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Joseph Dunne-Howrie

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# Crisis Acting in *The Destroyed Room*

JOSEPH DUNNE-HOWRIE

I don't know what the truth is. All I know is, the official story of Sandy Hook has more holes than Swiss cheese. I know when I'm watching a movie and I know when I'm watching something real. (InfoWars Recast 2018)

We see all this stuff, don't we? (Vanishing Point 2016)

I appropriate the term 'crisis actor' from the alt-right political lexicon in this article to analyse how Vanishing Point stage the fragmentation of public discourse in their production *The Destroyed Room* (2016). The performance is a semi-improvised conversation between three actors who debate the ethics of watching videos depicting Islamic State (IS) executions, the Islamist terrorist attacks in Paris, the refugee crisis and scenes of natural disasters. I adapt the meaning of 'crisis acting' as it is used by alt-right activist Alex Jones and the New World Order movement by arguing that we all become crisis actors in digital spaces.<sup>1</sup> The crisis actor conspiracy is elucidated with reference to the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School. In sum, a crisis actor in a New World Order conspiracy performs in a fictional event created by the government and the media, which the public are told is real. Online groups help the conspiracy grow like a fungus by spreading counter-narratives to the official reports. Crisis acting in my argumentation describes a collective failure we are experiencing in late capitalist societies to cohere the information we produce and accumulate online into an inclusive political dialectic. This frames crisis acting as an act that *fails* to produce authoritative narratives of reality as opposed to a successful strategy of control by government agencies. The performance of this failure in *The Destroyed Room* embodies the limitations of attempts to create a globalized empathetic relationship with the world in digital spaces.

I use the term 'media wreckage' to describe how reality in digital spaces is composed of bits of information that we re-purpose in collaboration with others. Media wreckage describes the fragmentation of political, social, economic and cultural narratives occasioned by the Internet acting as the dominant scaffold of global relationality. I argue that terror, social media and climate breakdown constitute the three pieces of media wreckage that are present in *The Destroyed Room*. I use a thick description of the performance with reference to each piece of wreckage to analyse how the Internet can be a barrier to dialectical thinking and political action.

Social media functions as a platform for users to affiliate themselves to traumatic events by posting messages and exchanging information in their networks. These acts are performative inasmuch as they function as a means of constructing identities affiliated with behavioural norms and precepts of online groups whose members collaborate in the staging of public trauma. When groups form as a response to an event like a terrorist attack any attempt to debate the political significance of the event are subsumed by performative expressions of a group's immutable identity. The increasingly sophisticated use of media by terrorist groups like IS turns video-sharing websites such as YouTube into powerful vehicles to spread terror on a global scale.<sup>2</sup> Both social media platforms and terror produce an emotional connectivity between people that fails to produce a political dialectic. Crisis acting alerts audiences to the dangers of using media wreckage as a primary means of connecting with strangers by performing the failure of technology to engender feelings of empathy and solidarity.

Climate breakdown is a piece of destructive media wreckage whose scale must be imagined in a new political dialectic if the planet is to recover from the effects of global warming. The lack of

<sup>1</sup> The New World Order movement originated in the Reagan-era, a period characterized by neoliberal economics and concomitant scare stories of 'big government'. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union were interpreted by many in the West as events that would establish liberal free market economies as the benchmark for democratic freedom. During the 1990s, supranational organizations like the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU) became symbols of oppression for disparate groups across America who came to believe they were totalitarian forces determined to impose a world government.

<sup>2</sup> This was demonstrated to a grotesque degree when white supremacist Brenton Tarrant live streamed the murder of fifty Muslims on Facebook during his attack on a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand.



