

***Rich Kids: A History of Shopping Malls in Tehran and The Believers are but Brothers* - digital lack and excess in a postdigital age**

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**Abstract**

This article addresses two recent performances created by Javaad Alipoor and Kirsty Housley - *Rich Kids: A History of Shopping Malls in Tehran* (2019) and *The Believers are but Brothers* (2017). It argues that they represent a fresh, stripped back and interrogative mode of intermedial performance, marking a clear departure from practices that employ the digital as a spectacular scenographic tool - where the visual excesses of large scale mapped and projected images are there for us to enjoy - as well as from sited, active and playful uses of handheld devices and networked engagements in mixed reality performance. Particularly focusing on the use of audience members' smartphones and platforms such as Whatsapp and Instagram, I contend that the prompting of these types of interactions in a theatre space generates a productive uneasiness at the intersection of human action and digital process. The article explores these qualities of unease and critical positionings that emerge within the contained spaces created in the performances and how they reveal and heighten the dual lack and excess of contemporary digital content and processes in our lives. In exploring these ideas, I make reference to postdigital theories, discourses of intermediality and critical writing around digital computation.

**Keywords**

Intermedial performance

Javaad Alipoor and Kirsty Housley

Postdigital

Digital computation

Digital lack and excess

## Introduction

Javaad Alipoor and Peyvand Sadeghian stand on-stage in HOME Theatre 2, Manchester in front of a simple set of folding doors with square frosted windows. Two microphones in front of chairs, on either side of the stage, provide the only other physical feature...oh and of course, the phones. Both hold iPhones in their hands as they introduce the show and use those devices to activate content and communicate with us through the course of the next hour. In a similar way to Alipoor's previous piece *The Believers are but Brothers*, the audience member's smartphone is employed in this new show, *Rich Kids: A History of Shopping Malls in Tehran*, as a means of engaging our attention towards mediated content, but also back to our own attentions, tensions and the myriad affects arising from the seemingly simple, slim block of processes that many of us carry with us. The smartphone is a powerful tool to employ in live performance where the use of our own devices can draw our attention back to their positioning in our existence, the promises they hold and how their processes flow into and 'supplement' (Derrida 1997) the gaps and 'lacks' in our lives. As Richard Seymour states:

The smartphone is our portal to the world, our golden ticket out of here. It holds our credit cards, music, magazines, audiobooks, maps, movies, games, tickets and keys. It is our wayfinder. It connects us to family members, workmates and irresistible internet bullies. We use it to get dates, to get dinner. It breaks up our day, as Adam Greenfield puts it, into 'jittery, schizoid intervals' with constant updates. We keep it close, charged at all times. It is as though, one day, it's going to bring us the message we've been waiting for (2019, p.69).

In this article, I argue that in their simple staging and use of audience members' devices, these pieces represent a shifting of digital mores in performance, specifically away from large scale, screened and sometimes mapped projection, where an excess of digitised content occupies and forms the scenography, and is there for us to consume, to lap up, to enjoy, towards the activation of a practice that happens in exchanges between the hardware and software of bodies, devices and computational processes in the shared space and time of performance. They differ in form and intention from large scale 'spectacular' intermedial work, but also from much 'mixed reality' practice, involving 'complex hybrid and distributed performance stages' (Benford and Giannachi 2011, p.3) that are activated through online exchanges and interactions with devices. The practices that I discuss here rather ask us to use our devices in the 'classic liveness', as Auslander (2008) would have it, of our bare encounter with performers in the space of performance, which in turn frames the activation of our personal technology in more interrogative and uneasy ways. Here, the digital content, fed to us through our devices within a theatre space, activates a productive feeling of supplementarity in relation to that content, where the excess of online material is heightened, but where concurrently, its 'play of substitution fills and marks a determined lack' (Derrida 1997, p.157). These works are stripped back, self-aware, interrogative; much

less interested in what the digital can do and much more interested in what it is *doing* – to us, to our relationships, to our sense of time, to the spaces between us, to the act of performance itself.

