Public Humanities (2025), 1, e107, 1–7
doi:10.1017/pub.2025.46

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS PUBLIC HUMANITIES

ARTICLE

Hollywood Is Burning: Imagery and Polycrisis

Sandro Eich

School of English, University of St Andrews, St Andrews, UK
Email: se56@st-andrews.ac.uk

(Received 12 January 2025; revised 31 March 2025; accepted 06 April 2025)

Abstract

In early January 2025, wildfires swept through several regions of Los Angeles, California. The fires' proximity to Hollywood, the epicentre of Western visual and cinematic production, led to the creation and wide circulation of real and artificially generated images on social media. In this article, I argue two things: first, these images capture human concerns in the age of polycrisis; and second, by interpreting these images as symptoms of an attempt to articulate a sense of reality in which human imagination has itself become under threat, public humanists of the present and future need to be attuned to their role as mediators of diverse publics and their way of making sense under these crisis conditions. This article thus uses selected imagery of Los Angeles's wildfires circulating on social media to excavate how ways of meaning-making in a digital age (memeification, use of generative artificial intelligence) reflect real public concerns about polycrisis, rendering these images productive beyond their satirical or misinforming values.

Keywords: climate crisis; crisis imagery; Hollywood; Los Angeles wildfires; polycrisis

It's January 2025, and images of uncontrollable wildfires in Los Angeles are everywhere. Colossal damage to human well-being. Visual reminders of the climate crisis. Firefighters and public officials struggle to control the fires. Entire neighbourhoods evacuate. When some of the wealthiest neighbourhoods in the world are ablaze, and these images are created and circulated in the public domain of social media, they come to address more than a single moment of crisis – they expose the layered meanings of our polycrisis moment.[1]

Made popular in 2022 by Columbia University historian Adam Tooze, "polycrisis" describes the experience of several crisis moments at the same time, which leads to a sense of disorientation.[2] With attentive fervour, Tooze writes, "What makes the crises of the past 15 years so disorientating is that it no longer seems plausible to point to a single cause and, by implication, a single fix."[3] The flames in Los Angeles are just the tip of an iceberg that hides a number of equally pressing crisis moments: record-breaking heat fuelled by climate change, an overstretched emergency response system, housing insecurity exacerbated by

[1] Cf. Lawrence et al. 2024.

[2] Tooze 2022. David Hening and Daniel M. Knight have recently shown that the term has indeed a much longer history and was coined by the sociological thinker Edgar Morin in 1999 (see Hening and Knight 2023, 3).

[3] Tooze 2022.

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.46 Published online by Cambridge University Press

soaring real estate prices, and an entertainment industry still reeling from economic regression – polycrisis indeed.[4]

1. Polycrisis and its publics

In climate activist Luisa Neubauer's reposting of a post from X, a McDonald's store aflame is paired with a statement that the effects of the climate crisis will soon be felt by you (the consumer of the image) as much as it has already impacted other global communities (see Figure 1). The localised imaginary of a Los Angeles McDonald's on fire is paired with the global effects of the climate crisis. By reconfiguring the online public to be the ones who will feel the impacts of climate change themselves in the future, the image captures a shifting relationship: the consumers of this particular crisis imagery will soon be forced to become the producers of such imagery themselves. Neubauer's collage expands the affected public. The "series of disasters" referenced by the picture becomes itself an expression of the sense of a polycrisis moment whose public is not just the populace of Los Angeles.

Various celebrities posted about the crisis on their social media accounts.[5] Fuelled by unknowable algorithms, Instagram accounts from the likes of Kim Kardashian and Paris