■ Alt-right activist and host of InfoWars Alex Jones.  
 Photo Sean P. Anderson  
 CC BY 2.0

effective action by governments suggests we do not yet possess a verbal language to express the terror it will spread. I argue in the conclusion that *The Destroyed Room* makes a powerful case for the theatre to provide a space for audiences to imagine new futures for humanity outside of digital spaces. This is not an essentialist positioning of theatre against the commodified systems operating within late capitalism, but a celebration of theatre as a vital practice for humanity to experiment with new forms of global co-existence.<sup>3</sup>

#### LIVING IN MEDIA WRECKAGE

Public narratives today lack authoritative coherence. The media's traditional role is to provide insight and analysis of events by producing a narrative of world affairs. All crises are now transmitted by pervasive media. Violent scenes are sewn into the fabric of everyday life. These videos do not just feature in the news but also in our Facebook feeds, our text messages, our emails, our tweets. The pervasive mediatization of crises immerse us in waves of traumatic information, leaving us struggling to make intelligible sense of the suffering we see every day. Each new wave of information leaves a detritus of media wreckage in its wake. We are forced to interpret the wreckage with others in our networks as a way of making sense of the world. The fragmentation of public narrative

has created a political culture in the West where conspiracy theories like crisis acting are entering the mainstream.

Adam Lanza murdered twenty children and six teachers at Sandy Hook Elementary School on 14 December 2012. The massacre was the worst school shooting in US history. Shortly afterward, Alex Jones, the host of the online broadcaster InfoWars, claimed he had detected so-called tell-tale signs of fakery in the news footage, leading him to claim the event was a hoax, a false flag conspiracy that was part of the New World Order's plan to create a world government. A chief goal of the 'globalists' in the New World Order imaginary is overturning the rights of American citizens to bear arms (Neiwert 2017: 38), the logic being that the change in law would significantly weaken national defences. Jones argued that there was no massacre, the school was abandoned, the graves of the victims are empty and all the pupils now live under assumed names (Wendling 2018: 115). The parents and children seen on the news were crisis actors.<sup>4</sup>

The crisis actor conspiracy has spread in America following Donald Trump's election. This is unsurprising given Trump's record of spreading lies and disinformation (such as the racist birther conspiracy, in which Trump claimed Obama was not born in the United States and was therefore not a 'real' American). Ann Coulter, a prominent Trump supporter, has propagated the crisis actor conspiracy when discussing the forced separation of families at the Mexico-US border by describing migrants as 'child actors' who 'are given scripts to read' (Horgan 2018). There now exists online communities dedicated to proving that survivors of high-school shootings who campaign for stricter gun laws are paid to travel around the country to appear at crime scenes and pose as families of the victims (Yglesias 2018).

While Jones's claims are nothing but fantasies designed to amplify the paranoia of his audience, the logic underlying the crisis actor conspiracy reflects how reality is perceived in today's digital culture. The theatrical lexicon used by crisis actor conspiracists elides the real with the fictional. Their version of authentic reality (usually expressed by Jones as the 'real America') does not feature in the mainstream media for them. Playing with media content produces believable

<sup>3</sup> The digital has become a referent for a diverse range of practices. Scholars such as Bay-Cheng (2016) and Causey (2016) correctly argue that there no longer exist clear delineations between the virtual and real worlds. Theatre is not immune from this process. But for the purposes of this article I use the term 'digital' to refer to those interactions with reality that require a technological interface.

<sup>4</sup> The Never Again MSD group was established by student activists after the massacre at Parkland Marjory Stoneman Douglas (MSD) High School in February 2018. Its leaders include one of the survivors of the shooting, David Hogg. His family have endured a sustained campaign of online harassment by affiliates of conspiracists like Robert Ussery (aka Side Thorn), Wolfgang Halbig and Tony Mead (Vice Video 2018).

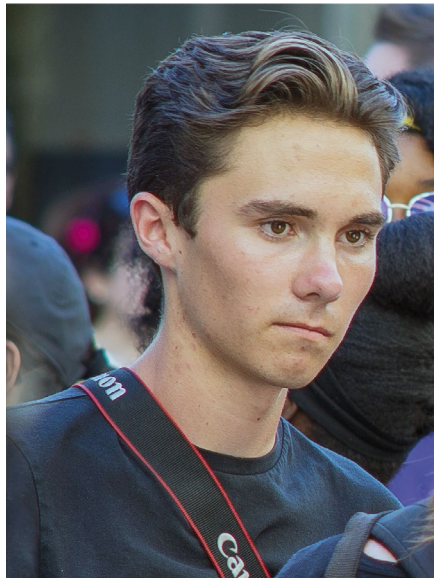
narratives that can be controlled by those with access to the 'true' sources of knowledge. Believing in a conspiracy makes one 'part of a genuinely heroic elite group who can see past the official version duplicated for the benefit of the lazy or inert mass of people by the powers that be' (Aaronovitch 2010: 10). The acolytes of Alex Jones consider his version of reality the most trustworthy because it affirms and amplifies their fears, hopes, prejudices and desires.

