



Julia Willms

“May I Introduce Choreography and Merriment” Liveness as Marketer and Parasocial Refiner in *Severance*

ABSTRACT

This article examines how the Apple TV series *Severance* (2022-) employs live installations as a strategic blend of marketing, performance, and parasocial refinement, focusing on three events staged in New York, London, and New Jersey in early 2025. Drawing on Elizabeth Evans’ model of *audience engagement* and using digital participant observations of fan practices across Reddit, TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram, the analysis argues that these live activations function as *parasocial refiners* that both rely upon and reshape the show’s relationship with its digitally active fan base.

The installations at Grand Central Terminal and Tower Bridge demonstrate how liveness, mystique, and diegetic world-building are mobilized to generate interactive, emotional, cognitive, and physical forms of engagement. These events depended on fan-driven mediatization, especially practices of surveillance, speculation, and peritextual production, to spread visibility and meaning across social media.

Through their design and placement in liminal commuter spaces, the installations blur the boundary between diegetic and public reality, reinforcing the show’s themes of labor, surveillance, and identity while shifting promotional labor onto fans, whose digital participation generates social currency within networked communities.

The third installation at Bell Works in New Jersey marks a strategic shift: leveraging prior fan-generated acclaim, the event redirects its effects toward industry insiders and influencers rather than the general public. By offering exclusive access, diegetic interactions, and a *Severance*-themed afterparty, it reframes parasocial refinement as a tool for cultivating prestige.

Across all three events, *Severance* exemplifies a *postdigital mode of liveness* in which corporeal co-presence and networked mediatization are mutually dependent. The installations illustrate how contemporary promotional strategies intertwine affective investment, fan labor, and brand consolidation, transforming liveness into a dynamic site where participation and marketing converge.

KEYWORDS

Severance, Apple TV, engagement in transmedia culture, postdigital mode of liveness, parasocial refinement

AUTHOR

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“May I Introduce Choreography and Merriment”

Liveness as Marketer and Parasocial Refiner in *Severance*

Introduction

To start this article with the quote, “May I introduce choreography and merriment,” famously expressed by Seth Milchick, Deputy Manager of the severed floor at Lumon Industries, the all-encompassing corporation at the center of Apple TV’s science-fiction serial *Severance* (2022-), hints at two dimensions that will be prevalent threads of the following line of argumentation. First, the introduction of Lumon’s choreography and merriment department, which is literally an in-house marching band, points to the text’s central theme of liveness, in performance studies commonly understood as an experience of spatiotemporal simultaneity of a cultural event’s production and reception (cf. Reason/Lindelof 2016, 3). In 2025, live choreography and merriment have been enacted in the form of three live installations to market *Severance* and nurture fan engagement. In that, their liveness was more than an ephemeral performance because it relied on an already active fandom to be mediatized online and therefore to be made marketable. In this sense, starting this paper with a quote means outing myself as a fan of *Severance*, a (really quotable and often quoted) show that not only has a devoted fan base, but whose cast, producers, and parent company Apple invest a lot of energy in nurturing and making use of fan engagement.

Narratively, the series focuses on so-called ‘severed’ employees who have chosen to surgically divide their consciousness into work and private life. This results in the creation of two separate identities called ‘innies’ and ‘outies,’ who, even though they share the same body, are unable to retain memories of the respective other. The series’ innie protagonists are the employees of the Macrodata Refinement department (MDR) at Lumon Industries, a biotech company that leaves them in the dark about their outies’ biographies, the reason for their undergoing of the severance procedure, and the nature of their job of refining macrodata. Prohibited from communicating with their outie selves and the outside world, the MDR team is also unaware of Lumon’s company structure. Its separation of departments through a maze of white-walled hallways has thus become one of *Severance*’s trademarks. The MDR team is responsible for categorizing encrypted data. The job itself is a mystery since it follows no known logic or goal other than sorting the data due to the feelings it evokes in the individual employee. As a metaphor, refinement therefore moves between the macro and micro level: it seeks to sophisticate large amounts of data based on an emotional reaction to individual data sets.

Framed as a deeply affective media practice, refinement provides a lens for examining the symbiotic relationship between the series and its fans. Expanded upon in the following, this article argues that the quality of the show’s surrounding marketing practices drives processes of parasocial refinement and fan engagement. Similar to the refinement within the series, *Severance*’s marketing works to sophisticate individual relationships with the show within a large fandom by addressing fans in-

dividually. Through a wide array of tailored marketing practices surrounding *Severance*, we can see attention to detail, creativity, and innovation not seen in other marketing campaigns and a mirroring of fan practices and fan communication that ultimately contributes to *Severance*'s critical and popular success.

These observations point to parasociality as central to understanding the effectiveness of these strategies. The prefix 'para' hints at a dimension that moves beyond common notions of social interaction and has famously been established by Horton and Wohl (2006 [1956]) to describe forms of mediatized relationship-building between audiences and performers (cf. 2). Regardless of the specific constellation, the mediatized nature of the relationship is characterized by a "lack of effective reciprocity" (ibid.), in which the performing entity is always at the center: whether it is a fictional character, a celebrity, artist, or influencer, fans and audiences engage in asymmetrical relationships in which they amass vast amounts of knowledge and emotional investment while they often remain individually unacknowledged. Precisely because of this asymmetrical nature, parasociality becomes a central dimension of refinement, because if nurtured, parasocial relationships frequently "develop into a long-term relationship between a media user and a media character" (Liebers/Schramm 2019, 5).

With the second season securing *Severance*'s position as Apple TV's most watched series (cf. Andreeva 2025), both its popular appeal and critical acclaim can partly be explained by looking at its multi-faceted marketing campaign: from the complementary *Severance* podcast to producer Ben Stiller editing the show on an iMac (cf. Apple 2025) to actress Britt Lower being featured at the iPhone 14 launch (cf. Perez 2022) or leveraging millennial work-life-balance trends like 'lo-fi playlists' for deep focus (cf. Apple TV+ 2025). The show's surrounding marketing and fan engagement efforts simultaneously build awareness of *Severance* and reinforce Apple's brand identity.

