# Introduction: Emergencies and spectatorship

Extended state of emergency. Wow. These are the perfect words to describe like just your normal now.

Kieran Hurley, 2017, p. 23

## Performing emergencies

In late 2015, the organisation known as 'Islamic State', 'IS', or 'Da'esh', the self-declared Sunni Muslim caliphate operating out of Iraq and Syria, seemed to be gaining on its objective of becoming a viable 'state'. Intractable conflict with the Syrian government and other rebel factions, as well as an international campaign of airstrikes led by the US, in which the UK had bombed IS strongholds in Iraq, had seemingly failed to halt this advancement. In retaliation for the strikes, IS had released grisly videos in which they executed foreign hostages, and had conducted and inspired numerous terror attacks around the world. On 13 November that year, IS affiliated militants killed and wounded hundreds of people in multiple locations around Paris city centre. Spurred on by these events, the British parliament hosted a one-day symposium on 2 December

to discuss proposals to extend their bombing campaigns to include IS positions in Syria.

Three months before this, the UK Labour party had passed an 'emergency motion' that declared they would not support military action in Syria unless four conditions were met. These were: that the action received UN authorisation; that a comprehensive plan was created to assist any peoples displaced by such action; that assurances were made that *only* IS positions would be targeted; and that military action would always be subordinated to diplomatic efforts to end the war in Syria (Syal, 30 September 2015). But despite the fact that there was no plan sufficient to assist the displaced peoples, the most feted contribution to that December symposium came from Labour's shadow foreign secretary, Hilary Benn. Benn declared that

> the question which confronts us in a very very complex conflict is at its heart very simple. What should we do with others to confront this threat to our citizens, our nation, other nations and the people who suffer under the yoke, the cruel yoke, of Da'esh? (Gripper, 3 December 2015)

His speech included an exhaustive and bloody itemisation of IS violence, a reminder of their proximity and enmity to citizens of the UK and an emphasis on necessity and speed in terms of 'acting now' and 'playing our part'. 'Our part', of course, being unequivocally linked to increasing the bombing campaigns. The speech received cross-party ovations, was repeatedly broadcast in full by various channels and was hailed by many reporters and politicians as one of the great political orations of recent history. The vote passed, and bombings started within hours. What Benn had done, following in the footsteps of many politicians before him, was to help legitimise emergency protocol through the conventions of theatrical performance.

'Emergency' is a complex and nebulous term, one that will come under repeated scrutiny throughout this book. The geographers Ben Anderson and Peter Adey (2015) broadly define it as 'an event or situation of limited but unknown duration in which some form of harm or damage is in the midst of occurring' (p. 5). They go on to point out, however, that abstractions must be weighed against the 'excessive exactness' which renders each emergency a singularity, irreducible in its entirety either to comparable events or to a generalised definition (2015, p. 6). It is an obvious point, perhaps, but one that is worth making, given the gravity of this topic. The political theorist Nomi Clare Lazar (2009) approaches the problem by conceiving a 'family of characteristics' such as 'urgency' and 'scale', rather than a formal definition (p. 7). Following

Lazar, I will generally employ the term in the plural, both to observe the irreducibility of singular emergencies, and to track a duality within the term which integrates events with their articulation. The term 'emergency', in short, always presupposes some kind of performance.

In order to start unpacking this statement, let's begin with the fact that the December symposium took the form of a 'show'. It was broadcast in its entirety by the BBC, and in sections by various news channels. It was accessible by live stream on the Internet, was the subject of numerous live blogs and it trended on the social media platform Twitter. Every effort was taken, in other words, to make this event accessible and attractive to the spectator. And the engine giving force to the event was fear. As I show in Chapter 1, IS had directly targeted western spectators with their carefully curated propaganda and terror tactics. The audience were afraid, and those who wished to extend the bombing campaigns merely had to appropriate this fear in order to legitimise their position. Benn's speech was effective because he co-opted the fearful qualities of IS' violence into his own performance, vividly illustrating the horrors of their recent actions and projecting doom laden scenarios of what would happen if military interventions were not increased. As he put it, the 'carnage in Paris brought home to us the clear and present danger we face from them [IS]. It could just as easily have been London, or Glasgow, or Leeds or Birmingham and it could still be.'