There is, of course, still a wealth of practice that engages in the digital as spectacular, exploiting its capacities to cloak and carry, to shift and transform the material elements of a *mise-en-scène*. This can be seen in the RSC's recent *Tempest* (2016), directed by Gregory Doran and made in collaboration with Intel and in association with Imaginarium Studios. With its active testing of a live performance-captured digital avatar, emerging alongside and through the physical performer playing Ariel, in addition to a shifting digital scenography, created from 27 mapped projectors, this is intermedial performance at its most spectacular. On the other hand, we also have the endlessly appealing modes of intermedial performance practised by companies such as 1927, where the live performers enact a beautifully timed and positioned choreography with the animated images and live music that is their signature. Here, the crafted intersections of body and image create enjoyable and satisfying combinations of the digital and material. In addition, there is a range of current experimentations with virtual reality in performance, which often manifests as another mode of the digital spectacular in its adoption of immersive technologies to augment or transform the core of a theatrical experience through creating a primarily digitised setting for it to happen. As Kerry Francksen and Sophy Smith (2018) point out, a primary draw of such technologies for many theatre and performance-makers is that they 'can enable us to extend beyond our own reality towards immersive and illusionary theatrical experiences' (p.127), just as mapped projected images, in combination with bodies and materials, can engulf, transport and re-contextualise us in new worlds.

In addition to these more 'spectacular' instances of intermedial practice, there is also a range of practitioners and works that use the capacities of networked, mobile devices in sited, playful engagements as well as employing the intersections of mobile digital devices with public space to generate creative and critical encounters between bodies, devices and places. In Blast Theory's *I'd Hide You* (2012) and *Can You See Me Now* (2001) for example, the events are spread and scattered across spaces, with bespoke technological formulations sitting at the heart of a game-like engagement between online participant-users and performers in actual spaces. More recently, pieces created by Rimini Protokoll, such as *Utopolis* (2019) and *Remote X* (2013), ask participants to use bespoke devices (speakers and audio players) as disembodied guides, offering instructions for the participant to move through, encounter and re-imagine public spaces and their fellow participants in those spaces.

In contrast, the two productions that are the subject of my analysis here, do not employ the digital spectacular as a way of transporting or ‘wowing’ an audience. They also do not use the interactive, ambulatory and locative capacities of devices to engage with remote performers or a present public space. Instead, these practices focus on a range of simple activations, through our own commercial off-the-shelf technologies, that happen in a conventional theatre spaces with present performers, as outlined below. In doing so, the sharp, uneasy ‘supplementarity’ of the digital in our everyday lives is revealed and heightened.

### ***Believers* and *Rich Kids*: classic liveness and the activation of personal, mobile devices**

My argument in this article arises from and focuses on *The Believers are but Brothers* (2017) (referred to as *Believers* from now on), written by Javaad Alipoor and co-directed by Alipoor and Kirsty Housley and *Rich Kids: A History of Shopping Malls in Tehran* (2019) (referred to *Rich Kids* from now on), written by Alipoor and co-created by Alipoor and Housley. Both pieces use communication platforms that will be familiar to many – Whatsapp for *Believers* and Instagram for *Rich Kids* - and both ask the audience to engage with some of the content of the performance through the particular capacities of the platform in play, using their own devices. This act, in and of itself, is an unsettling one. The use of a mobile device to access a social media platform within a theatre space challenges conventions that we switch off our access to the world beyond the performance and enter fully into the experience being offered. In these pieces, we keep our phones on, they buzz and light up with notifications, only some of which arise from the content of the performance. We use our devices to watch and comment and follow links and browse and scroll, deliberately inducing the ‘state of constant distractedness’ (Seymour 2019, p.44) that is characteristic of our contemporary networked existence. In doing so and specifically through their respective thematic content and the stories they tell, in conjunction with this mode of delivery, both pieces raise questions about the intersection of these modes of digital engagement and troubled contemporary contexts that are themselves shot through with digital processes.

*Believers*, as the copy for the BBC4 adaptation outlines, explores extremism, gaming, fantasy and masculinity ‘via an electronic maze of meme culture, 4chan, the alt-right and ISIS’ (BBC website 2019). In his introduction to the playtext, Alipoor claims that ‘[t]here is something about the nature of contemporary technology: The way that it allows those once disembodied fantasies that haunt and support everyday reality to be made palpable; intersecting with toxic masculinity; amplifying and resonating with certain senses of self-identity’ (2018, p.VI). Meanwhile, *Rich Kids* is described as ‘a play about entitlement and consumption, about how digital technology is complicit in social apartheid and gentrification, and the human problem of what successful and brutal people do with their coddled and useless children’ (HOME website n.d.). In both cases, the activation of the technology

in the performance and the platform chosen is a deliberate mirror of the intersection of human experience and digital culture that is being explored and interrogated.