At the same time, fans return this investment: fan-made mock websites (cf. Neatnik 2025a), MDR interfaces (Fig. 1), and LinkedIn profiles for Lumon (cf. LinkedIn 2025), online wellness sessions constructed like the ones offered by Lumon's wellness department (cf. Neatnik 2025b), fan art, playlists (cf. Catnatsuki 2025), memes, discord channels, and several subreddits (cf. AdScared7226 2025) surrounding the show and its narrative twists—all of these practices attest to the engagement of fan communities with *Severance*.

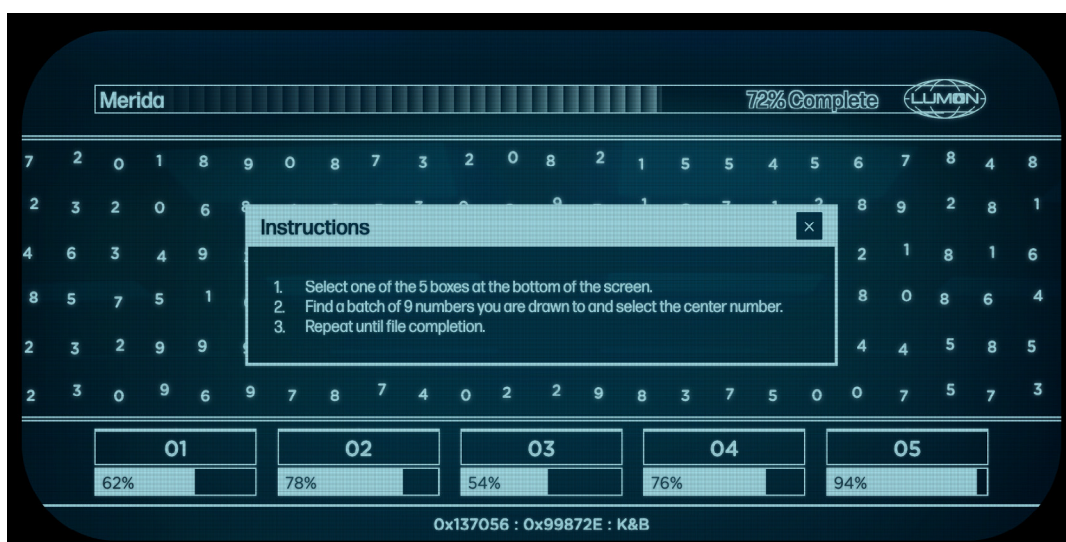


Fig. 1: A fan-made MDR website that allows users to refine data themselves (<https://www.mdr.codes/>)



Producers and fans contribute to symbiotic paratextual practices that serve to both market the series and to de-border its diegesis by intentionally blurring the boundaries between the show’s narrative mystique and its pop cultural influence more broadly. I want to address this blurred line between promotion and parasociality by looking at a specific phenomenon within *Severance*’s marketing: the repeated use of live installations as either public interventions or corporeal spaces that serve to immerse fans and audiences into the series and to extend its narrative into their life-worlds. By focusing on these installations, this article seeks to better understand how contemporary promotional strategies mobilize and restructure audience engagement across digital and physical contexts.

These instances of liveness took place in New York City, London, and New Jersey in January, March, and April of 2025 to market the show’s second season. Looking at them through Elizabeth Evans’ notion of audience engagement (2020) serves to highlight several dimensions: because the events were initially only minimally advertised, awareness of and access to their live, on-site dimension circulated primarily through digital fan networks, rendering their liveness a form of parasocial mystery. Additionally, the installations blur the line between marketing and staged live performance, turning brand promotion into an immersive fan spectacle. Their quality stems from mirroring *Severance*’s style, narrative, and motifs, for instance, in their play with liminal spaces such as train stations and the series’ production space at Bell Labs, mirroring tensions between work identity, private life, diegetic space, and transit space. By blurring spatial and corporeal boundaries, the installations collapse diegetic and non-diegetic space—as even cast members present at the events drifted in and out of character.

Engagement and Liveness

Using engagement as an entry into the use of liveness as a tool of marketing and parasocial refinement, I methodologically rely on approaches of digital ethnography to enable a media cultural form of digital participant observation that treats fan-made videos, commentary, memes, and fan art as ‘artifacts of reception’ because they show dominant modes of perception and valuation (cf. Dörre 2022, 45). This aligns with this paper’s integral general interest in receptive media practices and media participation. The corpus is formed by digital participant observations and data extracted from YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram comment sections, X, and Reddit in the first half of 2025.

As a theoretical approach, Evans (2020) takes connotations of engagement as “privileged experiences” (4) or the making of a connection (cf. 2) to propose a model that ultimately considers how “engagement emerges through processes of co-creation” (17) between producers and audiences. Her arguments are based on empirical data gathered from producers and audiences to understand engagement as a “discursive construct” (ibid., 3) that is based on both groups. She consequently develops a theoretical understanding of engagement that stresses different components, namely “type, form, cost and value” (ibid., 50), offering a “model of engagement that is both precise and flexible, applicable to engaging experiences with multiple different media and in multiple different contexts” (6). Her understanding of the phenomenon is deeply rooted in transmedia environments, making it a productive theoretical lens for analyzing a postdigital mode of liveness as one instrument for building engagement in the interplay between *Severance*’s narrative world, its producers’ marketing strategies, and audience responses. As will be shown in the following, liveness is used as a parasocial refiner in a way that mimics and mirrors

the way pop cultural engagement functions in digital spheres, leaning on a digitally active fan community that moves between different platforms, very much in the same way that T.L. Taylor (2018) describes user behavior on digital platforms:

Media and leisure practices take place *across multiple platforms and communities; they intersect and inform each other*. There is a circuit of practice, experience, and production at work. By default, any node is already entangled in the others. (Taylor 2018, 13)

The first two examples analyzed focus on Evans' dimensions of type and form of engagement in order to examine the interrelatedness of narrative investment, corporeal live experience, and digital fan practices. The third analysis, by contrast, draws on the conceptual "pliability" (Lupinacci 2022, 9) of liveness as a focal point since the term has taken on different meanings in application to different media environments (cf. Feuer 1983; Couldry 2004; Hammelburg 2021; Engell 2021; Brewer/Ruberg/Cullen/Persaud 2023). In this context, a specific postdigital blending (cf. Packard 2025) of liveness—as it has been understood in performance studies—and an understanding of the term applied to digital experiences will move to the forefront. This interrelatedness of corporeal, co-present, and ephemeral performance and its inseparable counterpart of simultaneous transmission and mediatization serves to illustrate a strong "mutual dependence of the live and the mediatized" (Auslander 2023, 11) in a general sense. More so, this mutual entanglement of corporeal and mediatized live experiences serves to highlight one key ingredient of the success of Apple TV's marketing efforts, as it displays a strong understanding of the way its fandom communicates about the show and how fans navigate digital platforms as key spheres of fan exchange. To be precise, the liveness in question does not originate from a simultaneous transmission of the events to viewers elsewhere but is rather located in the corporeal experiences taking place on site. It is only (instances, hours, or days) later that liveness is mediatized as recordings through social media. In this vein, Karin van Es (2017) has noted about liveness:

Live media all draw on configurations of real time and sociality to establish their value. [...] they establish that something needs to be attended to now rather than later, [...]. live media can make different selling points explicit by drawing on the particular relation they configure between real time and sociality. (Es 2017, 1249)

If we are to understand her use of 'live media' as an indication of the inseparable bond between liveness and mediatization, the specific live character of the installations becomes tangible, because they rely on an expectation to be mediatized to be marketable. Related to this, Auslander (2023) has argued that live forms "cannot be shown to be economically independent of, immune from contamination" (6) by their mediatization. Consequently, the liveness of the installations stems from an imperative to attend to them now and to mediatize them to perform participation in them within postdigital networks.

"The Surest Way to Tame a Prisoner Is to Let Him Believe He's Free"—The Glass Installation at Grand Central Terminal

On January 14 and 15, right before the premiere of the second season of *Severance* on January 17, 2025, Apple TV placed a giant replica of the MDR office in a glass box in Vanderbilt Hall at Grand Central Terminal, New York City's largest long-distance train station, right in the heart of Manhattan (Fig. 2).





Fig. 2: MDR office replica in a glass box at Grand Central Terminal from the YouTube video [Severance — Inside the Grand Central Terminal Pop-Up | Apple TV](#), posted on Jan. 16, 2025

The placement of the replica was complemented by the performances of the show’s main actors, Adam Scott, Zach Cherry, Britt Lower, Tramell Tillman, and Patricia Arquette, who entered the box in character and worked in it for several hours. Even though their conversations weren’t audible to the public audience, their performance attracted great attention from passing commuters at New York City’s busiest train station, as well as from fans in attendance who heard about the live installation through social media fan networks. Here, the use of liveness highlights two dimensions: on the one hand, it mirrors the show’s narrative dimensions of mystique and surveillance, on the other hand, it productively produces a form of interactive peritextual engagement, both resulting in “moment[s] of captivation” (Evans 2020, 16) for those in attendance as well as a transmedial dissemination of the live event via fans in digital spaces, thereby extending the promotional reach of *Severance*’s second season through fans.

The introductory quote of this subchapter stems from the first season’s fifth episode, in which the MDR employees Mark S. and Helly R. are secretly being surveilled by the severed floors’ manager, Ms. Cobel, while they attempt to map the floors’ layout to find other departments. When Ms. Cobel is being questioned by the head of security why she is letting the events unfold, she responds: “The surest way to tame a prisoner is to let him believe he’s free” (S1E5), ultimately confirming that the employees’ every move is being watched, while they are largely unaware of Lumon’s company structure and motives. These different levels of knowledge are not only one of the series’ main themes, but they also turn into one of its great appeals since the employees of MDR share this unawareness with the audience. *Severance*’s narrative development can therefore be understood as mystical, positioning the uncovering of Lumon’s secrets as the main and shared goal for both the protagonists and the audience.

The installation at Grand Central utilized these dimensions of mystique and surveillance. It relied on no official prior announcement, but garnered attention through its central positioning at 100 East 42nd Street in Midtown Manhattan, which not only attracted a public of passing commuters, but news of it quickly spread in digital fan networks. On the subreddit [r/SeveranceAppleTVPlus](#), user TSCHWEITZ posted a photo of the glass installation on January 14 and answered questions in the ensuing discussion, stating: “I work here [Grand Central] and rumor has it that there may be an appearance from a VIP around 4pm. I can’t say some more than that” (TSCHWEITZ 2025). Other users noted the peculiarity of the placement of the installation:

nanamaru: Penn Station would have captured the “hell” vibes more tbh.

frankstaturtle: It may be relevant that Grand central has an Apple store, while Penn does not.