His speech employs techniques that Anderson and Adey describe as common to the rhetoric of emergency, where 'promissory and threatening futures achieve some form of presence in the here and now' (2011, p. 1096). Their observation is that emergencies undertake a dialogue with the *emergencies to come*, as such occupying an 'interval' between present and future. Anderson and Adey thus affirm emergency as a criterion of response, as well as identification, which is where it differs from related terms such as crisis, catastrophe or disaster. To name an event an 'emergency' is to open a dialogue with its strategies of redress. Their analysis is built on the work of Michel Foucault, who observed that in liberal democracies the citizens are regulated by a 'system of correlation between juridico-legal mechanisms, disciplinary mechanisms, and mechanisms of security' (ibid., p. 1095). These systems become highly visible in the heightened states of 'urgency' and 'scale' constituted by emergencies. Anderson and Adey seek, however, to 'take Foucault beyond Foucault' because his model breaks down at the point where 'promissory futures' begin to be created. In this shadowy realm, it is the affective qualities of the projected future that legitimise the security mechanisms in the here and now. In his speech, Benn demonstrated an implicit awareness of this, not just through the highly evocative nature of his rhetoric, but

also through the tone and timbre of his performance, as his variations in pace, volume and invective sought to capture the imaginations of his audience.

It is therefore little surprise that Anderson and Adey's work comes into contact with performance. One of their studies opens with a discussion of an exercise in which government and emergency service workers addressed a simulated outbreak of swine flu. Hearing a stifled laugh from the tired participants at an inappropriate joke, and sensing an air of anxiety and stress in the room, they surmise that 'the conditions of response are made present through the composition of particular atmospheres and sensibilities' and that it is 'by making those conditions present affectively that the exercise can function as a technique of equivalence' (ibid., p. 1093). They are drawn to the contingencies of theatre, in other words – the atmospheres, irruptions and unpredictability which are the hallmarks of live performance – as the means through which the mechanical processes of emergency response are both created and activated. Despite this, however, the signifi cance of performance to Anderson and Adey's study remains largely unacknowledged.

Up to the time of writing these words, in fact, very little consideration has anywhere been made of the link between performance and emergencies. Most scholarly work on the latter is concerned with practicalities: legal and political frameworks, humanitarian responses, historical precedents, strategies of containment (the term itself, and its function within different discourses, is historicised in the Appendix to this book). But to overlook the *performed* nature of emergencies is to miss a fundamental aspect of their being, defined through Anderson and Adey as the affective quality latent in the interval between the projected future and the uncertain present. As I have argued through the cases of Benn and IS, emergencies are also dramatised through the conventions of performance and directed at targeted audiences, whose receptiveness they require in order to function. The British government needed the support of a percentage of its members, and in order to do that it had to mount a show to convince the populace of the necessity in 'acting now' and 'playing our part'. IS would have been unable to terrorise and recruit people without carefully orchestrating their violence so that it reached large numbers of the viewing public. Emergencies need audiences, and audiences are accessed through performance.

This book, then, explores the performance-based relationship between emergencies and the spectator. In terms of the ways in which emergencies are performed *for* the spectator, I have chosen to focus primarily on the framing and distribution of images. Because they are cheap and easy to

produce, because they can be quickly and limitlessly distributed, because they are instantly affective and because they can be easily overwritten, images have become a pre-eminent tool in the performance of emergencies. In terms of theatre itself, I have elected not to pursue Anderson and Adey's valorisation of the medium as a tool for conceptualising emergency protocol. Rather, I am focussing on the theatrical event, with all of its contingencies, as a space in which the relationship between the spectator and emergencies may be critically examined. My reasons are to do with a suspicion that perpetual exposure to emergencies through the apparatuses of contemporary technology creates what I define as 'precarious spectatorship', where the spectator's opportunity to rationalise herself, or her relationship with the thing that she is spectating, is compromised.