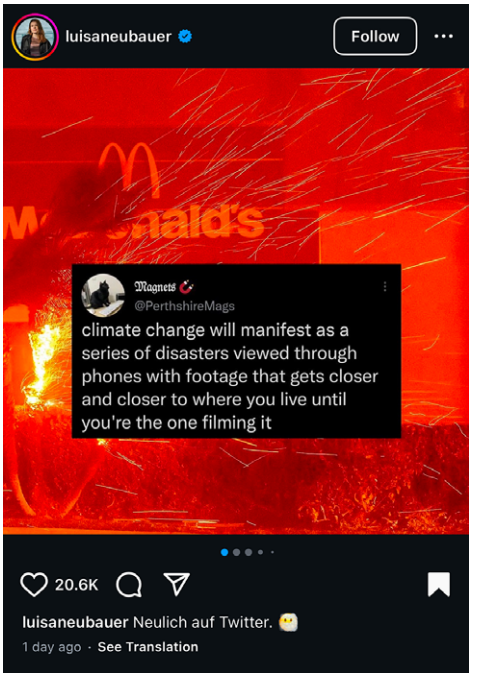


Figure 1. German climate activist Luisa Neubauer reposted a picture post from X (Twitter) to her Instagram page (https://www.instagram.com/p/DEriEbwNmX5/?igsh=MmhsZXkxZGk3Y2Zt).

[4] That this condition has also been registered in scholarly circles is made clear by the fact that this year's conference of the Association for Interdisciplinary Studies carries the title "Shaping the future in the era of polycrisis" (see Association for Interdisciplinary Studies 2025).

[5] Shamim 2025.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.46 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Hilton enjoy heightened public visibility in the online realm. As influencers, celebrities, and VIPs update their millions of followers with heartfelt messages about their personal grief, their social media accounts are momentarily rebranded into signifiers of collective experience, solidarity, and support. However, when A-listers lose their Malibu mansions on the same day that the people who normally serve them their coffee lose their far more modest housing, narratives of community building and collective experience take hold at the same time as we witness the worst of capitalist wealth accumulation come to the fore. As one public documentation of the fire in the Palisades area on X shows, there is a genuine belief among the super-rich that the privatization of public services presents a credible solution to these moments of shared human crisis (see Figure 2). Under the guise of neighbourly care, the financial privilege of seeking access to private firefighters asserts itself as a credible request, for you shall "love your neighbours as you love yourself."[6] The threat to real estate does not embody the destruction of family homes but becomes the threat to the product that has historically contributed to the creation of social and wealth inequality.[7]

By identifying what publics are constructed and addressed in such imagery, public humanists contribute to making sense of the polycrisis condition. As Jeffrey R. Wilson and Zoe Hope Bulaitis contend, "Public humanities happens whenever humanities scholarship interacts with public life."[8] The public humanities often set themselves apart from the traditional humanities by virtue of their practical and community-oriented approaches – in general, their scholarly *engagement* with diverse publics.[9] Where the creation of knowledge in traditional humanities can often be geared towards academic readers and scholarly audiences, the public humanities emphasise their close tie to "real-world" issues. What is the role of public humanists in a moment of polycrisis?

We don't need the public humanities to make sense of things like the climate crisis, pandemics, or economic instability, but the public humanist is uniquely placed to make sense of how specific *publics* make sense of these moments, as when the imagery of the Los Angeles wildfires prompts meaningful and scholarly engagement with documentary artefacts from the digital



Figure 2. A BlueSky post from user "mrsbettybowers.bsky.social" showing an X post by Keith Wasserman, CEO of a real estate investment firm (https://bsky.app/profile/mrsbettybowers.bsky.social/post/3lfaqm4nbp22w).

[6] Mark 12:31 NIV (The Holy Bible 2011) https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark 12:31&version=NIV.

[7] Keith Wasserman is the CEO of Gelt Ventures, a real estate investment firm that focuses on multifamily and individual storage real estate. For clarity: In no way have I intended to attack Wasserman personally in any capacity. I merely use his tweet as a documentary artefact.

[8] Wilson and Bulaitis 2025, 1.

[9] Cf. Ellison 2013, 290.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.46 Published online by Cambridge University Press

public sphere. When we, as public humanists, come across these and similar imaginaries that reveal the multiplicity of crises undergirding the Los Angeles wildfires, our work begins: to excavate these imaginaries publicly and showcase how a singular crisis moment can only ever emerge out of a multiplicity of hidden crises in this day and age. Wendy F. Hsu writes that "imagination is in essence an interpretive act, and interpretation provides the foundation for the humanistic practices of visioning, speculating, and reflecting. But interpretation can also lead to creative modes of humanist expression, such as making and design."[10] With every interpretation of public discourses about crises, and by paying attention to how the public is configured within these representations, we can slowly and increasingly make sense of polycrisis.