In *Believers*, we are set up as a Whatsapp group. Using the chat function, Alipoor, as *Performer*, and *Operator* (also present on stage) feed us content, such as memes, as well as asking us questions that intersect with the core content of the piece: 'How many Muslims live in this country? Any guesses? How many have joined ISIS?' In response to the guesses submitted by the audience through Whatsapp, the answers are also communicated: 'There are around 3 million Muslims in this country and only 300 have joined ISIS' (Alipoor 2018, p.8-9). Content is also sent, which apparently comes from the accounts of the characters depicted, intruding on the more lighthearted "banter sections" as Alipoor describes them, which happen as a conversation between the performer and the audience, creating a 'softer space in which the audience can chew on more intense and darker parts of the story' (2018, p.VII). As the piece continues, the delivery of that content deliberately muddies where our focus should be directed. Sometimes messages come through the platform which interrupt the live performance and we have to choose how we manage our attention. This reflects the ways in which interactions with networked mobile devices intercept with, intrude on and shape our experience of the world, but also, in a darker way, activates the experiences of the young men at the heart of the story, who watch videos, send and receive messages, organize, broadcast, troll, create and encounter extremism, primarily in online spaces. As Alipoor outlines in his introduction, 'we have a problem with violent young men and technology' (2018, p.VII).

In *Rich Kids*, the backward logic of the Instagram timeline is engaged in order to delve into the history and 'back story' of a Porsche crash in Tehran. The simple direct address of two performers, also present as a strategy in *Believers*, intersects with and is mediated by the Instagram app, working from the 'now' of the crash backwards through the events that led up to that event. In doing so, it traces the images generated by a particular set of 'rich kids' in Tehran – children of the revolution – who benefit financially in the present from their parents' historical role in the Iranian revolution of 1979. Many of these young people break the stringent rules imposed on most of the Iranian population and focus on partying, fast cars, expensive malls and an Instagram-friendly lifestyle that is revealed to us through images of popping champagne corks and expensive trainers, Rolex watches and gold chains, pool parties and shopping bags from exclusive stores. As we scroll back in time through these images, the script plays out in words shown under each post, which are also read out by the performers. At various points, this timeline is interrupted by live broadcasts from Sadeghian's phone, using an app to shift and disintegrate her face as she addresses us. Meanwhile, Alipoor hunches over his device to deliver a range of live messages to us. We watch our phones, as audience members join the broadcast, their usernames hurriedly

scrolling up the screen, while Sadeghian's voice echoes around the auditorium, gently amplified through the range of different devices activated, playing out the sound at slightly different times, like a delayed and ghostly choir.

In *Believers* and *Rich Kids*, the mixing of human and nonhuman digital processes feels raw, tangible and exposed – not least because of the engagement with a personal device, which it asks of each audience member. In these pieces, we occupy, through the phone's updates in conjunction with the action of the performance, what Richard Seymour describes as 'continuous, time- and energy-consuming shifts from one object of focus to another' (2019, p.82). As such, an intermedial experience is created that is less about the capacities of the digital to knit together the elements of the performance into a seamless and shifting whole and more about the glitches and gaps between the content and platforms in play; about squatting on the tech together – occupying its spaces in a temporary, but active way - and in turn, being offered a perspective of ourselves through that engagement; an angled 'selfie' of the now.

Intersecting with the subject matter raised, these sharp, interrogative engagements also activate wider questions about digitality in the contemporary world. There is something lonely and lost, which emerges through the digital content in both, alongside a deliberate excess of that content transmitted to us through our devices in a flow of posts and updates – a digital 'supplement', or '*overabundance* of the signifier' (Derrida 1978, p.367) which reveals a lack through its overflow. As Derrida indicates, 'the supplement supplements... As substitute, it is not simply added to the positivity of a presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness' (1997, p.145). As I go on to argue, this concept of digital excess or 'overabundance', in conjunction with lack and 'emptiness' is one that is particularly evoked in these performances through the foregrounding of our bare interface with the endless content available in online spaces. This in turn draws our attention back to the everyday interactions through which such content functions as a newly accelerated supplementary force in our lives, flowing over, through, between and into the gaps and lacks in human experience; what Shoshana Zuboff describes as 'a unilateral incursion into undefended space' (2019, p.139).