This precarity has become a key instrument in the presentation of emergency narratives, which operate on the level of the individual (the spectator, who is made to feel imperilled) but assume the position of a collective in their subsequent propositions of redress. Benn's speech trades on this function when he first lists the domestic spaces of British people as possible targets of terrorist violence, and counters this with proposed bombing campaigns on behalf of the British government. As I will go on to show, this location of the vulnerable individual in contradistinction to an assumed collective prioritises a sense of exclusion, where the spectator is cut off from the other spectators to whom the emergency is presented, and from the subject of the presentation itself. The precarity, then, is established in the relationship between the spectator and the object of spectatorship. A broader question about agency emerges at this juncture, of course – to what extent is the spectator responsible for their reaction to emergencies, or to what extent might they hold some responsibility for the ways in which emergencies are constructed, since these are always tailored to a given spectatorship? These questions are at the core of this book's endeavours, and many of my responses try, through analysis of images and videos, to expose mechanics employed within the presentation of 'emergencies' that attempt to manipulate the spectator. I'm also interested in the potential effects of repeated exposure to emergencies upon the individual. As Kieran Hurley muses to his audience in his play *Heads Up*, the modern world is a place where 'extended state of emergency' can become a person's 'normal' situation. Theatre, I argue, offers a useful form through which to examine the kind of precarity that this 'normal' produces, and the theatrical pieces that I analyse are ones which critique the figure of the spectator, and the act of spectatorship. 'Spectator', 'theatre' and 'image' are thus key terms that require definition within the context of the following arguments.

## Spectator, theatre and image

In order for there to be a spectator, there must be both an object and a framework of spectatorship. A spectator can follow a sports match in a stadium or at a computer, see a painting in an art gallery or in a book, watch a film at a cinema or on a television. The spectator is always connecting to an object of spectatorship through a point of access. Now, the above list features a few of the frameworks and objects specifically designed for the purposes of spectating. Murkier waters are encountered in the frameworks and objects that are accidental or problematic – what about spectators to a riot, or a crime, or a car crash, for instance? This question unveils a queasiness in our thinking about spectating, which sees a complicity between the spectator and the object of spectatorship. If the framework or object is problematic, the worry arises that either 'you should not be watching' (rather avert your eyes or make yourself useful and *act*), or, worse, 'perhaps this is happening *because* you are watching it'. The former case raises a standard critique of spectating as somehow passive and voyeuristic, and the latter an uncomfortable thought of the ways in which spectatorial appetites – especially those that spectators are unwilling to admit – may be catered for by people who produce spectacles. I consider this latter worry in Chapter 1, in a discussion of the IS murder videos produced for western spectators.

In terms of the debates around spectatorial 'passivity', Jacques Rancière's *The Emancipated Spectator* is still one of the most valuable contributions of recent years. Rancière dismisses the 'passive' argument, calling spectating our 'normal' and 'active' state, one in which we compare and deliberate, and produce ourselves in dialogue with what we experience (2009, p. 17). He criticises artists who try to 'educate' their audiences by presupposing the latter's ignorance, as well as those who try to 'awaken' audiences from a presumed state of torpor and indifference. For Rancière, these are patronising devices which mask contempt for the spectator, and a fear that her agency might somehow compromise the authority of the artist. His argument is compelling, but there are two critical ways in which it does not resonate with my project of study. The first is that he does not seem to recognise a difference between the image and theatre as objects of spectatorship, and the second is that he does not seem to recognise any value in the proximal relation of bodies within the processes of theatre itself. Neither argument, I believe, can be upheld when considering the spectator in relation to emergencies.

In addition to requiring an object and framework of spectatorship, the spectator must maintain a dialogue with the other in order to learn and rationalise herself. This contention is adopted from Emmanuel Levinas, who I shall return to in a moment. Rancière agrees with this, but says that we must dispense with the idea that theatre has any special ability to facilitate this dialogue. This is because he considers the notion of theatre being necessarily communitarian to be a myth because in a theatre 'there are only ever individuals plotting their own paths in the forest of things' (ibid., p. 16). For Rancière, the theatrical spectator appears to be no different to the spectator of an image, who is presented with a 'complex set of relations between the visible and the invisible, the said and the unsaid' (ibid., p. 93). In other words, the separation between the spectator and the thing that they are spectating must be maintained in order to provide the former with a space to learn and know themselves, and through which to develop their relationships with others.