Conspiracy theories satiate a human desire to seek out information about events to comprehend the world. But accumulating too much information inhibits true understanding by revealing 'more and more complexity that must be accounted for by ever more byzantine theories' (Bridle 2018: 188). This process transforms individuals from critical agents into a 'digital swarm of data subjects' whose actions are shaped by algorithmic calculations (Causey 2018). We become communication nodes in online networks and can only maintain our presence by expanding our web of connections with other nodes. Online communication can impede our freedom to participate in a genuine political dialectic by compelling us to engage in a collective event of thinking without any clear objective beyond maintaining the presence and vitality of a group's identity. The freedom to express one's opinions is not enough to bring about real-world change. The thinking events we perform in digital spaces are illusions of political action. They lack any achievable goal or objective save for the performance of individuated perspectives, performances that are shaped by invisible algorithms to conform to the beliefs and precepts of the online groups that we form temporary affiliations with. Any meaning of the interactions we have is perpetually gainsaid by the speed of information we are forced to process. As cultural studies scholar Stephanie Sreberny states, the attempt to produce the most desirous version of reality creates an arms race of narratives:

In the mix of mediated narratives in which we currently live can be seen the workings of contemporary history, attempts by those with definitional power to claim their narrative, to fix in the present the meaning of events. And we see how these narratives are challenged, rebutted, overturned. (2017: 194)

Matthew Causey's observation that the 'ontologies of the virtual and the real are not ... autonomous or discrete but interface in a bio-virtual experience' (2015: 73) encapsulates the media's secretion into our sense of identity. We are placed in a refractive dialogue with ourselves in the absence of a political dialectic. To use Alex Jones as an example, he affiliates himself to a society broadly aligned to the libertarian ideal of anti-government mixed with a nationalist imaginary of white American superiority and exceptionalism. Jones continues the performance of oppression within the conspiratorial New World Order imaginary even as the Republican Party seeks to turn America into an ethno-nationalist plutocracy. The crisis his audience believe they are experiencing has no end because it only exists within the digital spaces it unfolds in. But his performance of crisis *is itself* an instance of the crisis of public discourse that late capitalist societies are currently undergoing. Alex Jones is a crisis actor according to his own definition; his conspiracies only add to media wreckage.

By performing the process and effects of constructing perspectives on the world with the bits of media wreckage we crawl for in online networks, crisis acting in *The Destroyed Room* embodies the breakdown of dialectical thinking in contemporary culture. *The Destroyed Room* has a three-act structure. The scenography is a set of a living room, more evocative of a television



■ Survivor of the Parkland School massacre and campaigner for gun reform David Hogg.  
Photo Barry Stock CC BY-SA 2.0

studio than a person's home. In Act One, the director character comes onto the stage to address the audience. The director tells them that the performance is inspired by Jeff Wall's 1978 photograph of the same name. Act Two comprises the main action with the actors discussing the political issues I describe in the introduction. The entire conversation is filmed by two men dressed in black. They make no attempt to hide their presence. The film is live streamed onto a screen mounted upstage throughout the show. In Act Three, a video projection of refugees being dragged from the sea fills the stage as water pours from the wings. The living room is devastated. A man dressed in a white forensic gown enters and carefully picks through the wreckage.

