New Imaging: Transdisciplinary strategies for art beyond the new media

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INTRODUCTION
A profound shift is occurring in our understanding of postmodern media culture. Since the turn of the millennium the emphasis on mediation as technology and as aesthetic idiom, as opportunity for creative initiatives and for critique, has become increasingly normative and doctrinaire. Mediation and the new media arts have in fact become the new medium of critical and pedagogical discourse: like water is for fish, like culture is for cultural studies, mediation is a concept that is taken for granted now because it is itself the medium in which we think and act, in which we swim. We need a concept that is amphibian, and that can leave its medium. The concept we propose is a remediated apprehension of the image: an active image and activity of imaging beyond the boundaries of disciplinary definition, but also altering the relations of intermedia aesthetics and interdisciplinary pedagogy. This concept will need to incorporate a vibrant materialism of the image’s sensory and cognitive strata and an evanescent immaterialism of its affective qualities. Rather than locate our conference in the space of negotiation between disciplines or media (the “inter-”), we propose the opposition, transit and surpassing of the interdisciplinary by a “transdisciplinary aesthetics”, and its conceptual and physical practice of a “transdisciplinary imaging.”
The aim of the conference is to bring together artists, scholars, scientists historians and curators.
The conference will explore areas related to: Painting, Drawing, Film, Video, Photography, Computer visualization, Real-time imaging, Intelligent systems, Image Science.

Participants were asked to address at least one the following areas in their abstract:
- remediated image
- hypermediacy and the iconic character of the image
- politics of the image and/or image making in a transdisciplinary context
- life sciences and bioart in relation to the living image
- distributed and networked image
- table top scale to nano
- machines and computer vision
- perspectival image
- image as speculative research and critique
- illusion, process and immediacy
- aesthetics and the proliferation of imaging

Keynote Addresses
Roy Ascott, Jens Hauser and Anne Ring Petersen

The Speakers Chosen Were:
Syzygy: gazing at shadows, darkly

Harry Nankin  RMIT University, Melbourne

Abstract
To consider an ‘ecological gaze’ at a time of the putative ‘end of nature’ is to engage in “dark ecology”, a mournful attendance to global ecological destruction, the collateral termination of the moribund ontological binary ‘man/nature’ and the concomitant decay of spatial ecological identity. To uncover an ecological gaze photographically is to bear witness to what might be characterized as ecological ‘tragedy’ for which the germane ocular trope is not a morbid iconography revealed by reflected light but an elegiac index of shadows, and not distancing monocular hubris but a visceral chiasm of binocular seeing, photo-kinetic action and photo-chemical reaction. Such was the rationale of Syzygy, a project about Lake Tyrrell in the Victorian Mallee. Lake Tyrrell was reputedly once an indigenous celestial observatory. The heavens mirrored in its shallow waters informed a sacred reciprocity of sky with country, reciprocity long since ruptured. Syzygy reflects upon this sacrament and its loss by turning the lake’s surface into a photographic focal plane that no longer reciprocates the heavens. This estrangement between heaven and earth is indicated by imagery created literally by exposure to starlight falling on the lakebed on moonless nights. The resulting heavenly shadows trace live invertebrates and reptiles gathered from the lakeshore and rare astronomical glass plate photographs brought to the location. Syzygy was a collaboration with scholar/artist Paul Carter, astrophysicist Maurizio Toscano and many volunteers. The process was organised on-line and documented on video. This paper locates Syzygy within contemporary art practice by addressing how this groundbreaking 4-year experiment revivifies analogic methods as an arena for speculative research and critique, transforms appropriated scientific data into affectual imagery through remediation and reframes environmental art as politics in a transdisciplinary context.

SYZYGY
1. Lake Tyrrell
At first sight Lake Tyrrell in the semi-arid Victorian Mallee is unprepossessing. Yet, this stark, seasonally-filled saltpan surrounded by eroding sand hills and grassy plains is associated with a pre-colonial story evoking a vision apparent only when the land itself is unseen–at night.