The overflow of digital content that we receive also generates affects that resonate with Lauren Berlant's (2011) depiction of ordinary experience as an 'intersecting space where many forces and histories circulate and become "ready to hand"' (p.9), which seems particularly to echo the functioning of our ordinary-extraordinary-disorderly devices. The non-spectacular, real time and ordinary engagements with devices which are part of each

performance give rise to speculative, productive and uneasy affects, with affects manifesting as ‘properties, competencies, modalities, energies, attunements, arrangements and intensities of differing texture, temporality, velocity and spatiality, that act on bodies, are produced through bodies and transmitted by bodies’ (Lorimer in Vannini 2015, p.5). As Berlant argues, ‘people’s desires become mediated through attachments to modes of life to which they rarely remember consenting’ (2011, p.52) - in this case, our everyday attachments to digital mobile devices - producing ‘new intuitions, habits of ordinariness, and genres of affect management’ (p.93). In these two pieces, the now quite commonplace arrangements of body and device and the everyday textures of computation in our lives are given sharper focus, through the ways in which we are asked to consume the performance and the role of our devices in that process, turning our attention back to the ‘habits of ordinariness’ we have created and opening up distinctly uneasy affects in relation to these habits.

I also contend that this work is best understood as a mode of intermedial, rather than postdigital performance practice, according to Matthew Causey’s (2016) outline, though a postdigital gaze, perspective and ‘flavour’ is certainly evident in both pieces. I focus on the intermedial as ‘discourse’ happening in and through the specific interactions between bodies, devices and processes that the pieces prompt. Specifically, as outlined below, reinforcing the ‘logic of the supplement’ that Causey claims terms like ‘multi, inter- and trans’ construct. This is not in the interest of creating ‘hierarchies that are irresolvable and false’ (Causey 2016, p.428) between the different elements of the live event, but in order to pay attention to the ‘system of differences’ (Derrida 1978, p.354) in play, drawing out specific intersections of experience and computation, feeling and digital process. Below, I frame this argument firstly with broader notions of computation, before moving on to theories specific to the study of the digital in performance, including intermedial and postdigital perspectives. Finally, examples from the Alipoor/Housley pieces are engaged to extrapolate my core points related to digital lack and excess, the ‘logic of supplementarity’ and the productive uneasiness at play in these works.

### **Computational processes and ‘thinking digitally’**

As David Berry indicates, the term computation ‘comes from the Latin *computare*, *com-* ‘together’ and *putare* ‘to reckon, to thin or to section to compare the pieces’. To compute then, is to count, or to calculate’ (2011, p.10). This links to the ways in which digital software and code is ‘increasingly quantifying and measuring our social and everyday lives. By capturing, in millions of different ways, the way we live, speak, act and think on mobile phones, CCTV camera, websites, etc. computational devices are able to count these activities. This turns life into quantifiable metrics that are now visible and amenable for computation and processing’ (2011, p.2). The mass adoption and huge growth of digital computation in the twenty first century – its reckoning,

‘thinning’ and processing of our lives - has seemingly not been a shock to our collective system. Despite the huge shifts wrought by the ways in which we currently use and position computational processes, in software and code, the majority of us who have access to such processes, use them, if not unthinkingly, then certainly with a shrug in response to what this represents, what it shifts and how we are impacted and measured and processed and monetised.

Of course, this is not the case for all users and there is now a range of burgeoning theoretical approaches and sets of writing that do indeed query what this seismic shift in processing of experience is doing – from Safiya Umoja Noble’s (2018) identification of the racism embedded in Google’s search algorithms, to James Bridle’s (2018) characterisation of the ‘new dark age’ that we are entering and Shoshana Zuboff’s (2019) account of ‘surveillance capitalism’. This is not to even touch on a range of theoretical material dealing with the mechanisms and affects of social media in particular – Richard Seymour’s (2019) *The Twittering Machine* being a recent example – and a set of writing that sits within the theories of the new aesthetic, post-internet and postdigital culture and practice, particularly through David Berry’s work, addressing the processes of software, code and computation as distinctive of our contemporary era.