The audience never learn why the conversation is taking place, yet one cannot help but think of reality television when seeing a camera crew record a conversation between three ostensive strangers. This creates the possibility that the purpose of the conversation is to perform the experience of living in a state of crisis for a captive audience. In the failure to form convincing narratives of reality, new spaces of discourse emerge for the audience to embrace the discursivity of identity as a vital means of shaping the future. I argue below that media wreckage is symptomatic of an existential crisis in humanity's faith that the age of the Anthropocene will usher in a more just and sustainable future for our species and the planet. The simultaneity of the mediated and real water on stage creates an intermedial space where the refugee crisis becomes a vision of our world if humanity does not tackle climate breakdown. *The Destroyed Room* conforms to the function of those performances that allow 'societies in crisis' to 'define themselves' (Duggan and Peschel 2016: 2). While *The Destroyed Room* offers no solutions to the crises we are experiencing today, it acts as a warning to audiences to 'prepare themselves for a post-crisis future by keeping alive their own notions of who they are and what they hope to become' (ibid.). The impending scale of the planet's devastation makes it impossible to disaggregate from all the other crises facing humanity. *The Destroyed Room* resonates with a reading of performance ecology as a practice 'concerned with relationality, with networks

of interdependence' (Bottoms *et al.* 2012: 1) by performing the necessity of creating visions of a future outside of digital spaces. Remembering that humans exist in ecological symbiosis with one another and the planet is the most crucial step in creating this vision.

#### SOCIAL MEDIA

*A coffee table with a jug of water and three glasses sitting on top of it. A tall, narrow bookcase stands upstage right. A few hardback books and a lamp emitting an orange glow are decoratively arranged on the shelves. Upstage left, a table with bottles of wine, glasses and a bowl of nuts sits underneath a large screen hanging from the ceiling. A camera is filming the table and projecting the image onto the screen. The scene is set for a conversation to take place.*

The set of *The Destroyed Room* creates the illusion of a domestic dwelling. Its familiarity underscores its sterility. The screen and the camera build up a sense of anticipation while signifying that the room is not a private space. The events that occur inside it are staged for an audience to watch. The director hints at what may be about to occur when he explains how Jeff Wall's photograph is the inspiration for the performance:

'My practice', Wall said, 'has been to reject the role of witness or journalist, which in my view objectifies the subject of the picture by masking the impulses and feelings of the picture maker'. Now looking at Wall's photograph, you might think, what caused the room to end up in this state. Who destroyed it? What did it look like before? Who lived there? Why did they leave? What happened? (Vanishing Point 2016)

The audience understand that they will be witnesses to destructive acts. The director concludes his introduction by asking the audience to welcome 'our actors onto the stage' (Vanishing Point 2016). The director does not tell us the actors are performing in *The Destroyed Room*, only that they will have 'a discussion' (ibid.). The implication is that the performance will be spontaneous and so lack a strong fictive artifice. The camera crew come on stage at the same time as the actors. The semiotics tell the audience that they are not performing a fictional role, yet no attempt is made by the director to differentiate

the three speakers from the camera crew. They are all crisis actors. The slippery nature of the reality *The Destroyed Room* exists in resonates with Patrick Duggan's description of late modern capitalist societies as spectacles where 'there is both an overload of event – in that it is omnipresent in representation – and too rapid to move into representation for the event ... to settle into a sense of "reality"' (2012: 50). The crisis actors exist as intermedial presences, which allow the audience to witness how reality today consists of 'actuality and virtuality' (Klith and Scheer 2012: 98).

*Two women and one man sit around the coffee table. They are dressed smartly but informally. Pauline Goldsmith launches into the conversation by asking Elicia Daly and Barnaby Power when they first realized life was unfair. Daly recalls a time when her sister's rabbit Twinkle killed her rabbit Buffy. For Power, it was when he saw a man die of a heart attack on a rugby playing field. The audience's eyes are drawn to the screen. Close-ups and fast cuts give the discussion a televisual dynamism. The tone of the conversation shifts when Goldsmith points out those moments could now be filmed and broadcast online. She asks if there is anything on the Internet they wish wasn't on the Internet. Daly laughs, thinking about all the times she watches other people's misery.*

The debate ensuing from Daly's chilling reaction concerns the ways that Facebook is used to snoop on people's private lives and to express solidarity with victims of traumatic events. Power and Goldsmith criticize the ethics of Daly's decision to post a French flag on her Facebook profile after the IS terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015 but not doing similar after the Islamist attacks in Belgium, or indeed ever posting a Syrian flag despite the larger scale of devastation caused by the civil war. Daly's perplexed response – 'I don't think they had one for Belgium. Is it different if it's an airport?' (Vanishing Point 2016) – indicates a superficial feeling of solidarity with the victims of terrorism. But her inability to articulate a cogent moral justification for her actions without referencing her emotional response to the media content she consumes reflects the power of sentimentality when making ethical decisions in digital spaces.