Nineteenth century squatter and amateur ethnographer William Edward Stanbridge reported that the local “Boorong tribe” who knew “more of astronomy than any others” (Stanbridge, 1861: 301) were specialists in studying the night sky reflected in the shallow waters of Lake Tyrrell. The Boorong shared the outlook of most pre-moderns in supposing a correspondence between heaven and earth. The relative location of stars imitated the arrangement of landscape features. Attributes of the night sky were emulated in the stories of their terrestrial correlates. This earth-sky correspondence appears to be conveyed in the lake’s name. According to historian John Morieson (Morieson, 1996: 6);

“The name Tyrrell comes from the local word for “sky” and it is not hard to imagine why. On an occasion when the lake has been replenished, to be there on a cloudless night when the water is still, every star in the firmament can be seen reflected. Standing on a point of land jutting out onto the lake, it is easy to form the impression that one is in space, with the stars all around, above and below. “Tyrelle” had both meanings; “sky” and “space”.”
For Paul Carter the *tyrille* of the Boorong is best understood as “primordial space” reminiscent of the *chora* of classical Greek cosmology: “The tyrille was not a clearing but an opening, a cleaving in which all things came into being, doubled like reflections in their proper places” (Carter, 2003: 7).

Today, the heavens remain essentially unchanged and, as Paul Carter says, ‘in their proper places’ but the lake and its environs, cleared of most native vegetation in the twentieth century, is an ecologically impoverished zone. The heavens are left to mirror the land as it might be remembered, not as it has become. It is a double (‘reflected’) loss: the absence of an intact ecological surface and the undoing of an imagined pairing or reciprocity of earth with sky.

The Boorong story inspired its use as a metaphor for the global environmental crisis and produced two questions: First, is it possible to imagine Lake Tyrrell again as an optical aperture or plane? Second, could the regions ecological ‘tragedy’ (and by association, the world’s) be evoked through the lake’s poetic ‘re-pairing’ with the heavens in photographs created by starlight on site? Such a re-pairing could infer a *syzygy* of the project title: the yoking together of two or more objects or the alignment of three or more celestial bodies.

### 2. Project Overview

The *Syzygy* project took place in three phases over four years. First, ‘terrestrial’ and ‘celestial’ source negatives were made and found, respectively [see Fig 1]. A year of fieldwork produced the earthly set: photographic shadowgrams on large sheets of low-speed orthochromatic gelatin silver film recording live native invertebrates and reptiles gathered from around Lake Tyrrell and exposed to flash at night on site [see Fig. 2]. The celestial negatives were borrowed astronomical survey photographs on glass plate. The starlight exposures were then executed at a site at the northern tip of the lake most distant from light pollution. The sky-facing shadow films were exposed to ambient starlight under their respective pre-prepared negatives laid after dusk on tarpaulins pegged to the lakebed in daylight [see Fig. 3]. Many shadow-films—a high-speed panchromatic gelatine silver emulsion cut to the same size as the astronomical plates—were exposed simultaneously [see Fig. 4]. To ensure a predominance of starlight, exposures were restricted to a few clear dark, nights each month free of the reflected sunlight of the moon and bright planets. Approximately 270 films were exposed to the stars in 15 events over three years. Finally, the developed films were chemically treated and mounted on glass preparatory to exhibition. A selection of over 100 of these film/glass objects has been configured into some two dozen triptychs and one much larger multi-segment artwork.

A chance conveying of the Boorong story by independent author, artist and scholar Paul Carter inspired the *Syzygy* idea. Later, Paul Carter (assisted by Dr Emily Potter) entered into extensive discussion and writing about the site and project process. The project was also, in part, a response to Paul Carter’s *Nearamnew* pavement at Federation Square, Melbourne, a work similarly informed by the Lake Tyrrell story. Physicist and lecturer in Science Education in the Melbourne Graduate School, University of Melbourne Dr Maurizio Toscano was the principal scientific collaborator. He discovered and brokered access to the astronomical survey collection, assisted in plate cataloguing, identification and selection, prepared the long-range starlight exposure timetable, calculated field exposures and helped solve nagging technical issues.