Rhye5: Also coincidentally the grand central Apple Store is a 30 second walk from the pop up area.
(nanamaru 2025)

Media practices like these can be understood as “interactive peritextual engagement” (Evans 2020, 56), an approach that sheds light on two important dimensions. Regarding the interactive dimension of engagement, Evans states that engagement becomes “interactive when the audience is required to have input [...]. [It] requires two-way communication” (ibid., 53). The event is designed to be shared. Fans engage with the installation by filming and photographing the live experience, turning their social media posts into an immediate form of promotion. The aspect of surveillance mimics *Severance*’s diegetic dynamics: none of the present actors acknowledged the surrounding environment, rather all of them acted as if they were unable to perceive anything outside the glass box, turning the installation into a unique and non-repeatable live performance of *Severance* only accessible to those in attendance and opening itself up for mass surveillance. Here, liveness as a marketer relies on the “peritextual engagement” (ibid., 54) of fans and audiences in the form of surveillance to maximize attention, bringing to the forefront questions of complicity, as one Reddit user notes that all people in attendance “suddenly become like the Lumen [sic] staff spying in on their workers. The panopticon is real and everyone becomes complicit in it, if only for a moment, even as they’re just waiting for the elevator/train doors to close so their innies and outies can swap places” (particledamage 2025). By naming the panopticon, this comment directly addresses the idea of reciprocal surveillance as a tool of social control, as famously proposed by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975). In her work on the use of information technology in the workplace, Shoshana Zuboff (1988) utilized Foucault’s conceptual work on the panopticon to argue that “[t]he Panopticon represents a form of power that displays itself automatically and continuously. Panoptic power lies in its material structure and presence; the Panopticon produces the twin possibilities of observation and control” (321). In the case of the glass installation at Grand Central, there is a visible shift in the functioning of panoptic power, though, as is made visible from a user exchange on the subreddit r/SeveranceAppleTVPlus:

Lonelyland: lol hi fellow redditer, we were literally standing directly next to each other for part of this 🙌

EatsYourShorts: Definitely. I was all over the place, but I was wondering who you were as well looking at what you shared.

Lonelyland: Oh I see myself in the background of a few of your shots lol [...] (Lonelyland 2025a)

This moment of recognition of the self as surveilled has two paradoxical implications: first, there is no articulation of a negative reaction to being surveilled; it is rather a normalization of reciprocal surveillance that secondly leads to a mediatized connection of two individuals that hadn’t transpired while they were co-present in the same space. This interaction underlines the central role that the production of images occupies at the intersection of engagement and global capitalist dynamics:

[...] participation and commodification are closely linked to the production, circulation, consumption and operativity of images and visual communication, raising the question of the role network-



ked images and aesthetics play for and within the proliferating surveillance capitalism. (Moskatova/Polze/Reichert 2022, 6)

Both the theoretical perspective and the presented media practices confirm a normalization of reciprocal surveillance, resulting from an interplay between the cultural valuation of liveness and cultural capital derived from its mediatization as audiovisual imagery. In this perspective, liveness functions as a “resource for the ritualization and naturalization of certain power relations” (Lupinacci 2022, 23) because participation in it not only conceals the ongoing displacement of labor but also whitewashes the implications of reciprocal surveillance.

In this vein, *Severance*’s adjacent marketing activities emphasize an appealing entanglement between pop cultural participation and the installation’s purpose as marketing. This can be shown by a post from Britt Lower on January 15, one of the show’s main cast members. The post shows pictures of her character Helly R. in the glass box with a caption stating, “I have no recollection of this” (Fig. 3). The caption not only plays with a rendering of the innie/outie dualism onto herself and her character and a subsequent de-bordering of diegetic limits, it also reacts to, acknowledges, and takes seriously the way in which fan engagement with the show functions in digital spaces, as fans display a tendency to communicate through quotes and specific terminology from the show.

The networked fan communication about the live installation is both in- and exclusionary: non-New York locals could only be in-the-know about it if they were already part of online fan circles. Simultaneously, those who posted about it engaged in forms of peritextual engagement, meaning “behaviour [that] sits in the space surrounding [...] core texts that are more concerned with fan production, commentary and discussion” (Evans 2020, 74). Basing their surveillance practices on an installation