Many of these studies focus on the elements of computation and digital networked technologies that might escape our everyday attention – the ways ‘digital decisions enact new modes of racial profiling’ (Noble 2018, p.1), a digitally enabled mode of capitalism that ‘claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data’ (Zuboff 2019, p.8), and crucially, ‘the opacity with which most of those systems are constructed or described’ (Bridle 2018, p.5). In other areas of my practice, I am gently pushing at my use of ubiquitous computing and digital processing in creative work, through conceiving of and engaging with digital networked spaces as ‘wild’ and beyond our understanding and control (Scott 2019). This is echoed in James Bridle’s perspective that ‘we often struggle to conceive of and describe the scope and scale of new technologies, meaning that we have trouble even thinking them’ (2018, p.5), which is interesting to compare to Matthew Causey’s conception of postdigital performance as ‘thinking digitally, embodying an activist strategy of critique within and against postdigital culture’s various ideological and economic strategies of control, alienation, and self-commodification’ (2016, p.432). Many postdigital perspectives interrogate the ‘logic of impalpability’ (Berry and Dieter 2015, p.1) or ways in which ‘computational technologies direct us towards a passive trust in widely delegated, yet obfuscated, actions’ (p.5) and, as the quote from Causey indicates, this is an oppositional and activist set of strategies that aims to query and combat the passivity and obfuscation such technologies create.



However, is it possible or desirable to think digitally, in order to respond to these ‘strategies of control’? The proposal from Bridle and others is that we are actually incapable of this, because the scale and complexity of the processes in play always escapes us – it is beyond our capacities to think the network of computation, software and code that we have created. This is echoed in Samuel Arbesman’s (2016) account of technologies ‘at the limits of comprehension’, where he outlines the incredibly complicated systems and interconnections and legacy codes that underpin our networked society, as well as the processes of abstraction that have arisen in response, which engage in ‘hiding unnecessary details of some part of a system while still retaining the ability to interact with it in a productive way’ (p.23).

In his account of postdigital performance, Causey characterises ‘thinking digitally’ as the incorporation of ‘the structural elements and logic of the digital...in order to resist, or at least understand, the systems of electronic and computational control’ (2016, p.432) and that in order to achieve this resistance, ‘Artists and researchers of postdigital culture are fully embedded in the aesthetics and ideology of the digital and its codes of control, configurations of temporal and spatial organizations, and structures of identity’ (p.432). The condition of embeddedness, which is core to postdigital thinking, indicates that we are ‘enclosed’, ‘fixed’ or ‘firmly attached’ (Cambridge University Press 2020, Merriam Webster 2020) It suggests a settled and enclosed state that we now occupy within digital culture and it is this state that I feel is productively unsettled by these performances in their examination of relationships between us and the computational processes that are part of our lives. The bare, exposed and contained interactions with personal devices work against the accustomed familiarity we have established with these processes; they are lifted and re-framed and brought into a live performance event in a way that re-invigorates them with productively uneasy feelings.

In relation to the uneasy affects that happen between us and our devices, I am also interested in how this extends into a productive sense of awe and wonder at the network that has been created by us and its vast complexity. Bridle invokes this in his writing through referencing Timothy Morton’s notion of the ‘hyperobject’, which Morton uses in relation to global warming and which Bridle connects to the internet, as something ‘that surrounds us, envelops and entangles us, but that is literally too big to see in its entirety’ (2016, p.73). In Morton’s terms, ‘*hyperobjects* refer to things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans’ (2013, p.1). As Bridle summarises, this means that we perceive them ‘through their influence on other things’, as they ‘stand outside both our perception and our measurement ... defy[ing] our ability to describe them rationally’ (2018, p.73).

The new modes of intermedial practice considered here are of interest to me exactly because they induced me to feel some of this endless and massive distribution of content and processes; the sharp, distinct, uncomfortable and ultimately fantastical positioning of the human in relation to the webs of information we have wrought and our bodies' felt engagements with what surrounds and intersects with them – an insistent and ubiquitous culture of computation, of communication, of the image, wrought and formed and presented back, of the always live happenings, as well as the dead and buried material sitting under the weight of all those new posts, of the latest content of the now. Here, the endless and accelerated supplementarity of experience that is prompted through the 'hyperobject' of the internet and its intimate positioning in our lives is revealed. It is a distinctly human experience – the '*disorganized ordinary*' (Berlant 2011) of life in 2020 – which evokes the impossibility of thinking the digital. In *Rich Kids* for instance, audience members are asked to engage in live acts of digital archaeology, using the Instagram app. Beginning with an account of the actual legacies of the materials that form smartphones and their persistence in the world after the imperfect flesh of our bodies has disintegrated, Alipour and Sadeghian then move to the representational archaeology of scrolling or timeline-based applications such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. The story of a car crash in contemporary Tehran winds back through the images and captions of the Instagram timeline we are provided with on our phones, while also being simply represented on stage through images appearing on the frosted glass squares of the doors and captions read out by the performers. As we scroll back in time through more recent to historical images, where contemporary excess and partying gives way to revolution and war, the weight of the digital material starts to manifest in the event – all the currency of those current images lost in a moment, the content buried deep down in a timeline, the glimpses of existence crushed and defeated by so many others.