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1 According to Paul Carter (Carter, 2003: 7) “explorer Edward John Eyre named the lake after the Aboriginal word ‘derell’ meaning above, sky or space”, later rendered as ‘tyrille’ by William Edward Stanbridge.

1 Victorian state government reports have detailed the environmental ‘hazards and conflicts’ arising from large-scale land clearing and settlement in the Mallee region, including Lake Tyrrell. For example, only 7 of an original estimated 25 species of small to medium-sized native mammals and marsupials survive in the region. (LCCV, 1974: 153-173 & 219-229, LCCV, 1987: 285-328).
problems. Early in the project Dr Toscano investigated options of fabricating a refraction telescope with the lakebed as the focal plane, turning the lake floor into a radio telescope receiver and concentrating starlight with a parabola of mirrors.

Syzygy was mostly organised on-line and the process visually documented in stills and HD footage edited into a 14-minute documentary movie Making Syzygy, posted on-line. ABC Radio National producer and sound artist Christopher Williams made extensive audio recordings produced as the sound track for the movie and a separate 4-part, 44-minute audio artwork. Technician Rudy Frank, local guide Anthony Finch and 20 volunteers participated in the documentation and fieldwork.

The project was enabled by funds provided under Arts Victoria’s Arts Innovation and the Australia Council for the Arts Inter-Arts grant programs.

Figure 1. Source negatives. Left: a life-scale ‘photogram’ of a live Wolf Spider on orthochromatic film created by exposure to flash on site at Lake Tyrrell. Right: the corner of an appropriated ‘14 inch square’ glass plate astronomical survey photograph.

Figure 2. Making the invertebrate negatives. Left: photograms of live invertebrates being exposed by flash at night beside the lake. Photograph by Viren Mohan, 2009. Right: collecting ants in daylight on the lakeshore with a siphon. Photograph by Rudy Frank, 2009.
3. The Ecological Gaze

Syzygy is the most recent example of a long-term speculation into the possibility of art manifesting an ‘ecological gaze’. This ‘ecological gaze’ proposes an aesthetic stance attentive to ecological entities, processes and relations framed within a self-reflexive response to the non-human. The first word in this paired neologism, ‘ecological’ is both a scientific term and phenomenological metaphor whilst the word ‘gaze’ connotes a psycho-socially conditioned apprehension of the external world as regarded object and incipient subject. The ‘ecological gaze’ draws on a range of ethical, aesthetic and philosophical critiques of the place of nature in western culture whilst necessarily privileging ‘nature endorsing’ (empiricist, environmentalist) over ‘nature sceptical’ (post-modern) positions (Soper, 1995: 4). Although the ecological is presented as metanarrative, its gaze is not epistemologically prescriptive, its singular guiding principle being a poetic engagement with the ecological as ‘fact’ (phenomena) and ‘affect’ (feeling).

Prime among facts and affects foregrounded by an ecological gaze is a world undergoing irreversible anthropogenic environmental change. In the popular sense of nature “not human and distinguished from the work of humanity” (Soper, 1995: 15) ‘the end of nature’ on earth is imminent and the once secure ontological binary ‘man/nature’ appears increasingly specious. The concomitant decline in environmental alterity and stability threatens to cauterize the ecological identity of place. That these phenomena may be regarded as ‘tragedies’ is one aspect of the ecological gaze.

Colloquially ‘tragedy’ describes any serious misfortune, but its stricter application applies to art of that name which in turn probably originated in the ritual sacrifice, ‘scapegoat’ or pharmakos...
of ancient Greece (Eagleton, 2003: 278-280). The colonial ‘sacrifice’ of indigenous man and nature at Lake Tyrrell might be understood as tragic in the common and atavistic sense but the auguring of human suffering due to the contemporary elimination of non-human nature across the planet is also tragedy insofar as life imitates art. Here, the twin Aristotelian narrative elements of anagnorisis or ‘recognition’ (eg. realizing the impact of biological destruction) and peripeteia or ‘reversal of circumstances’ (eg. the slippage from ecological security to instability) may well describe the human condition in the face of global environmental crisis.