Media studies scholars Mette Mortensen and Hans-Jörg Trenz argue social media redefine the boundaries of social solidarity by allowing users to experiment with new ways of creating bonds between strangers where online media is used as a tool to scaffold dialogue about political subjects (2016: 343–4). Emotional responses are staged on social media 'as a public performance, in which users manifest sentiments, dispositions and motivations and make them mutually understandable' (348). The decision to post a flag on a Facebook profile is a performative act disclosing one's emotional response to a mediated traumatic event. But whereas Mortensen and Trenz consider performative acts on social media to constitute 'a new participatory mode of ... direct engagement in political debates' (347), Daly becomes increasingly distant from the political reality that the content of the images of terrorism transmit by concerning herself with what these images say about her online identity. The potential to effectuate societal change remains elusive when the function of mediated content is used to construct narratives about ourselves. Feeling one cannot contribute to meaningful change in society produces a 'psychic disjunction' between the individual and the socio-political reality they live in, forcing them to fall back on an emotive response to world events (Duggan 2012: 47). Daly's justification for posting a French flag but not any other nation's flag encapsulates this disjunction: 'I'm going to cry more when a friend dies than when a stranger dies' (Vanishing Point 2016). The friend in her analogy is the UK's political ally, France. Personifying a country codifies the event of terrorism into the language of social media:

*There's a video of the band playing when the shooting starts ... It's awful ... If you compare it to that photo before [sic] everyone looking into the camera having such a great time like before and after [sic]. So the band are finishing this song and you can hear this *clack clack clack*. The drummer knew what was happening right away ... The way they all dive off the stage ... It was fascinating. How your life can turn upside down like that. (Vanishing Point 2016)*

Daly's face is projected in close-up during this section. The image and the dialogue compel the audience to witness her re-playing the film in her memory. The intimacy of the close-up obscures

the political significance of the media content by foregrounding her emotional response. Daly's performance shows how social media enjoins users to become part of world events by expressing their emotional reaction in public forums to author new identities for themselves. The potential to author new identities in collaboration with others becomes alluring when one considers how identity can be publicly validated and celebrated on social media. But crisis acting shows how this process becomes a substitute for genuine political engagement. Daly's intermedial presence is a type of selfie, a phenomenon that 'most sadly encapsulates the passion to document the self and distribute the remains across digital environments so that the memory of the event is recognised and made real through its virtual presence' (Causey 2015: 75). Daly becomes part of media wreckage through her inability to attain a critical distance between herself and images of terror.

#### TERROR

*They drink a few glasses of wine. The conversation moves onto the refugee crisis and terrorism. Goldsmith asks if they have seen 'any of those videos'. She relishes the possibility of breaking a taboo. Power says he has. Needing little encouragement, he describes watching a Jordanian pilot being burnt alive. The screen intercuts between close-ups of Goldsmith's and Daly's reactions to Power's story. Their faces are rapt.*

■ *The Destroyed Room* with Alicia Daly (left), Pauline Goldsmith (centre) and Barnaby Power (right).  
Photo Mihaela Bodlovic



You see this still, this image of a guy in an orange boiler suit. His eyes are empty ... It's like they died before the rest of him. But what's worse is that it's intercut with footage of war and bombed out places. Women's and children's bodies clutching each other. Clinging onto each other ... It doesn't seem real ... Burnt alive. Fucking burnt alive. Do you want to watch it? (*Vanishing Point* 2016)

In his introduction to Jean Baudrillard's analysis of modern warfare's unreality *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1995), Paul Patton cites the power of the 'military apparatus' to 'control the production and circulation of images as well as the power to direct the actions of bodies and machines'. The first Gulf War was 'a new kind of event and a new kind of power which is at once both real and simulacral' (Patton 1995: 5–6). Central to Baudrillard's argument is the orchestration of spontaneous happenings into an orderly narrative reproduced as a media spectacle. But the media strategy of IS has turned the spectacle of terrorism into a phantasmagorical imaginary of terror engulfing humanity. Terror becomes a centrifugal force in digital spaces.