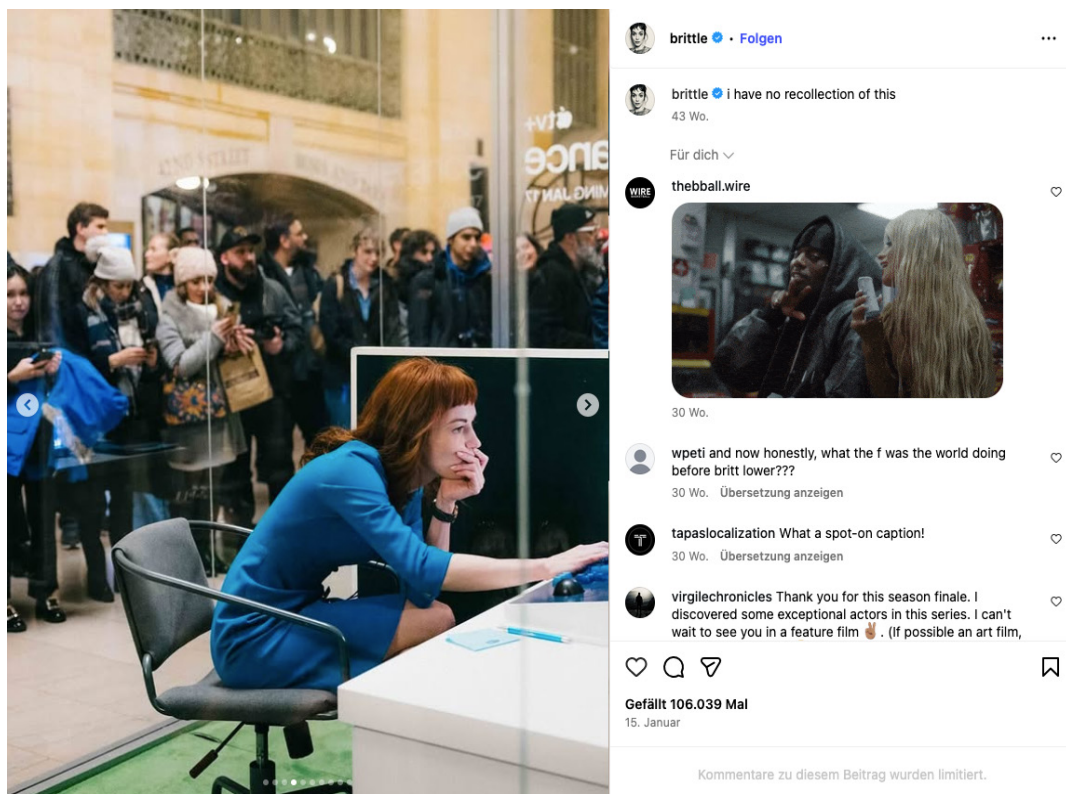


Fig. 3: [Instagram post](#) by Britt Lower, showing her inside the glass installation at Grand Central, posted on Jan. 15, 2025



Fig. 4: Picture from the subreddit [r/SeveranceAppleTVPlus](https://www.reddit.com/r/SeveranceAppleTVPlus/), posted on Jan. 16, 2025

outside the margins of the main show as a core text, they were actively taking part in forms of peritextual engagement, thereby generating unique material that would otherwise have remained hidden from public view. For instance, one Reddit user took a photo of one of the computers inside the glass box containing a secret message within the MDR interface, stating: “HELP” (Fig. 4).

Others posted self-recorded videos of the pop-up with the title theme of *Severance*, captioning: “The Apple TV marketing team needs a raise bc the actual *Severance* actors casually playing their characters working in the middle of Grand Central rn is so random and funny” (pizzagirllex 2025). Their sentiment of praise for the installation is shared by many others online (cf. Sea-Worry7956 2025; manu_it 2025; avid5d 2025), and the posts on Reddit displaying pictures and videos of the event and commentary on it consequently garner thousands of upvotes (cf. TSCHWEITZ 2025; Lonelyland 2025b). In Reddit’s sociotechnical platform logics, upvotes and downvotes on contributions to the platform function as social currency, in effect influencing users’ ‘karma’ as a measure for their activity, trustworthiness, and behavior (cf. SharpNothing4653 2025). Ultimately, those who surveilled the live installation and disseminated it via Reddit gained social currency, turning *Severance*’s inner diegetic critique of surveillance into a positively connoted media practice. This dual logic of surveillance can be used to take a critical stance on the mechanisms of parasocial refinement: precisely because the elevated quality of the live installation produced interactive peritextual forms of engagement that praised its creative character, that praise tends to mask the fact that forms of engagement serve to maximize the marketing value of the live event, in effect outsourcing the dissemination of the show’s marketing onto fan collectives. Just like *Severance*’s innie protagonists are unaware of being under constant surveillance, there is little to no critical discussion among engaged fans about the ways in which marketing labor is shifted onto them and simultaneously obscured because surveillance practices secure a person’s reputation and value within the social structure of digital fan networks.



“The Work Is Mysterious and Important”—The Balloon Pop-Up at Tower Bridge

On March 26, the second live installation took place at Tower Bridge in London. Intended as a promotional event to celebrate the show’s renewal for a third season (cf. Apple TV 2025), the second live event aesthetically and thematically revolved around blue balloons showcasing portrait shots of *Severance*’s protagonists. Several dynamics of the use of liveness already established at Grand Central were repeated: with no prior advertising, the crowd consisted of commuters and fans who learned about the installation through online networks. In making blue balloons its central element, it relied on *Severance*’s absurd and mysterious appeal because only those in-the-know about the balloons’ meaning within the show could fully appreciate their use in the installation. Right on brand to the show’s most quoted line, “the work is mysterious and important,” *Severance*’s marketing team placed hundreds of blue balloons, extras in work attire, and the show’s cast right at the heart of one of the busiest commuter spaces in Europe with no prior announcement. Following Evans’ (2020) arguments on the “form of engagement” (76), three dimensions of this live installation can be observed. First, it involved a form of “cognitive engagement” (ibid., 77) because it used blue balloons whose meaning needed to be deciphered in line with their placement within the diegesis of *Severance*. Second, it used forms of “emotional engagement” (ibid., 78) because it differed from the Grand Central installation in one important aspect: the actors weren’t partaking in character but were present for a photo op in front of the installation. Unlike the event at Grand Central, where the glass box both enabled surveillance and hindered interaction, many fans in London got the chance to take selfies with the cast, turning the event into a matter of emotional engagement (Fig. 5). Third, it used notions of “physical engagement,” “related to the physical reactions they [audiences] experience when they are engaged” (ibid., 77) by utilizing its placement at a liminal space of transit between work and private self.

The blue balloons are a recurrent motif of *Severance*’s second season, introduced in its first episode as a welcome-back gesture for Mark S. after his rebellion against Lumon at the end of the first season. They are given to him by Mr. Milchick, now running the severed floor, creating one of many paradoxi-



Fig. 5: The balloon installation at Tower Bridge from the YouTube video [Severance London Balloon Installation Pop-up Event – Blue Balloons and Cast Arrive!](#), posted on Apr. 2, 2025

cal situations as they hint at a forced, cheerful-looking ritual in an environment that is anything but genuinely welcoming. As a motif, their meaning has been a topic of what Evans calls “cognitive engagement,” understood as “something that made them [audiences] consider larger messages that the content contained” (ibid.). The speculation about the meaning of the blue balloons is notable in an exemplary Reddit comment:

I’m also thinking about the theme of rising and falling. Levels are important in this show. If you let go of a balloon, it rises on its own. Force is required to intervene and keep it at the desired level.
(TheFlyingSkier 2025)

In this reading, the balloons serve as a motif for social control, a hollow token of merriment, and can be interpreted as a symbolic gesture of capitalist critique. However, this critical dimension is rarely taken up in fan discourses. Instead, the installations foreground the balloons’ iconic aesthetic, which audiences primarily take up as a resource for participatory and promotional engagement. They were notably not only used within *Severance* and in the balloon installation at Tower Bridge, but also in the form of an interactive digital balloon generator for fans to create their own versions and as accessories in Apple stores (Fig. 6).