An ecological gaze attends to the morbid contemporary condition with a sensibility comparable to literary theorist Timothy Morton’s “dark ecology” (Morton, 2007: 181) in which the all-inclusive, open-ended, tangled “mesh” of ecological connectivity (and dislocation) is foregrounded. In considering what kind of art production might express a dark ecology, Morton argues for a critical ecomimesis (evocation of the ecological subject) pursued through an “intersubjectivity” involving an attempted “collapse of aesthetic distance” (Morton, 2007, 164) between world and artist. Summarized as ambience such art would inspire “a sense of circumambient or surrounding world…something material and physical, though somewhat intangible, as if space itself had a material aspect…” (Morton, 2007: 33-34).

4. Speculative Research and Critique

To apprehend land by ways and means other than to ‘picture’ it via habitual ocular tropes is one possible approach to an ecological gaze. A key to uncovering such a way of seeing may lie in photography’s distinctive claim to authority, its indexical character. This response to an external reality is normally optically mediated so that photography is almost always understood as a mechanical eyewitness. Its indexical authority is located in the appearance of the image outcome, in iconic likeness, in representation. The tactile and photochemical relationship to the world intrinsic to the act of light capture, the material imprint described by Susan Sontag as “like a footprint or a death mask” (Sontag, 1973: 154) is generally backgrounded. According to Charles Sanders Peirce indexicality is a function of proximity in that it “depends upon association by contiguity, and not upon association by resemblance or upon intellectual operations.” (Peirce, 1931-58: 306). To understand the most contiguous and thus most materially indexical of imaging processes—camerless photography or ‘photograms’—Susanne Ramsenthaler argues “one has to distance oneself from the immediate image, making a straight connection with the ‘absent part’ crucial in its formation. And this is where its power lies.” (Ramsenthaler, 2003: 9) It is awareness of what Ramsenthaler calls the ‘absent part’ conjured by the indexicality of the photogram (more than likeness-making) that lends itself to the production of ambience, art made under an ecological gaze.

In considering the representation of ecological tragedy in particular the germane ocular device was considered not to be a morbid iconography revealed by reflected light but an elegiac index of shadows. Syzygy staged two species of indexical shadow: preliminary negative photograms made of found living creatures recorded on film under flashlight and the imprints of starlight passing through these and astronomical glass plate photographs onto unexposed emulsion forming the final artworks. Both the photogram negatives and starlit positives imprinted the world under cover of darkness as shadows (shadows made in shadow) implicating an eclectic “dark ecology” of references: Plato’s cave, negation, erasure, inside-out “exscriptive writing” (Lippit, 2005: 55), the “atomic-light” body imprints of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and, to paraphrase Milton, ‘shadows of heaven’. The intermediate photogram films and their star exposed inversions report anamorphically distorted likenesses of their unseen invertebrate and reptilian referents, translucent overlapping imprints suggesting the interior of things, arguably rendering the technique one of those “phenomenologies of the inside” along with “psychoanalysis, X-rays, and cinema” (Lippitt, 2005: 5).
Gelatin silver proffers peculiar poetic attributes. Silver–to-silver printing harks back to the mainstay of the medium for most of its history, the negative/positive system announced by William Henry Fox Talbot in 1839. Recording the faint nocturnal ‘light of the universe’ generated extreme ‘reciprocity failure’ (reduced sensitivity) in the silver emulsion compensated for on-site by exposures extended to almost an hour, an (intentional) optical decoupling symbolic of the narrative of broken reciprocation between earth and sky. To cultural theorist Roland Barthes silver (as distinct from dye-based) photographs are “literally an emanation of the referent” (Barthes, 2000: 81). He muses

“And if Photography belonged to a world with some residual sensitivity to myth, we should exult over the richness of the symbol: the loved body is immortalized by the mediation of a precious metal, silver (monument and luxury); to which we might add the notion that this metal, like all the metals of Alchemy, is alive.”