My problems with Rancière's model are twofold. First, whilst I find his debunking of the communitarian myth to be useful, he does not take into sufficient account the differences between the 'thing' of the image and the 'thing' of theatre. Both trade on representation, certainly, and both open themselves up to reading, but amongst their manifold differences there is a key distinction in the ways in which they approach what Levinas referred to as the 'face'. This is not necessarily the actual face of a person, but rather the point of communication through which the person is approached and apprehended. For Levinas, the face makes an ethical demand upon the self because it provokes fear, as the boundary to the other, but also reminds us of our responsibility to the other – the face is the entity which says 'thou shalt not kill'. In her reading of this argument, Judith Butler observes that:

> the human is not *represented* by the face. Rather, the human is indirectly affirmed in that very disjunction that makes representation impossible, and this disjunction is conveyed in the impossible representation. For representation to convey the human, then, representation must not only fail, but it must *show* its failure. There is something unrepresentable that we nevertheless seek to represent, and that paradox must be retained in the representation we give. (2006, p. 144, emphases in original)

She goes on to explore the ways in which images – particularly portraits of the enemies of the west – are presented in such a fashion as to saturate the entire text with a concept of 'evil'. She sees this as an effacement of the Levinisian face and retorts, quite brilliantly, that 'reality is not conveyed by what is represented within the image, but through the challenge to

representation that reality delivers' (ibid., p. 146). In this she chimes with Rancière, for whom the image becomes 'intolerable' if it is oversaturated with explication and cannot therefore provide a space in which the spectator may explore and rationalise for themselves. The reason that my argument is going to put me at odds with Rancière is that I believe that certain images, not because of their content, but by dint of their distribution in line with given 'emergencies', are intolerable. Given that one objective in declaring an emergency is to alert a targeted audience to a dangerous situation, in order to mobilise and legitimise protocol, it follows that the function of the image *must* be overwritten with explication. In emergencies, the spectator cannot be left to 'plot her own path through the forest of things'. That is not to say that the image *can't* provide a space for resistance and rationalisation in conjunction with emergencies, but rather that images are intolerable when specifically employed in the service of emergencies. Further, the image is ubiquitous within emergencies: images are cheap, images are affecting, images can be easily overwritten with other images, and images can now be distributed to the entire world at the click of a button.

I place theatre in contradistinction to the image because, as I will argue, its relationship with the spectator offers a space in which this figure may be critically examined, and encouraged to examine themselves. Theatre may, of course, be saturated with explication – and, equally, many theatre shows employ images within their construction. Again, to be clear, I am not claiming that all theatre necessarily challenges the spectator and encourages critical reflection on their position with regards to emergencies, any more than I am claiming that all images preclude such reflection. Simply that the distribution of bodies and the emphasis on face-to-face encounters can, in some theatre, provide an opportunity for a privileged investigation of spectatorship.

An example of theatre that does trade on explication is *Ten Billion*, written and performed by the climatologist Stephen Emmott and directed by Katie Mitchell (London, 2013). The performance comprises an hour-long illustrated lecture which guides audiences through a series of datasets concerning population increase, rising levels of ocean temperatures, water use, global flooding, automobile manufacture and carbon monoxide emissions. As well as drawing connections between these, Emmott also relates his studies to societal phenomena such as the so-called Arab Spring of 2011, and makes gloomy projections about the implications our disintegrating ecosystem will have on human life. Whilst he offers some hope of humanity's survival if we alter our living habits, his general tone is pessimistic, and he concludes by repeating an associate's belief that the best way of preparing for the future is to 'teach my son how to use a gun' (2013, p. 198).