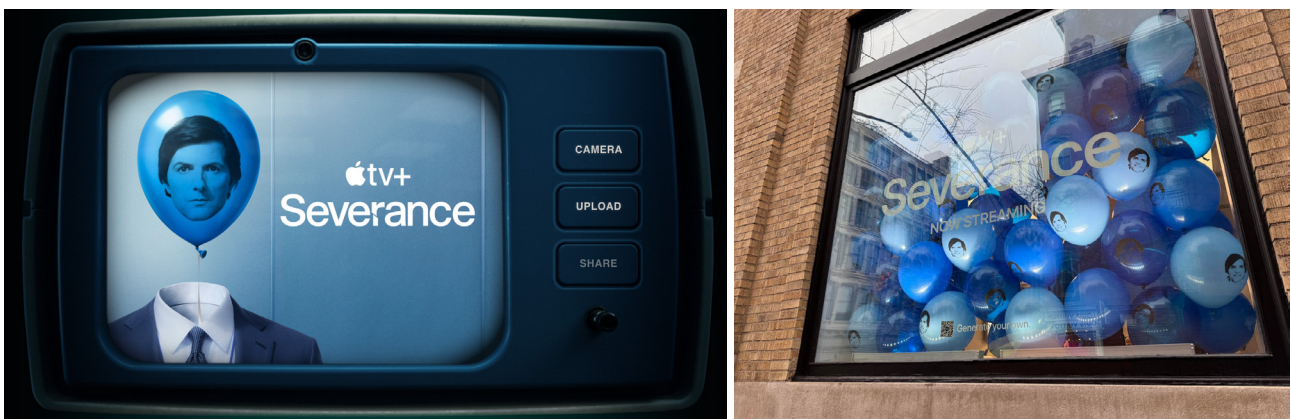


Fig. 6: Screenshot of the [digital balloon generator](#) and an [Apple store display posted on Reddit](#) on Jan. 18, 2025

And while fans do interactively engage (cf. StraightBudget8799 2025), the irony of capitalist critique being produced and marketed through Apple’s corporate infrastructure is not lost:

But while it takes a lot of jabs at the symptoms of modern capitalism, the show often shies away from examining the underlying reason all of this manipulation and control exists in the first place: profit. The tendrils of capitalism extend into every aspect of our lives. (Prager 2025)

A critical reading of *Severance*’s marketing would situate it at a point of “tension between a visual aestheticization of capitalism and the anaesthetization of images or/and surveillance techniques, i.e., on the dynamics between visibility and invisibility” (Moskatova/Polze/Reichert 2022, 7), placing its capitalist implication at a point of “hiding in plain sight” (Steyerl 2013) through performative self-critique. In other words: using a fictional series that exhibits a critical stance on global capitalism as a cornerstone of its streaming service serves to obscure Apple’s own implication in its exploitative logics, passing as



only one example of several tech giants that presently dominate the platform logics of the entertainment industry (Chalaby 2024, 564).¹ The paradox of a series that is critical of global capitalism while being marketed through global capitalist logics and being produced and financed by a big tech company is actively reframed through forms of engagement and resulting parasocial refinement that the live installations produce, as can be seen by this Reddit comment: “So so incredibly jealous! I missed it cause stupid work looking at data!! (Work is important and mysterious) 🙄” (eerina72 2025).

The live appearance of the cast at Tower Bridge fostered an already existing form of emotional engagement, a

longer-term form [...], in which audiences develop affection for content. [...] Such connections were based primarily on characters and were specifically developed over a prolonged period of time, which allowed the relationship between audience and character to get increasingly layered and familiar. (Evans 2020, 100)

Emotional engagement for *Severance*’s individual characters can generally be observed in the show’s digital fandom, but it is particularly strong for the series’ protagonist, actor Adam Scott. He is not only *Severance*’s narrative pivot and fulcrum, but fans have also devoted art and memes to his character, making his live appearance at the installations all the more meaningful for them (cf. severancednews 2025). The emotional engagement is of particular significance here because Scott’s appearance in London mirrors and fosters inside fan-communication that uses the innie/outie dualism to cultivate a parasocial transmedia relationship that exceeds *Severance*. In this sense, fans have de-bordered the narrative guesswork intrinsic to *Severance* to humorously look for other clues in Scott’s prior work that hint at *Severance*. For instance, they use memetic humor to point out patterns between the show and his role as Ben Wyatt in *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015) (Fig. 7).

Scott’s presence at Tower Bridge, along with the cast, lastly opens up a third dimension of engagement in terms of its corporeal live nature. Even though its specificity stems from localized, corporeal



Fig. 7: Pictures from the subreddit r/SeveranceAppleTVPlus, posted on [Jul. 22, 2022](#) and [Aug. 25, 2022](#)

¹ I would like to thank my colleague Farhad Feizi for his valuable insights on the entanglements of the entertainment products of big tech companies and their roles as global political actors.

co-presence, the event was collectively mediatized in the same way as the event at Grand Central. The located and co-embodied nature of the live installation, therefore, allows for two observations about its spatiality: like Grand Central, it is no coincidence that the installation was located in a liminal and transitory non-place. Among others, Marc Augé (1995) famously understood transit spaces as “non-places,” as he wrote

[t]he traveller’s space may thus be the archetype of non-place. [...] movement adds the particular experience of a form of solitude and, in the literal sense, of ‘taking up a position’: the experience of [...] spaces in which solitude is experienced as an overburdening or emptying of individuality. (Augé 1995, 86f.)