The film *Power* describes is real. First Lieutenant Moaz al-Kasasbeh was burnt alive in a cage by IS in 2015. Many news outlets decided not to make the film available when IS posted it. Shepherd Smith of Fox News, however, devoted a special report to the film by describing it in lurid detail straight to camera – just as *Power* does. The video was later published on Fox News's website. Smith opens the segment by explaining that '[t]he reason we are showing you this is to bring you the reality of Islamic terrorism and to label it as such' (Wilstein 2015). At no point does Smith acknowledge that the film is a mediated version of the execution and was shot in such a way as to guarantee its virality. The film reproduces the event of terror in its dissemination as much as it captures the brutally violent act of a man being burnt alive. The attempt to control the narrative of terror by Fox News made a news item part of a viral terror event that spread into multiple digital spaces and became a piece of media wreckage.

Stating that the 'reality' of terrorism can be communicated in voice and text as opposed to filmic images underscores how broadcasters often frame their narrative of world events

as the experience of reality itself (Martin 2009: 75). The layer of description Smith overlays onto the terror image becomes more real for audiences by becoming part of the terrorism narrative, a narrative that American audiences have become very familiar with post-9/11. Director and dramaturg Rustom Bharucha makes a convincing case for disaggregating terror from the hegemony of 9/11 as a first step in realizing that ‘terror is experienced in multitudinous, palpable and infinitesimal ways across the world, where ordinary people live *with* terror on a daily basis’ (2014: 3, emphasis in original). The media environment where terrorist narratives play out produces what Sreberny calls ‘disaster marathons of terror’ that lead to ‘a loss of control over how these events c[an] be staged, being “co-productions” between ... broadcasters and perpetrators, God and the enemy’ (2017: 193). The event of terror in today’s media environment never ends; it ceaselessly shape-shifts into different re-plays of violent images that enter our lives via the screens surrounding us. The process is intensified when media wreckage is re-purposed by the public to tell new narratives of terror. This is done every time a news story is shared and commented on in our social networks. The modern experience of terror is not therefore confined to a specific event. Producing feelings of fear, anxiety, doubt and distrust, terror corrodes social bonds and stymies the potential for collective action by undermining the virtues of communality.

The audience witness the traumatic effects of these re-playing of media terror images in Power’s performance. A camera films him in close-up throughout his description of the film. The fact that this is a performance, and therefore an inherently representational staging of the terror effects media wreckage produces, enhances the audience’s awareness of how media narratives do not bring people any closer to the experience of terrorism but can spread its effects. Bharucha describes this phenomenon as ‘a performative understanding of terror’, which ‘begins only when one *responds* to an act of extreme violence, however vulnerably and in a state of acute fear, either through spectatorship or an act of witnessing’ (2014: 29, emphasis in original).



■ Pauline Goldsmith commits to consuming more media. Photo Mihaela Bodlovic

Power is talking about a real event but the event itself can never emerge onstage. His argument that ‘we can’t close our eyes to it’ (Vanishing Point 2016) only makes the audience more aware that the terrorist act under discussion only exists for the crisis actors and for the audience in Power’s narrative. The ‘it’ Power believes he is seeing through media is as representational as the intermedial frame he tells his narrative within. His dialogue brings Daly and Goldsmith into the orbit of terror, yet they never attempt to critically engage with the film’s broader political context. Their dialogue concerns the morality of watching IS media and not the actions of IS. Any greater level of connectedness – which observing trauma can effectuate among groups (Duggan 2012: 52) – is never reached. Power’s motivations for watching the film constitute the subject of the drama.