In such moments, the content of the piece and its structuring in the app allude to the unfathomable processes that sit beneath, behind and in relation to the accessible visual content. Scrolling through the Instagram timeline and *feeling* such processes specifically as they are happening in the space of the performance creates routes out of that simple act into wider questions around the digital age. The real time simultaneity of those acts and happenings – the way the event unfolds through the structures of the platforms made actual, embodied and live in the space - unsettles our customary digital engagements. It also resonates with a broader conceptual perspective of this digital content as *overabundant* and 'the result of a lack which must be *supplemented*' (Derrida 1997, p.367). As Berry points out, in recent years the processing of information has particularly accelerated, due to the increased speed and volume of computational code and software, tying 'humans and non-humans together into new aggregates' (2011, p.2). Zuboff also points out how this processing aims to extend into 'every aspect of every human's existence' (2019, p.9). As the final part of this article argues, these

pieces highlight uneasy new aggregates between humans and non-humans, through staging an overflow of content and information, in a causal relation with loss, lack and a paucity of human experience. Before this core argument is expanded though, I firstly consider the performances in relation to current theorising of the digital in performance practice, specifically through postdigital and intermedial ideas.

### **Theorising the Digital (and Postdigital) in Performance**

In his 2016 article, Matthew Causey lays out some 'components or modalities of the affects of the digital' (p.433) that comprise an 'aesthetic context' for postdigital performance practice. He also claims that 'intermedial theatre, like multimedia before and transmedia briefly after, is a thing of a past', specifically because such terms 'still construct a logic of the supplement that create hierarchies that are irresolvable and false' (p.428). As indicated above, I hold on to the 'inter' of intermediality in my thinking and am still invested in the 'logic of the supplement' in addressing the intersection of computational processes and human experience in performance. I want to explore these intersections, pull out the digital threads and pathways into experience, hold them up to view and examine their supplementarity, through considering the specific 'inters' that happen between our human and non-human processes. An intermedial approach to analysis supports these aims in paying attention to the specifics of the intersections and particularly the differences in play.

In a recent account of twenty-first century intermediality, Andy Lavender (2019) traces the various iterations and understandings of the term intermedial through the publications arising from the International Federation of Theatre Research (IFTR) Intermediality in Theatre and Performance working group. From a focus on 'co-relations between different media' (Kattenbelt 2008, p.26) and the 'softening of boundaries' within such co-related, in-between spaces (Chapple and Kattenbelt 2006, p.12), perspectives shift to a more concrete focus on plurality of affects and actions through Nelson's 'both-and' conception. Here, the 'necessary interdependencies' (2010, p.17) and simultaneous activations of media create spaces that are experienced not as in between but as layered, composite, shifting and multiple. In his analysis, Lavender makes reference to a range of recent intermedial practices. A number of these ask audience-participants to move through public space with the aid of mediatised guidance and link to the sited, ambulatory, mobile practices that I reference above, as a comparison to the uses of mobile technologies in the Alipoor/Housley pieces. Lavender argues that this is representative of a shift in what intermedial practices are doing and their interests, which chimes with some of Causey's perspectives on postdigital performance:

If intermediality used to be interested in boundaries and beyond – the things that happened when one medium intersected with another or when one found oneself 'in between' media – we now inhabit a cultural scene that is much more routinely mixed, where boundary crossing

has become so commonplace that the boundary is less noticeable than the journey, and the move from one entity to another less pertinent than the *feeling* of being amid transition' (2019, p.46).