Live or not, it has long been observed that from the moment (or with Syzygy, the hour) of capture a photograph indicates what is past, already or eventually dead, reminding us of the ‘ever present passing of time’ and our own imminent mortality. Photography is thus unavoidably “a melancholic object” (Prosser, 2005: 1), a momento mori, showing “not the presence of the past but the pastness of the present” (Prosser, 2005: 1). Syzygy recorded the flashlit shadows of once living creatures and invertebrate and star pictures re-made with congealed starlight. There is pathos intrinsic to these images as in all photographs, but it is a pathos redoubled when we recall that even at the time of exposure the starshine heralded long-gone objects. Even without alchemy, these are images enlivened by fossil light.

Syzygy’s mute ‘emanations’ resist what Walter Benjamin argued to be the usual draining of ‘aura’–fetishized preciousness materially connected to origination–in the reproduced or reproducible artwork, especially photographs. The Lake Tyrrell films are ‘original’ in that they have been produced directly through the ‘touch’ of their referent creatures, glass plates and cosmic light. Their possible auratic power derives at once from this ‘originality’ as an index of traces but also from what Deleuze (echoing Barthes) once called the ‘fossil’ nature of photographs, the physical transformation caused by contact with the light of the referent remaining “even after the latter has decayed” (Marks, 2000: 84). Here, it is valid to be mindful of light’s unique touch. Quantum physicists speak of paired photons being ‘entangled’ with each other across space and time. Many photons congealed in the starlit Syzygy emulsions were entangled with partner particles elsewhere in the Milky Way–and beyond. Cosmic aura indeed.

Syzygy’s artistic associations are eclectic. Although artists like Adam Fuss have photogrammed living creatures in the studio and Susan Derges has recorded outdoor natural phenomena (Cotton, 2004: 206) the live, in situ plein air invertebrate captures of Syzygy are unprecedented. Many artists have made photograms by moonshine but there is but one known precedent of contact printing by starlight: daguerreotypist Antoine Claudet in 1846. Others privilege the source: in 1894 Swedish playwright August Strindberg exposed photopaper ‘celestographs’ to raw starlight (Campany, 2005: 115) and since 1998 Erika Blumenfeld has

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4 The unexposed zones of the final films shaded from starlight by overlying negative source imagery are the ‘bright’ zones of translucency, celestial objects and invertebrate fields.

5 Batchen, Geoffrey, Professor of Art History at the Graduate Center, City University of New York in a personal email of 22 July 2008 identified a news item of May 1, 1846 in the Salem Gazette (Volume 85, Number 35) which quotes the "London correspondent of the Boston Atlas, describing a scientific soiree": "What seems to cause the greatest astonishment, is an impression of black lace upon a daguerreotype plate, by the light of the stars! M. Claudet, in referring to this phenomenon, observed, that he considered it as proof of the chemical power of star-light. He said that he had prepared a plate in the usual manner, covered it with a piece of black lace, and exposed it to the then brightest part of the sky, the constellation Ursa Major, nearly at the zenith. It was left to the influence of these, and the surrounding stars, for about fifteen minutes, which sufficed to impress the black lace upon the plate".

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recorded the night without a camera but being unmediated, these images are shadowless. The precisely choreographed *in situ* photogrammetry and *plein air* starlight exposure procedures repeated over three years lent these events the character of faux-scientific ritual or performance, not unlike the site-specific actions of Joseph Beuys. The intimacy between artist, material and site echoed land artists like Richard Long or David Nash who seek the “equivalent…of nature poetry” (Malpas, 1998:38). The invertebrate and reptile imprinting directed by bodily gestures and chance parallel the charcoal frottages of painter John Wolseley, the earth rubbings of Michelle Stuart (Casey, 2005: 59-63) and the serendipitous animal art of Olly and Suzi (Baker, 2002:87).