2. Imagining America

We have become too used to seeing images of the effects of the climate crisis in other places – rising sea levels in Papua New Guinea or flash floods in Eastern Spain. Now, these images came to the centre of the Western visual imaginary: Hollywood. Los Angeles is deeply tied to its identity as the creative and economic centre of the American cinema and television industry, housing production studios like Warner Bros., Paramount Pictures, Universal Pictures, Disney, and Sony.[11] Suddenly, this factory – responsible for producing much of the Western creative imagery – unintentionally became the producer of images of horror and destruction.[12] Not only do these images present infrastructural and environmental destruction, but they also bear the threat to the industry that itself constantly "imagines." When we see the dream factory on fire, it's a challenge to imagine our incapability of imagining aesthetic, cultural, or political alternatives.

The Hollywood sign on fire is actually an image produced with generative AI (see Figure 3). The sign was not endangered by the closest fire, the so-called "Sunset fire," which was one of the first to be contained by the firefighters.[13] In the specific moment in which a crisis occurs, it is simple to point to the dangerous potential of such images spreading misinformation. And this risk is not to be underestimated, considering that the quality of information that emergency services and the public receive in such situations can be crucial to a quick and effective response. However, an AI image of the Hollywood sign in flames or a photo of a McDonald's store on fire (not generated with AI) represents more than the Los Angeles crisis; they show the risks posed to the political imaginaries of the American Dream and wealth capitalism in America (see Figure 4).[14]

Imagery created and circulated on platforms like X (Twitter) and Bluesky documents a specific moment in time: one in which the notion of photography representing "the real" has long made room for digital alterations through computational methods. When we adjust our appearance in an Instagram selfie with image editing software, or lay filters over our pictures of the natural world, we attempt to bring the reality of the world ever so much closer to an imagined ideal. It is easy enough to label digitally altered images or images

[10] Hsu 2016.

[11] While Hollywood undeniably has evolved away from its sole focus on cinematic and television production – what Julian Stringer calls an "intertwined multimedia system" – its symbolic and cultural values are still rooted in its history of film and television production (see Stringer 2019, 200).

[12] This arguably also reveals how these images of LA's destruction are deemed more significant than images of Gaza on fire that have not received a similar presence in the Western news media.

[13] Shamim 2025.

[14] Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* (1970) visually encapsulates this sense by having its protagonists imagine the explosion of the capitalism's architectures. I would like to thank Dr Dong Xia for sharing this useful example with me.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.46 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Figure 3. AI-generated image of the famous Hollywood sign on fire. Cropped copy taken from Instagram user account "badboy760_" (https://www.instagram.com/p/DEl0eBLRaKy/?igsh=cXc1Zml6eHQ0dj13).



Figure 4. Palm trees close to a McDonald's are on fire (https://www.sportskeeda.com/pop-culture/news-mcdonald-s-restaurant-flames-palisades-eaton-wildfires-rampage-los-angeles-los-angeles-fire-details-list-restaurants-impacted).

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.46 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Figure 5. BlueSky post from user "illumi.meme" (https://bsky.app/profile/illumi.meme/post/3lfbpm3vle22b).

created through generative AI as misinformation, but they also serve to mediate polycrisis.[15] My intention is not to present these images as more important than images of crisis happening elsewhere in the world but to suggest that they form part of an archive of imaginaries of the United States's present moment.