In its evoking of commonplace crossings of virtual and material practice and experience, Lavender's characterisation resonates with postdigital perspectives in which 'the historical distinction between the digital and non-digital becomes increasingly blurred, to the extent that to talk about the digital presupposes a disjuncture in our experience that makes less and less sense in the experience of the everyday' (Berry and Dieter 2015, p.2-3). This perspective also points to particular affects arising from this embedded position, specifically that we might well have moved from 'an earlier moment driven by an almost obsessive fascination and enthusiasm within new media to a broader set of affectations that now includes unease, fatigue, boredom and disillusionment' (p.5).

As referenced above, the affects I experienced in the Alipoor/Housley pieces circulate in the area of unease; an unease that is activated through an intersection with my personal digital device in relation to charged content in the contained space and time of a performance. These performances take place in a conventional set up, both spatially and temporally. In both pieces, the performance happens in a black box theatre space, a separation between the audience and performers is at least physically present and the piece takes place over a manageable and standard amount of time (around an hour in both cases). This is distinct from the types of intermedial practice that Lavender focuses on, where the 'reaching' of these mostly sited works 'into civic space and cultural production ... into the live experience of witnesses, the functional life of a city, the designated spaces of work and inhabitation ... is what makes this a definitively contemporary kind of intermediality' (2019, p.55-56). It is also distinct from the sited performance of ANU, Blast Theory 's 'pervasive games' and Ryan Trecartin/Lizzie Fitch's hybrid installation practices or 'sculptural theatre' that are used as examples of postdigital performance in Causey's article.

This is also why a more distinct focus on the intermedial discourse between actions, experiences, processes and platforms feels particularly productive in addressing these works. Whereas Causey queries the usefulness of 'inters' to account for the relations between things in contemporary performance and Lavender perceives intermedial practice as a given substrate underpinning the works he experiences, I am interested in how intermediality, as a 'system of differences', is exposed in simple digital engagements enacted in shared spaces as part of these live theatre events. Here, affects of unease arise through spare, simple and exposed engagements with digital content, which string themselves through the activation and experience of the event

– clicking links, scrolling through content, adding comments, watching gifs endlessly end and begin. Here, the surfacing of the intermedial encounter is made strange and uneasy, not because we are unfamiliar with the processes of our own devices, but because that familiar engagement is brought into relief through the workings and prompts of the event. At these moments, and more so than in practices where I am asked to use a networked connection to play a mixed reality game, or to follow the instructions of a digital device or speaker to move through space, the discourse and *difference* between my desires and these processes, between my actions and the workings of the device, between the digital content I select and the computational processes underpinning it are heightened. Such intersections have the capacity to refract and reconfigure technological mores and norms – not a mirror as such, but certainly a self-reflexive re-view and re-experiencing of the everyday and “crisis ordinariness” of our swift adaptation to the constantly ‘unfolding change’ (Berlant 2011, p.9) that is contemporary, computational culture.

As an example, in *Rich Kids*, just watching Alipoor bent over his phone on stage, producing content that then emerges in my Instagram feed, feels like a radical act. Why so? Because attention that a performer offers to the business of performing - to expressing and communicating - is unsettled by that very everyday act of focusing attention on the screen of the phone and not towards us. Of course, that type of attention-play – not necessarily offering an action directly to an audience – is a feature of a range of performance practices, where energy is directed to the task in hand or the creation of a fictional world, without necessarily including the audience in the gaze or sphere of focus. However, something else happens when that attention is offered to a device in order to communicate, in a way that is familiar to so many people alive now; that carries with it a range of echoes of ourselves, of others, of judgements and contexts so utterly familiar, but made somehow sharply unfamiliar by the staging of the act and the witnessing of the actions associated with the performer communicating with us in this extraordinary-ordinary way. It is the simplicity and the framing of the act, which creates that affective jolt and prompts me to re-view what is happening between Alipoor, his device, my own and my experience. In that live moment, the more fixed and settled quality of my embeddedness in digital spaces is prized open, just a little.

This aligns with Lavender’s request for intermediality to be ‘understood within a wider frame of ‘cultural shaping’ where meanings are negotiated and forms of engagement transacted’ (2019, p.60). In the case of these new intermedial works, the ‘cultural shaping’ that specifically interests me is computational in nature – processes taking place within and between us and our devices – swift, innumerable and autonomous processes, set in play by humans, but manifesting beyond our direct experience and understanding. In order to explore and

interrogate this ‘shaping’ further, I consider in more detail below a perspective that the ‘inter’ of our engagements with digital and computational processes in the Alipoor/Housley pieces can be best understood in relation to a state of accelerated supplementarity, where the production of excessive, overabundant digital content and its overflow through our personal devices, as part of both performances, is affectively connected to a sense of loss, lack and emptiness.