*Syzygy*’s indexicality (shadow and light) is therefore threefold: one of sense—the bodily and binocular memories of human participants—and two of record: the kinetic ‘touch’ of creatures and plates imprinting image-holding film surfaces and, pre-eminently, the photochemical *punctum* of ancient cosmic photons energizing silver halides. All three phases of *Syzygy*, the sourcing and making of the negative imagery, *plein air* exposure method and film outcome may be said to reflect on the digital revolution by virtue of the very absence of electronic imagery. In so doing, the project revivifies analogic methods as an arena for speculative research and critique. Clearly, there is an elegant logic to employing photochemical rather than digital techniques in pursuing indexical semiotic strategies: dispensing with the camera, glass optics and the conventions they signify—monocular perspective, the picture frame, focus point, depth of field, ‘the view’—enabled a revisionist, ‘ambient’ rendering of the schema ‘landscape’.

The formal resolution of the finished *Syzygy* films, trimmed and face-mounted on starfire glass panes bordered by a circular black mask screen-printed on the opposing side, silently infer the glass astronomical survey archive, magnification optics and zodiacal wheel [see Fig. 5]. In an otherwise degraded landscape, the invertebrates (and some reptiles) gathered around Lake Tyrrell offered a bounteous and evocative iconography of locality, fragility, otherness, sociability, competition, threat and mortality [see Figs. 6, 7]. Seen in reproduction at life-scale, these creatures present a potent terrestrial analogy with the specks, streaks, wafts and explosions of the night sky, analogy returned in the otherwise faint and unseen contents of the heavens massively enlarged for clarity by telescope [see Figs. 8, 9]. Alone and counterposed, the two sets of masked photographs draw our gaze to the heart of the ecological idea: our inescapable embedment within the planetary evolutionary knot, interdependent biosphere and unimaginably vast and old universe.

![Figure 4](image-url)
5. Remediation
The celestial images of Syzygy remediate some 120 astronomical “14 inch” (367 mm) square glass plate photographic negatives borrowed from what was at the time the collection of Dr Rachel Webster, Professor of Physics, University of Melbourne. The selections were drawn from a northern hemisphere (‘NGS-POSS 1’) series made by the Mount Palomar Schmidt telescope, California between 1948 and 1958 and a set of southern sky (‘UKST’) pictures recorded by the Anglo-Australian Schmidt instrument at Siding Springs, NSW between 1973 and 2002. Each plate covers a little over 6 degrees of arc (equivalent to a dozen full moons) with a resolving power about a million times that of the unaided human eye. The 3000-odd plates comprise part of the world’s first systematic survey of the entire visible universe.

Syzygy’s remediation has a sole antecedent in Thomas Ruff’s 1989-92 Sterne (Star) series in which Chilean La Silla observatory (‘ESO’) plates made between 1974 and 1987 were enlarged using traditional darkroom techniques. What critic Hennig Engelke observed about Ruff’s work is equally pertinent here: these re-presentations of data as art unavoidably allude to the “elusive synthesis” described by Alfred Tauber (Engelke, 2005: 13) dividing aesthetics and empiricism and the schism between CP Snow’s “two cultures” of science and the humanities (Engelke, 2005: 1). Unlike its German precedent however the ambiguity of authorship inherent in the act of remediation in Syzygy is less linked to Marcel Duchamp’s “readymades” and modernism’s attack on the fetish of authenticity than to older habits of artistic appropriation and simulacra.

Digital sensing has long superceded analogic astronomical photography but scans of all three plate series’ undertaken by the Royal Observatory, Edinburgh and available on-line are the foundation for Google Sky and the prevailing data-base for contemporary professional astronomy. Though scientifically redundant the original plates remain archetypal scientific documents emblematic of empirical method, the Enlightenment and modernity: they remind us that magnification optics and scientific photography have been essential to the emergence and continual refinement of the post-Copernican world-view. Whilst Sterne’s uncompromised reprintings could be seen simply as “photographs about photography” (Engelke, 2005: 4) Syzygy’s radical recontextualization militates against such glib readings. Both projects’ illustrate that transforming scientific data into art through remediation might be the only way such evidence from another age retains or regains cultural relevance.

