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Media Review: A Routine Dynamics Perspective on the 'Black Summer' Bushfires

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3 **Media Review: A Routine Dynamics Perspective on the ‘Black Summer’**
4 **Bushfires**
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9 **Eva Orner**

10 **Burning**

11 Australia: Finch. 1h 31 min
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14 **Justin Krook & Luke Mazzaferro**

15 **A Fire Inside**

16 Australia: Amazon Studios. 1h 26 min
17

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19 **Reviewed by:** Anja Danner-Schröder, *RPTU Kaiserslautern, Germany*; Kathrin Sele, *Aalto*
20 *University, Finland.*
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24 **The World is on Fire!**
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26 The two documentaries *Burning* and *A Fire Inside* report on the 2019/2020 ‘Black Summer’
27 bushfires, the largest on record in Australia. Both documentaries establish an eerie intimacy by
28 showing impressive scenes that people usually do not see: firefighters in front of a huge wall of
29 fire and flying sparks everywhere. But most importantly, the documentaries make a case for swift
30 action on the climate crisis. While reviewing the two documentaries, we focus on routines
31 conceptualized as situated action patterns; an approach which sensitizes researchers to focus on
32 “task orientation, sequentiality of actions, recurrence and familiarity as well as attempts at
33 reflexive regulation” (Feldman et al., 2021, p. 1).
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45 ***Burning: A Story at the Intersection of Action and Inaction***
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48 Director Eva Orner uses the bushfires as a peg on which to hang the climate crisis. The
49 documentary starts with introducing the general theme of Australia’s extreme weather conditions,
50 portrayed as a “*distillation of the world's dilemma, when it comes to climate change*”. The narrator
51 confesses that “*the greatest tragedy of this terrible black summer bushfires season was that we*
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3 *have seen it coming*". While *"fires in Australia are a constant"*, Greg Mullins, a former fire
4 commissioner, explains that the situation has changed dramatically in recent years. Pictures from
5 the past show how locals had beaten the flames with water buckets, tree branches, and rakes, which
6 Mullins describes as *"just what you did"*. But the viewer quickly learns that the bushfires have
7 become much more intense and catastrophic.

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16 The documentary goes back and forth frequently between people acting and those
17 deliberately refusing to act on climate change. It starts with former Australian prime minister
18 Morrison bringing a chunk of coal into parliament, saying *"this is coal, don't be afraid!"*. By doing
19 so, he embraces old action patterns, promoting fossil fuels and joking that *"there is no word for*
20 *coalophobia officially"*. The documentary then introduces 16-year-old climate activist Daisy
21 Jeffrey who proclaims on stage of a climate protest event that new action patterns are needed but
22 *"our government is doing nothing"* and *"is not taking action [...], even though our country is*
23 *burning because of their inaction"*. Juxtaposing between the government's inaction with large
24 protests demanding immediate action on climate policy shows the divide over what needs to be
25 done. Tech entrepreneur Mike Cannon-Brookes appears in this story and reflects on the identity
26 of Australians as fossil exporters, which he refers to as their DNA but also explains that old action
27 patterns can be reinterpreted and developed without being lost: *"We will need to pivot from*
28 *exporting coal and gas to exporting renewable energy"*, which according to him *"is possible [...]*
29 *without changing our DNA"*.

48 ***A Fire Inside: From Being Engulfed by Actions to the Inability to Act***

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51 Justin Krook and Luke Mazzaferro feature firefighters at the frontline. The documentary starts
52 with pictures from the actual bushfires, while the narrator states: *"we cannot pretend that this is*
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3 *something we have experienced before, because it is not*". The focus is on how people, particularly
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5 volunteers, respond to and battle the fires. The viewer learns how volunteering is "*marked into*
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7 *[the] Australian DNA*" as an important action pattern.
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11 At this point the documentary zooms in on the people of Balmore and their relentless fight
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13 against the 'Black Summer' bushfires. Firefighter Nathan Barnden explains that "*everything we*
14
15 *tried just didn't work. The fires were too severe for what we were capable of doing*". He almost
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17 rhetorically asks what one can do if "*everything that you have ever been taught doesn't work*". As
18
19 he recapitulates his own actions, he reflects upon how many of the situations they were in "*could*
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21 *have been it*". One particular action pattern he recounts revolves around how they responded to
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23 calls from people trapped in their homes:
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28 Together with John, another firefighter, Nathan drove toward the first house for a
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30 family of seven knowing that they "*had no firefighter hoses, no protective curtains,*
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32 *no sprinkler system, nothing to protect us*". At one point, the fire got so extreme that
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34 they "*made the decision that [they] physically couldn't get any further. When trying*
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36 *to turn around we got stuck [...]. We could not get the car out and [...]. And I know*
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38 *we never said it, but we both looked at each other that this is it, that this is where it*
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40 *ends for us.*" When they were suddenly able to move the car, they drove back to the
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42 intersection calling the station and asking whether there really were people in the
43
44 house. Once Nathan and John had confirmed the high-risk situation, they turned
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46 around and drove back into the fire. "*We pull up in front of the house and 3/4 of the*
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48 *house is on fire and we can't see a single person, [...], all their shit is burning [...].*
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50 *John jumped out of the car, [...], opened the front door, [...], and there was a family*
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52 *of seven.*"