The choice to locate the installation adjacent to London Bridge Station—a non-place of transition between private and work—obviously reflects *Severance* as a satire of corporate structure and is a notably distinctive intervention into public space when viewed from a strategic marketing angle. At the same time, the meaningful physical engagement is displaced into digital discussions and mediatized versions of liveness, not only repeatedly exemplifying a mutually dependent relationship between liveness and its mediatization (cf. Auslander 2023, 14) but also begging the question of where the connection or “privileged experience” (Evans 2020, 4) of engagement lies that liveness produces: is it rather in the corporeal live moment or its subsequent collective discussion within digital fan communities? Perhaps a combination of both? In contrast to Augé’s (1995) early suggestion that digital communication spaces constitute non-places (cf. 79) and are therefore devoid of the forms of collective exchange characteristic of anthropological spaces, I propose a postdigital reading of this instance of liveness, in which analogue, corporeal co-presence, and digital communication spaces combine to enable meaningful engagement. Accordingly, Dörre (2022) discussed digital media participation as an entryway into communitization (cf. 208) that can be productively combined with the notions of liveness developed in this article. In other words: looking at the installations at Grand Central and Tower Bridge, we can see a mutual entanglement and dependence of corporeal and co-present liveness and digital connectivity that, in turn, enables a second dimension of liveness. In this vein, Ludmilla Lupinacci (2022) has argued for a concept of liveness that is rooted in the habitual live experience of social media, stating that liveness emerges

through habitual anticipation—that is, grounded on the premise that, on social media, something interesting or attention-worthy is always about to happen. Here, then, liveness is conceived as associated with a latent sense of ‘just-in-caseness.’ (Lupinacci 2022, 32)

Here, the mediatization of the live event as it unfolded redeemed this inherent sense of a ‘just-in-case,’ mutually enforcing two highly different forms of liveness: one as a corporeal event and one as a collective digitized co-presence in fan discussions. The seemingly analogue predisposition of the installations is therefore a highly efficient blending into the digital and into the way public attention, perception, and engagement can be steered in the postdigital.

The blending and mutual dependence of these different forms of liveness is precisely what prevents the installations and their mediatization from simply being understood as media events. Research on liveness has evoked close relations to the event character of media, be it in the context of television (cf. Dayan/Katz 1992, 5) or different facets of the mediatization of society more broadly (cf. Hepp/Couldry



2010). In their introduction to a rethinking of Dayan and Katz’s seminal work on *Media Events* (1992), Couldry and Hepp (2010) argue for an updated understanding in the context of globalized media cultures. They define media events as “certain situated, thickened, centering performances of mediated communication that are focused on a specific thematic core, cross different media products and reach a wide and diverse multiplicity of audiences and participants” (ibid., 12). Anna Zeitler (2021) adds that interruption, liveness, knowledge, communication, and audienceship are aspects associated with media events (cf. 51). Against this backdrop, I argue that these instances of liveness extend existing understandings of media events by foregrounding forms of engagement as processes of postdigital co-creation (cf. Evans 2020, 17), thereby pointing to a shift from centralized media events to more distributed, participatory formations of liveness. Audiences do not merely disseminate or evaluate the event but actively participate in producing its visibility, meaning, and cultural significance.

“A Handshake Is Available Upon Request”—The Lumon Event at Bell Works

The third and final analysis focuses on a live event that took place on April 5, 2025, at Bell Labs Holmdel Complex, also known as Bell Works, a mixed-use office complex in New Jersey, which serves as the filming location for *Severance*’s Lumon headquarters. In contrast to prior installations, this one did not serve as a public intervention but invited members of labor unions representing writers in film, television, radio, and online media into the diegetic sphere of *Severance* (cf. RilGerard 2025; EclipseEpidemic 2025). Attendance with limitations was also possible for locals following Bell Works’ social media (cf. bell-works 2025; npsychdoc 2025). The event offered the possibility to take photos with Ms. Huang, the second season’s new Deputy Manager of the severed floor, as well as a live performance by the theme song’s composer Theodore Shapiro and a live performance by actor Gwendoline Christie as her character Lorne, a severed employee running Lumon’s Mammalian Nurturable department (Fig. 8).

The program also included a live Q&A-session moderated by late night host Stephen Colbert, featuring the show’s cast and producers and concluded with a *Severance*-themed afterparty for invited



Fig. 8: Picture from the subreddit [r/SeveranceAppleTVPlus](https://www.reddit.com/r/SeveranceAppleTVPlus/), showing a fan’s perspective on the live Q&A outside of the seated area for invited guests, posted on Apr. 6, 2025

guests. While the second day of the advertised event that was open to the general public left fans largely disappointed by the lack of program and highlights (cf. x1shotx3killsx 2025), the first day was widely praised by those in attendance (cf. linzinthecity07 2025). It created the same fear of missing out as the other installations, as can be seen by an exemplary comment on Reddit: “Judging by Reddit, *everyone* is there without me 😞” (Past-Feature3968 2025).