Figure 5. Syzygy 5/The Cygnus B Triptych, 2010. Toned gelatin silver films mounted on starfire glass with screen-printed masks slotted into hardwood support. Three glass/film objects 337 x 357 x 5mm on base 30 x 80 x 1100mm.
Figure 6. Syzygy 8/The Carina Volans Triptych, 2010. DETAIL. Swarming ants and associated nest detritus are generic icons that also specifically reference Mallee ecology.

Figure 7. Syzygy 4/The Pointers Triptych, 2010. DETAIL. Chance and probability are integral to the conceptualization of an ‘ecological gaze’. This creature, identified as a rare Mallee Worm Lizard Aprasia aurata meandered into the project site at Lake Tyrrell one night whereupon it was gently captured, photogrammed and released.
Figure 8. *Syzygy 6/The Fornax Triptych*, 2010. DETAIL. The exquisite detail and tonal subtlety of the original gelatin silver astronomical imagery on glass plate is reproduced without visible loss in the emulsion-to-emulsion contact printed *Syzygy* positives.

Figure 9. *Syzygy 4/The Pointers Triptych*, 2010. DETAIL. The circular form broken by cross bars is an optical artifact called a “ghost” projected onto the original photographic glass plate from inside the telescope by the refracted light of the adjacent bright star in the Crux or Southern Cross group. Such imaging ‘imperfections’ have been removed from the scanned digital archive and are usually excluded in publications but are reproduced without interference in the *Syzygy* films in deference to their indexical authority and scientific pedigree.
6. Transdisciplinary Context

Syzygy was transdisciplinary in intent and outcome. Post-colonial scholar Paul Carter’s retelling of the Boorong story was its poetic raison d’être and astrophysicist Maurizio Toscano’s accessing of the plates and scientific insights enabled and abetted progress at all stages. The impact on the participants similarly crossed fields. For both Paul Carter and Maurizio Toscano the project involved grappling with analog photographic techniques and poetics. For the artist, undertaking Syzygy necessitated knowledge of the ecological and indigenous history of the Mallee, descriptive astronomy, astrophotography history and techniques.

Syzygy’s agenda was art but art made ‘in the shadow’ of the emerging uber-zeitgeist, global environmental crisis. If by ‘political’ we include the power relations determining and determined by belief and emotion, the raw material of art, Syzygy addresses environmental politics in three ways: pedagogical, indigenous and relational. For Dr Toscano, Syzygy presented an opportunity to examine philosophical analogies between art and science and to uncover strategies through which art can be “a vehicle for introducing students to the indigenous, aesthetic, cultural and ecological conceptualisations of science”6. In respect to indigenous concerns Syzygy’s focus on landscape tragedy seen through a relic of lore from a destroyed people silently implicates the human tragedy of colonial dispossession. Far from being an act of xenotentristm, the appropriated Boorong story confers mythopoetic voice to country about which the colonizing culture is largely silent: to Paul Carter this “meditation on the heavens” is an example of how the “recovery of stories, alternative histories, and their creative retelling, is a vital means through which artists…can contribute to the re-enchantment of environments currently under stress”7.

7. Conclusion

By revivifying analogic methods as an arena for speculative research and critique, transforming appropriated scientific data into affectual imagery through remediation and reframing environmental art as politics in a transdisciplinary context, Syzygy was and is an unequivocally poetic act inviting further dialogic and artistic response.

6 Toscano, Maurizio, personal communication and official letter of support submitted to Arts Victoria, dated July 27, 2006
7 Carter, Paul, personal communication and official letter of support submitted to Arts Victoria, dated July 24, 2006
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