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54 In a sudden shift, the scenery and focus change and we see people's relief about the long-awaited
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56 rain, but also learn that "*no birds, no insects [were] left*"; just devastated wasteland. It is this
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58 emptiness and people's struggle to recover from what had happened that become the center of the
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3 story. People share how they went from firefighting for almost 200 days straight to nothing but
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5 loss and grief. They explain how they had never felt as paralyzed before. Nevertheless, we see how
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7 being part of the community and helping others enabled people to slowly overcome their inability
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9 to act and thus in rebuilding their lives.
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12 13 **Managing the Unmanageable** 14 15

16 Watching the documentaries, our interest in actors and their action patterns led us wonder what
17
18 happens when something known as a constant—like bushfires in Australia—becomes
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20 unmanageable. Both documentaries refer to the Australian DNA, which is differently interpreted
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22 by different actors. Whereas the Australian government portrayed the fires as just another
23
24 challenge that can be managed with the right action patterns installed, the firefighters conveyed
25
26 that fighting the ‘Black Summer’ bushfires had been the absolute maximum of what is humanly
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28 possible. Nevertheless, both groups seem to interpret fighting the fires as the continued answer,
29
30 with more or less adaptations to the action patterns needed to tackle future, possibly more
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32 catastrophic, fires.
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38 Hence, both groups rely on training (Geiger, Danner-Schröder, & Kremser, 2021), which
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40 enables firefighters to approach fires in a flexible manner (Danner-Schröder & Geiger, 2016) even
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42 in situations they experienced as almost unfightable. The documentaries refer to these actions as
43
44 an expression of resilience, which Fourie, Höllerer, Dwyer and Spee (2023) labeled adaptive
45
46 resilience. Yet, adaptive resilience cannot be the sole answer as it focuses on adapting to and
47
48 coping with what we have, rather than questioning our action patterns in a more profound way.
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50 Hence, learning efforts ought to go beyond what can be expected, requiring the ability to transform
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52 one’s action patterns toward new, unknown realities or what Rouleau (2023) calls anticipation-
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3 resilience dynamics. Experts, such as Georg Goldammer, director of the Global Fire Monitoring
4 Center, predict that “*our handling of wildfires has to fundamentally change*” as “*we see fires that*
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cannot be extinguished, only guided” (Spiegel, Sep 17, 2022).

As we engaged with how the documentaries deal with the question of action patterns for unknown situations, we realized that in both documentaries people mainly consider ‘post-colonial’ routines as part of their Australian DNA. On the brink, the filmmakers ponder the argument that there is a lack of respect for fire preventing routines once practiced by “*aboriginal people*” and, hence, a rejection of indigenous knowledges and organizing (Bastien, Coraiola, & Foster, 2023). In *Burning*, Bruce Pascoe, a writer, explains that upon their arrival 250 years ago “*Europeans stopped the methods that made [the land] like that [sweet and open]*”. Tim Flannery, a former climate commissioner, concurs that “*indigenous Australians managed this land for 40,000 years at least, and it was carefully curated*”. *A Fire Inside* ends with a part focusing on the importance of learning from forgotten indigenous routines and, in particular, how one should preventively burn bushland in a controlled manner. Despite these excursions, the storylines of both documentaries focus on Australia’s ‘post-colonial’ DNA, emphasizing modern fire management, without seriously considering action patterns of indigenous peoples. This is a prime example of “*cosmetic indigenization [...] defined as the superficial appropriation of Indigenous identities and knowledges to enhance or further the image of a colonial organization*” (Bastien et al., 2023, p. 668). Hence, relearning as suggested by Fourie et al. (2023) should not just focus on reinforcing extant routines, but needs to go beyond by relearning almost forgotten routines from the past.

Throughout the two documentaries three different actor groups are presented: Prime Minister Morisson and his allies denying the climate crisis, activists fighting for action and firefighters dealing with the consequences of governmental inaction. As these groups are presented

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3 as opponents (see Rouleau, 2023), the viewers of these documentaries are vividly confronted with
4
5 the question of how the different action patterns are connected (Sele & Grand, 2016). This aspect
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7 points to the relationship between everyday actions and grand challenges, or as Rouleau (2023)
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9 points out the micro-macro connection. The documentaries nicely demonstrate that the different
10
11 actor groups all act on their own, even though grand challenges should be tackled beyond single
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13 actors. Hence, all those actors interested in avoiding fires and the climate crisis more generally
14
15 should work together. Moreover, the documentaries point to the importance of engaging in a
16
17 critical conversation about the consequentiality of such routines (Feldman et al., 2021). While
18
19 recognizing that certain routines are drivers of climate change (e.g. burning coal), we also realize
20
21 how difficult it is to move beyond what we know today in order to change old action patterns and
22
23 create new routines that help us in acting against the climate crisis (e.g., producing and exporting
24
25 renewable energy). Additionally, the ‘Black Summer’ bushfires were not a single, sudden
26
27 occurrence, but a consequence of previous decisions and actions (see Fourie et al., 2023). Last, *A*
28
29 *Fire Inside* portrayed the consequences of fighting such intense fires for the firefighters and
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31 affected people and how difficult it is to recover. These people are in urgent need of routines that
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33 pick up the looming challenges.
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40 We concur with the activists that it is high time to act by: (1) carefully questioning our
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42 action patterns in a more profound way to anticipate future actions; (2) including all action patterns
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44 available, also forgotten past ones; and (3) combining our actions in a joint effort to fight the
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46 climate crisis and its consequences!
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