When the discussion moves onto the refugee crisis, Power invokes paternal feelings for his family as a moral justification for disputing the right of refugees to settle in the UK. Goldsmith asks Power what he would say to the people on the boats. He replies: ‘You can’t just let everybody in, can you? I mean that’s what they did in Germany and they wanted them straight back out again because they started grabbing women’s arses’ (Vanishing Point 2016). His response leads Daly and Goldsmith to give him the sobriquet ‘family man’ to describe his perceived insularity and provincial attitude. Goldsmith berates those who cite love of their children for justifying their fear of refugees:





■ Climate breakdown and the refugee crisis are part of the same story.  
Photo Mihaela Bodlovic

Oh yeah that's what they say. 'You need to have children to understand it ... You wouldn't understand because you don't have any children' ... So then what happens is [sic] everything [sic] your house, your home, your comforts, where you live ... You just go, 'It's all about *my* children, *my* kid' ... And you're deemed to be a blessed person because you protect that function ... Where's collectivity? What about other people's suffering ... This idea of protecting your own. It just promotes that selfishness ... So maybe the only way you can really understand what's going on with someone else is to imagine it's your own kid. And if that means seeing a picture of a dead baby on a beach or a baby's body floating in the water or a baby blown to pieces by a bomb and buried under the rubble then so fucking be it. (Vanishing Point 2016)

Goldsmith's imploration for solidarity is undermined by her suggestion that consuming traumatic images will engender greater feelings of public empathy. The increasingly heated discussion indicates that pervasive images of terror – whether that be IS executions, war zones or drowning refugees – create an alienated and distrustful culture. The audience do not have to see an IS film in order to witness its effects on public discourse. The faulty logic of Goldsmith's argument is clouded by her impassioned and loud vocal delivery. She gesticulates wildly on the couch, imploring Power and Daly to accept her argument. Her reaction to the discussion at this point effectively shows how terror can crowd out non-mediated narratives of hope by becoming

the cause of social alienation and, paradoxically, be cited as a means of alleviating it. Goldsmith's failure illustrates the limitations of sociologist Luc Boltanski's theory of 'moral spectatorship' in social media, where he argues '[p]ublics of moral spectatorship are not bound together by pre-existing ties of community such as nation state, but rather by attention to mediated reports of distant suffering and collective search for adequate ways to commit' (cited in Mortensen and Trenz 2016: 345). Crisis acting performs the failure to commit to any action save the consumption of more media.

#### CLIMATE BREAKDOWN

*They begin to argue. Goldsmith tries to get the conversation back on track. It doesn't work. They decide to go to the bar. Goldsmith raises her glass to the audience. They exit. Meanwhile, the stage has been filling with water. A film of the sea is projected onto the stage. The audience begin to hear muffled voices. People are being resuscitated on a beach. We now see an old man clinging onto a piece of wreckage in the sea. He floats, looking into the camera. A man dressed in a forensic outfit walks onto the stage, closely examining all parts of the destroyed room. He pauses and points his camera over a newspaper. A photograph of a drowning man appears on the screen. Blackout.*

The final act is the only one without spoken dialogue. A vision of ecological apocalypse emerges out of the wreckage. The audience have just watched the crisis actors drowning in a sea of information, desperately trying to keep afloat. But soon, images of human suffering will no longer be experienced as a mediated reality by anyone on the planet. The final moment of the performance suggests the media content we consume may be giving us an insight into our ecological post-crisis future. Images of millions of displaced peoples wandering the earth in search of refuge might very well become a reality for all humanity. Attempting to produce narratives of reality in digital spaces with no explicit political imperative is the practice of crisis acting. It must be resisted if we want to avert ecological catastrophe. This can only be accomplished on a global scale. Connectivity between governments and populations

separated over vast distances is a prerequisite for making this goal a reality. But it is a project that requires forms of social relations not couched in the language of identity if it is to be politically effective.

Identity in digital spaces is rendered immutable by the subordination of critical engagement for group thinking. *The Destroyed Room* shows how the Internet turns all of us into crisis actors each time we attempt to create new identities for ourselves with media wreckage, and in so doing begin to make new versions of reality for these identities to co-exist with other crisis actors in digital spaces. Media wreckage describes a crisis in the belief that individuals can imagine a different future for humanity without having to project an identity steeped in the ideology of online groups into this future to make it palatable or even possible. Such an act of imagination can only be achieved through a dialectical collaboration between diverse critical agents. Theatre provides a space outside of digital spaces for constructing this dialectic of the future by making us witnesses to our experiences of fear and alienation, and in so doing acts as an arena to combat the crisis of experiencing reality in media wreckage.

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