This praise stems from a blended intersection of marketing and live performance already established in the instances of liveness in New York and London. The third installation builds on the established dynamics of collective mediatization of the live and its popular success in the form of the first two to re-direct their impact away from fans and onto another relevant group of stakeholders: industry insiders who have a vote in the awarding of prizes such as the Emmy Awards. By immersing voters in the fictional world of *Severance* through a high-quality live event, Apple TV+ aims to sway award decisions. Securing these wins ultimately boosts the platform’s prestige and competitive standing within the streaming industry (cf. Block 2019; Adalian 2021). As part of a larger marketing campaign, this strategy proved successful in 2025, as *Severance* received the highest number of nominations at the 77th Primetime Emmy Awards (27 in total), outperforming other leading series such as *The White Lotus* (2021-) and *The Studio* (2025-) (cf. Moreau/Schneider 2025). Given that Emmy nominations are closely tied to industry visibility and recognition, this prominence suggests that the series’ widespread circulation and engagement across platforms translated into institutional attention. This closely aligns with Apple’s broader strategy of providing high-quality productions of original content “and skipping the part where it spends billions buying up huge parts of other companies’ film and TV libraries” (Adalian 2021). Productions such as *Severance*, *The Studio*, *Ted Lasso* (2020-), *Silo* (2023-), *Sunny* (2024), *The Morning Show* (2019-), or lately *PLUR1BUS* (2025-) not only mirror the corporations’ cultural reputation to be of high quality, they also serve as a “billboard for Apple’s bulked-up TV app” (Adalian 2019) which functions as a key part of an economic strategy to not compete with Netflix for the spot as the top streaming platform, but rather to use Apple TV as an entryway into a larger product ecosystem, “the place people go to discover, buy, and watch everything streaming, anywhere, whether it’s a show, a movie, or a network” (ibid.).

These observations do not serve to argue that three live installations are solely responsible for Emmy nominations, but rather highlight that they need to be considered as a cornerstone of a multi-faceted blend of marketing, quality branding, and refining audience relations by strengthening engagement. This is particularly evident in the installations’ reiteration and transformation: while the first two addressed a general public and fans in different ways, the third used the acclaim established by the first two and popular fan practices to redirect its impact predominantly toward the entertainment industry. In this sense, a reversal seems to occur, highlighting a dimension of engagement so far not taken into account: the industry perspective on engagement as a “key indicator of success” (Evans 2020, 5).

The Bell Works event illustrates this dynamic by introducing an intermediary layer of promotion: influencer-mediated circulation. While earlier installations relied primarily on fan-driven dissemination, the third event foregrounds a more professionalized form of parasocial engagement. Alongside coverage in official promotional channels, influencers translate the live experience into curated, platform-specific content. In doing so, they occupy a mediating position between participatory fan practices and more conventional promotional logics, effectively extending the event’s transmedial circulation.

Several videos by influencers (e.g., [KarrisaEats](#) and [Explore with Shannon](#)) cover the third installation with a clear promotional imperative. With varying reach, their videos can be identified as forms



of the influencer’s audiovisual self-documentation. In this sense, they are part of a consumer culture in which promotional messaging coincides with the entertainment value of content (cf. Dörre 2022, 307f.), effectively eroding a categorical difference between both. Crucially, this shift also complicates the notion of fan-driven engagement. While earlier instances of liveness relied on spontaneous forms of audience participation, the influencer-mediated circulation of the Bell Works event introduces a more strategic and professionalized mode of visibility production. In this context, the mediatization of the event is no longer solely the result of voluntary fan practices but is, at least in part, shaped by actors whose participation is aligned with promotional objectives. As such, what appears as participatory engagement is partially underpinned by forms of compensated or strategically incentivized visibility production, blurring the distinction between authentic fan practices and promotional labor. Moreover, the content produced by influencers showcases privileged aspects of the event, such as exclusive access to performances, spaces, or interactions that remained largely inaccessible to the general public, thereby reinforcing the asymmetry between mediated visibility and lived participation.

The Bell Works event ultimately exposes the paradox at the heart of *Severance*’s live installations. While they hinge on a rhetoric of access, intimacy, and shared immersion into the show’s diegetic universe, their operations reveal a strategic calibration of engagement not toward the broader viewership but toward those whose evaluations materially shape the series’ industrial trajectory. Gestures of closeness—whether in the form of an afterparty, a Q&A, or a diegetically framed photo opportunity—function, much like the show’s notion of a “handshake available upon request,” as controlled and conditional forms of recognition within the economy of prestige television. What appears as an expansion of the show’s world outward into physical space is, on closer examination, a contraction: a selective narrowing of who is permitted to participate meaningfully in the cultivation of cultural capital.

Conclusion

The three live installations surrounding *Severance*’s second season reveal how liveness operates not merely as a promotional tactic but as a parasocial refiner that actively reshapes the relationship between series, fans, and industry stakeholders. Across Grand Central Terminal, Tower Bridge, and Bell Works, Apple TV mobilized liveness as a strategic hinge between corporeal co-presence and digitally networked circulation, constructing events that rely on an already engaged fandom to achieve visibility, meaning-making, and affective traction. The installations’ success hinges on a deep attunement to existing fan practices such as speculation, meme culture, and the playful use of diegetic terminology, as well as on a willingness to blur boundaries between narrative mystique and public reality. In doing so, they mirror the show’s own central tensions between work and self, knowledge and opacity, autonomy and control.

Understanding these installations through Elizabeth Evans’ model of engagement clarifies how type, form, cost, and value converge in postdigital environments: liveness initiates cognitive, emotional, and physical forms of engagement that fans then amplify through participatory peritexts. Yet these forms of participation also mask the degree to which marketing labor is displaced onto audiences, transforming parasocial pleasure into an engine of promotional efficiency. Moreover, the shift from public interventions to an exclusive, industry-oriented event at Bell Works demonstrates how the same logics of parasocial refinement can be redirected toward cultivating prestige and award visibility, which serves

as a reminder that engagement, in industry discourse, is inseparable from economic value and brand consolidation.

Ultimately, the case of *Severance* foregrounds a contemporary mode of liveness that is intrinsically postdigital: it emerges in the oscillation between the ephemeral and the mediatized, the corporeal and the connective, the spontaneous and the strategically orchestrated. The installations' power lies not in their status as live events, but in the circuits of co-creation they activate across platforms, publics, and institutional actors. As such, they illuminate how liveness today functions as a site where affective investment, fan participation, and brand strategy intersect—and where parasocial relations are not merely cultivated but continuously refined and economically utilized at the same time.

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