko's 35mm footage was later developed, he noticed that a portion of the film was heavily pock-marked and carried extraneous static interference and noise. Thinking initially that the film stock used had been defective, Shevchenko eventually realised that what he had captured on film was the image and sound of radioactivity itself. ... What we are witness to, in this fleeting energetic event, is the radiological conversion of a somewhat pedestrian account of the disaster into the most dangerous film in the world."[1]

Notice, already, how opportunistic the creators of ecstatic documents are. Moments of ecstatic media tend to ***happen*** to those predisposed to them. Indeed irradiation became the defining visual proposition of Shevchenko's project and he embedded it into the film's narrative. "This is how radiation looks," his voiceover announces.

■ *fig.* 2

Ecstatic documents might sometimes be unbidden, but more typically they are pursued, with rigor and intent. There is a

1. Susan Schuppli, *Material Witness: Media, Forensics, Evidence*, MIT Press, 2020.

YouTube video of a helicopter taking off from a Hong Kong dock without its rotors moving. It is eerie and artificial-looking; the aircraft seems somehow to float into the sky with no visual sign of the mechanical energy required to get it off the ground. The effect is produced by an exact reciprocity between the rotational frequency of the helicopter's rotor blades and the specified shutter speed and frame rate of the digital camera recording the scene. This reciprocity creates a document that quite simply does not *look* like an unmediated experience of seeing a helicopter achieve flight, yet is somehow *more* faithful to it. The video engages *ecstatically* with rotational frequency and disinterestedly with everything else. It neglects all other aspects of the scene it conveys. The context of this particular helicopter flight is completely absent. In this way it is at once hyper-attuned to its subject and, like Shevchenko's irradiated film, in another sense incomplete, inadequate. This kind of technical reciprocity would be banal or pedantic, in the negative sense, if it were not for its empathic poetry: the curious and unlikely fact of it emphasizing what is arguably the defining characteristic—r-r-rotational frequency!—of what it documents. Right now this video has had 11 million views. One can confidently assume that these are not 11 million local Hong Kong chopper spotters. No! These are 11 million enthralled by the curiousness of the ecstatic document.

■ *fig.* 3

Ecstatic documentarians use media to make radical gestures of empathy. To identify themselves with what they attend to, and thereby to produce more Australian, more rotational, more *radioactive* forms of attention. Sociologist Janet Vertesi's fieldwork with the crew of the Mars rovers accounts for just such an ecstatic attention, a mediated empathy that

the rover's operators develop with the impossibly distant robotic vehicle which they are tasked with directing. The rover transmits raw image data montages back to Earth from its panoramic camera system. Vertesi explains how members of the crew, based at scientific institutions around the world, refrain from post-processing the perspectival distortions in these crude composite images, instead learning to adapt their own perception in empathy with the vehicle. Vertesi describes this practice, which she calls "skilled vision," like so:

> ...they rarely use a corrective algorithm to digitally adjust the image to a more rectangular projection, producing a more familiar photographic frame. Instead, they learn first and foremost to acquire the robot's own native representation of Mars, as well as its own bodily orientation and apparatus.[2]

Skilled vision precisely reflects skateboarder Ellis Frost's recently posted YouTube video, titled "Can I 360 Flip While Filming a 360 Flip." Ellis's spoken intro goes: "Matt's gonna do a 360 flip, while I do a 360 flip at the same time, while I film Matt doing a 360 flip with my phone, while you [talking to camera] film both of us doing a 360 flip." It sounds *convoluted*—"360 flip *Inception*," jokes Ellis.

Ellis's camera work is shaky and Matt's 360 flip is barely in frame. *How about just having a professional cameraman film a professional skateboarder doing a 360 flip?*, those not accustomed to the ecstatic might legitimately ask. *This is objectively worse in every way.* But Ellis is qualified to film

2. Janet Vertesi, 'Seeing like a Rover: Visualisation, embodiment, and interaction on the Mars Exploration Rover Mission', in *Social Studies of Science*, 2012.

Matt because he can also 360 flip. His is a consummately skilled vision. We viewers know that Ellis knows what it is to 360 flip. We trust that his knowing imbues the document with something. Something invisible, ineffable, *ecstatic*. From the third camera we see Ellis, not taking his eyes off his phone. Ellis totally fixated on capturing Matt. Ellis 360-flipping at the exact moment Matt does. Because Ellis has 360 flips on *lock*. He has another video, "How effortless/lazy can I 360 flip," in which he does them with his hands in his pockets. Most people, like Matt, are poised and concerted and trying hard. Ellis is not even thinking, not even trying. Ellis is spending his surplus energy on performing empathy with Matt.

■ *fig.* 4

Sceptics of the ecstatic document will typically object: *That's fine for helicopters whose rotors spin at six rounds per second, that's fine for Australia, for Chernobyl, for Mars, that's fine for people who can 360 flip with their hands in their pockets, but what about X, and Y, and my cat Z?* It is a reasonable concern. But, frankly, this is not about being reasonable. Reasonable documents abound. Reasonable media are ubiquitous. The bevy of algorithmic operations which your smartphone camera routinely performs to technically normalize your photographs is reasonable. And the content of the resulting computational images looks reasonably, believably, like your cat. Ecstatic documents, though, are rare birds. It takes a certain attunement to find one, and when you do the thrill only increases your capacity for seeing skilfully and empathically.

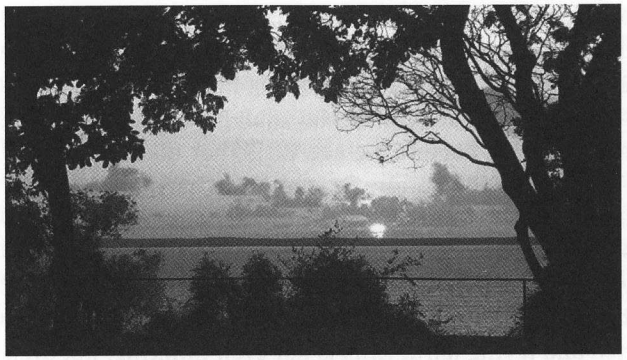


fig 1 An image by Kelly Matthews of a sunset in Darwin Harbour that also looks like an outline of Australia.



fig 2 Film stills from Vladimir Shevchenko's *Chernobyl: Chronicle of Difficult Weeks*, via "The Most Dangerous Film in the World" by Susan Schuppli.

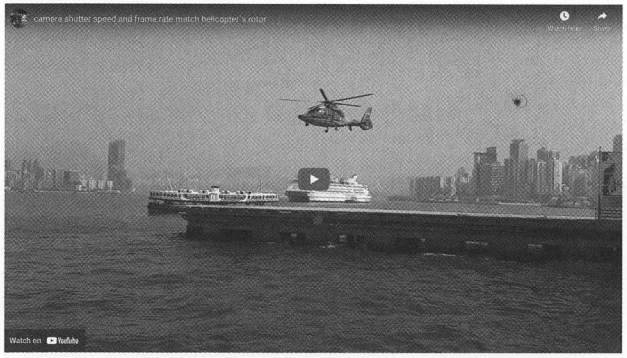


fig 3 Still from YouTube video "camera shutter speed and frame rate match helicopter`s rotor" uploaded by Chris Fay 7 years ago.



fig 4 Still from YouTube video "Can i 360 Flip While Filming a 360 Flip" uploaded by Ellis Frost 3 years ago.