As generative AI contributes to creating this apocalyptic imagery of America on fire, it becomes the subject of the crisis moment. A post by user "Illumi.meme" on Bluesky shows how the memeification of the Los Angeles crisis integrates several contexts of cultural contention: the role of techno-super-rich individuals like Elon Musk, the excessive use of natural resources by generative AI, and populist attacks on the so-called "woke" agenda (Figure 5). Laying bare this moment's additional layers of meaning – beyond the surface of the destructive horror it represents – public humanists are needed to unravel how "vernacular creativity can be utilised for collective civic talk."[16]

3. Public humanities and polycrisis

What arises from the ashes when we stand in front of a dismantled dream factory? Scholars, practitioners, and citizens who understand themselves to be public humanists will be integral to excavating the multiple layers of meaning that build contemporary experiences and imagery of crises. As we interpret these images and narratives, whether one-to-one, publicly, offline, or online, our role should be to reveal the possible meanings of public crisis events. In doing so, we will, bit by bit, make sense of our polycrisis moment, which ultimately serves a political goal: to orient us to a collective capacity to imagine a future of (re)building communities where the haves and the have-nots are equal, and where the skill of public humanistic interpretative practice brings us one step closer to developing a repertoire of actions through which to build a better future for all.

Author contribution. Conceptualization:; Data curation:; Formal analysis:; Writing – original draft:; Writing – review & editing.

Conflicts of interests. The author declares none.

References

Antonioni, Michelangelo, dir. 1970. *Zabriskie Point.* Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 2005.

Association for Interdisciplinary Studies. 2025. "The 47th Association for Interdisciplinary Studies Conference: Shaping the Future in the Era of Polycrisis." https://app.eventos.fi/ais-conference-2025/website/496. Accessed March 29, 2025.

[15] I am by no means an AI aficionado, nor do I want to be an AI apologist here. However, it strikes me that through fields like Critical AI, we have entered productive discourses of AI and human creativity (see Raley and Rhee 2023).

[16] Milner 2016, 155.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.46 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Ellison, Julie. 2013. "Guest Column – The New Public Humanists." *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 128: 289–98. https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2013.128.2.289.

Henig, David, and Daniel M. Knight. 2023. "Polycrisis: Prompts for an Emerging Worldview." *Anthropology Today* 39(2): 3–6. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8322.12793.

Hsu, Wendy F. 2016. "Lessons on Public Humanities from the Civic Sphere." In *Debates in the Public Humanities 2016*, edited by Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein. University of Minnesota Press. Ebook. https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/65be1a40-6473-4d9e-ba75-6380e5a72138/section/0c337efc-8ed6-4af0-b997-5bdae84ce0d8#ch24. Accessed January 10, 2025.

Lawrence, Michael, Thomas Homer-Dixon, Scott Janzwood, Johan Rockstöm, Ortwin Renn, and Jonathan F. Donges. 2024. "Global Polycrisis: The Causal Mechanisms of Crisis Entanglement." *Global Sustainability* 7: e6. https://doi.org/10.1017/sus.2024.1.

Milner, Ryan M. 2016. *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*. The MIT Press.

Raley, Rita, and Jennifer Rhee. 2023. "Critical AI: A Field in Formation." *American Literature* 95(2): 185–204. https://doi.org/10.1215/00029831-10575021.

Shamim, Sarah. 2025. "Which Hollywood Stars Have Lost Their Homes in the California Wildfires?" *Aljazeera*, January 10. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/1/10/which-hollywood-stars-have-lost-their-homes-in-the-california-wildfires#:~:text=Has%20the%20Hollywood%20sign%20burned,and%20has%20not%20caught%20fire.

Stringer, Julian. 2019. "The Modern Entertainment Marketplace, 2000–Present." In *Hollywood on Location: An Industry History*, edited by Joshua Gleich and Lawrence Webb. Rutgers University Press, pp. 181–205.

The Holy Bible. 2011. "Mark 12:31 New International Version." https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark%2012%3A31&version=NIV. Accessed March 30, 2025.

Tooze, Adam. 2022. "Welcome to the world of the polycrisis" Financial Times, October 28. https://www.ft.com/content/498398e7-11b1-494b-9cd3-6d669dc3de33.

Wilson, Jeffrey R., and Zoe Hope Bulaitis. 2025. "What Is Public Humanities?" *Public Humanities* 1: e17. https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2024.25.

Cite this article: Eich, Sandro. 2025. "Hollywood Is Burning: Imagery and Polycrisis." *Public Humanities*, 1, e107, 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.46

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.46 Published online by Cambridge University Press