Emmott declares near the beginning of the piece that he views the current ecological situation as an 'unprecedented planetary emergency' (ibid., p. 7). In articulating this emergency, he moves away from science and scientific writing and into theatre, adopting a more 'theatrical' register in order to re-present his findings. The reason he gives for this is telling:

> If we discovered tomorrow that there was an asteroid on a collision course with Earth, and – because physics is fairly simple science – we were able to calculate that it was going to hit Earth on 3 June 2072, and we knew that its impact was going to wipe out 70 per cent of all life on Earth, governments worldwide would marshal the entire planet into unprecedented action.
>
> Every scientist, engineer, university and business would be enlisted: half to find a way of stopping it, the other half to find a way for our species to survive and rebuild if the first option proved unsuccessful.
>
> We're in almost precisely that situation now, except that there isn't a specific date and there isn't an asteroid.
>
> The problem is us. (ibid., p. 191)

Emmott is talking about the necessity of capturing the imagination of targeted audiences in order to both impress upon them the gravity of the situation, and to motivate them to respond. He is, in other words, turning to performance to try to speed up the remodelling of eco-disasters into emergencies. There is a clear reflection here of the 'promissory and threatening futures' outlined by Anderson and Adey. There is also, palpably, no space for argument or alternative, because the nature of Emmott's project is underwritten by the 'urgency' and 'scale' of the threat posed by ecological deterioration. To be clear: I am in no way disputing Emmott's topic. Rather, I am pointing out that his use of the theatrical form is not the way that it will function in my analysis. His text is saturated with explication because that is exactly what it is designed to be: an act of explication.

Even saying this, however, Emmott appears to be aware of the power of proximal bodies in a theatre space – this is presumably a factor in communicating his message through drama, rather than the more distributable forms of image, text or video. In opposition to Rancière's dismissal, I argue that the proximity of bodies and the contingency of performance are wholly significant to the construction of meaning within a theatrical text. This is especially visible in the recent rise of so-called 'immersive theatre' shows, examples of which will be analysed in Chapter 4. But, more broadly, theatre is capable of exposing and critiquing what I'm terming 'precarious spectatorship', a term that I have corrupted most egregiously from Butler. For Butler, 'we address others

when we speak, [and] in some way we come to exist, as it were, in the moment of being addressed, and something about our existence proves precarious when that address fails' (2006, p. 130). It is through the 'structure of address' in which we approach and are approached, that the self and other are created. If 'structure of address' is substituted for 'object of spectatorship' – Butler does this herself with images, in fact – then an oversaturation of that object with explication will inhibit or damage the production of self and other. The object no longer provides space either for rationalisation, or, coming back to Rancière, 'commune' between spectators. As such, the process of spectatorship is destabilised: it becomes precarious. Addressing this precarity, I contend, is therefore a matter of shifting the object of spectatorship and identifying the differences between the 'thing' of the image and the 'thing' of theatre. And in opposition to Rancière, addressing this precarity *is* a matter of bodies, because the structure of address in theatre is expressed through and for the body.

The importance of commune between bodies is starkly illustrated in Rachel Bagshaw and Chris Thorpe's *The Shape of the Pain* (2017), which I offer now as a brief case study into some ways that theatre can offer a chance to critically reflect on spectatorship. This is a dramatic piece based on Bagshaw's experience of Complex Regional Pain Syndrome, where a person suffers perpetual pain regardless of physical stimuli. The show exploits the peculiarities of theatrical performance to address issues of physical and psychic interrelation, and also raises another topic that will prove important throughout the analyses of this book: storytelling.

### *The Shape of the Pain*

Before the performer, Hannah McPake, even enters the stage, her voiceover describes her physical form, the topographies of the stage and set, and the nature and function of the audience. We can see her standing to one side, unmoving and mute: the voiceover is pre-recorded and the theatrical image highlights the disjuncture between performer and performance. When she begins to speak *live*, McPake emphasises this disjuncture by explaining herself as a performer, and referring to an offstage woman, Bagshaw, whose experiences she will recount. She clarifies an 'experimental' nature to the show, with the 'experiment' being an attempt to convey Bagshaw's pain to the spectator, via the performer.

Since pain cannot be communicated under its own terms, or *as pain*, it is required that alternative languages which are foreign to the experience of pain are used to describe (but never traverse) that experience. Although everybody in the audience has had this experience, we cannot

join in a collective comprehension because pain is non-conveyable. What is more, it is inaccessible to the subject unless they are in direct contact with it *at this moment*. You stub your toe and instantly remember all those other times you stubbed your toe. The pain is an access point to the past. But once the pain has gone, you cannot remember in its entirety the sensation of stubbing your toe, at any point in your life, until it happens again. Pain may thus be described as a non-conveyable singularity, one that frames our experiences but which, without direct experience, is something that we tell ourselves in a language that is alien to it. What is more, at the denouement of the show – when the lights and sound reach fever pitch and McPake delivers a speech about intense pain – she utters the remarkable words 'at this point she's no longer there and I have to take over'. In other words, Bagshaw (as subject) steps outside of the framework of spectatorship and McPake is left to affirm not just the failure of theatre to represent pain, but the failure of pain to represent itself to the subject. At the centre of pain is an absence – not just a non-conveyable, but a thing that does not exist. Seen from this perspective, pain pulls towards what Giorgio Agamben argues as a principal function of storytelling.

In an essay called *The Fire and the Tale*, Agamben recounts an allegory about the founder of Hassidism, who would go to a certain place in the woods and light a fire and meditate in prayer, and by doing this would then be able to perform a difficult task. A generation later, his successor would go to the same place in the woods and pray, but had forgotten how to light a fire. But because he was in the right place and praying, this was 'sufficient'. His successor would go to the same place in the woods, but he did not how to light a fire or how to pray. But because he was in the right place, this was also 'sufficient'. His successor did not know how to light a fire, how to pray or where to go in the woods, but because he knew how to tell the story of these things, this was 'sufficient' too. Agamben's point is that at the heart of all stories lies mystery; the story emerges from practices that are mysterious, or forgotten, or impossible, and assumes their place. He goes on to say:

> The fire and the tale, the mystery and the story are two indispensable elements of literature. But in what way can one of the elements, whose presence is the irrefutable proof of the loss of the other, bear witness to this absence, exorcising its shadow and memory? Where there is the tale, the fire is out: where there is the mystery, there cannot be the story. (2017, p. 8)

With *The Shape of the Pain*, the mystery being explored – which no longer exists in a tangible sense, as Agamben says, because this is where there

is only story – is the non-conveyable experience of individual pain. At the core of the phenomenon of pain there is a void in which no representation is possible because there is nothing to represent. It is an *aporia*, the Greek word meaning 'impasse', which describes the point where we reach the limits of the known and are forced to dismantle and remake our knowledge in order to create new apparatuses for the negotiation of this unknown thing. McPake closes the show by informing the audience that if we cannot accept that some things cannot be represented, then we're 'fucked'. However, if we *can* accept this, then, she reassures us, we are 'a bit less fucked'. The failure of the story, this process of 'being fucked', returns us to Butler's point about the 'challenge to representation that reality delivers'. Throughout the show we have been emphatically reminded of our status and function as spectators, and of the impossible objective attempted by the production. It is the opposite of 'saturating through explication' – rather, *The Shape of the Pain* resists explication because of the inaccessibility of its subject. It also locates the force of its argument within the physical embodiment of its performer and its audience. Although it does not seek to create communities of spectators, it makes a demand on the material presence of the individual spectator and invites us to consider the relationship of our corporeal forms, both to ourselves and to the show. This invitation could not be successfully conveyed through an image, since it must be delivered through the demonstrative example of the performer's body (already foregrounded before she enters the stage). This prioritising of the corporeal is, as I will go on to argue throughout this book, one of many strengths that theatre can offer in a critical examination of the relationship between spectators and emergencies.

## About this book

*Precarious Spectatorship: Theatre and Image in an Age of Emergencies* is divided into four chapters, an Introduction, Epilogue and Appendix. Chapter 1, 'Enemy/image', conducts an in-depth discussion of the ways in which Islamic State (IS) murder propaganda was produced and distributed in the UK, in the years 2014–2015. By focussing on the careful construction of personas by both IS and the UK government, my aim is to demonstrate the ways in which emergencies may be packaged and deployed in order to inspire specific responses in targeted audiences. On the one hand, IS used their technological fluency to ventriloquise