### **Supplementarity in *Rich Kids* and *Believers*: The lack and excess of the digital**

The ‘logic of supplementarity’ is, according to Derrida, activated by ‘the sign which replaces the center, which supplements it, taking the center’s place in its absence – this sign is added, occurs as a surplus, as a *supplement*’ (1978, p.365). The concurrent lack and excess of the digital, as evoked by the double meaning of the Derridean supplement, seems to me to be a highly productive way of understanding its simultaneously easy and uneasy positioning in our lives – how neatly and snugly it fits in and yet how much room it takes up, what it swallows and what it generates, its excesses and its paucities. The notion of the supplement as a surplus also echoes some of the primary concerns related to ‘surveillance capitalism’ raised in Zuboff’s (2019) recent incendiary text. She reveals how the data we produce in our everyday interactions with networked digital platforms is treated and used ‘as a proprietary *behavioral surplus*, fed into *prediction products* that anticipate what you will do now, soon, and later’, transforming all elements of human experience, behaviour and life into marketable data – an incredibly valuable commodity that can then be used to ‘nudge, coax, tune and herd behavior toward profitable outcomes’ (p.8). Derrida indicates that ‘the *overabundance* of the signifier, its *supplementary* character, is ... the result of finitude, that is to say, the result of a lack which must be *supplemented*’ (1978, p.367). The overabundance - the surplus - of our data, flowing from all aspects of our experience in the world, heightened and accelerated through autonomous computational processes, is also causally linked to a ‘lack’. According to Zuboff, we can connect it directly to the sharp intersection of a growth of access to and expectation of certain conditions of life and the simultaneous rise of ‘*neofeudalism*’ where ‘*what is unbearable is that economic and social inequalities have reverted to the preindustrial “feudal” pattern but that we, the people, have not*’ (2019, p.44). This also chimes with Berlant’s characterisation of ‘unstable and shattered ordinaries’ and the ‘rhythm that people can enter into while they’re dithering, tottering, bargaining, testing, or otherwise being worn out by the promises they have attached to in this world’ (2011, p.28) – promises that are actively made more present, accessible, close and abundant through the processes of computation that shape interactions with our devices.

Such inequalities, promises and new 'unstable ordinaries' are starkly revealed in *Rich Kids*, where there is also a strange and uneasy duality of lack and excess, which emerges in the Instagram images shared - the foaming of champagne over the Rolex watch of Chatunge Mugabe, bought for him by his father, the pairs of trainers, wads of money, poses and backdrops and shopping bags and endless car images you can find under #richkidsofinstagram, which we are asked to scroll through as part of the performance. The niggling, prickling uneasiness of digital supplementarity is also active in the way a Whatsapp group is used to activate meanings and feelings in *Believers*. As 'Performer', Alipoor addresses us directly, outlines the experiences of three male characters affected by and activating extremism in various forms, as well as communicating through messages sent to the Whatsapp group, as described above. In the activation of this end to end encrypted mode of communication, with its resonances of terrorist cells, as well as more banal exchanges between friends and family, an uneasy felt sense of this platform opens up. Alipoor tells us that he uses this mode of communication because some of the content of the show 'needs a certain kind of distance' (2018, p.5), but there is also something urgently close about the shifts of engagement it asks of us: Should I look at the phone or the performer? Should I add to the conversation? How do I feel about the memes sent through the platform? Who is sending the messages? The felt confusion and dividing of attention from the insistent buzzing on my knee, alongside the excess of content and information being offered digitally and in the physical space of the performance, opens up a felt response about both the platform *and* the charged subject matter. Like the end to end encryption of Whatsapp itself, that felt experience is generated and exists within that space, but its residue persists in meaningful ways beyond the event, alongside the surplus of digital data traces that still exist in the processes of my device.

It is the *supplementary* nature of the digital that emerges in both pieces – a surplus that indicates a lack, 'a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play' (Derrida 1978, 353-354). Both the isolated and disillusioned young men of *Believers* and the spoiled rich kids of Tehran are seen in these pieces, endlessly feeding 'behavioral surplus' into that unfathomable system of codes and interconnections, while also supplementing material life with the endless and fantastical substitutions offered by a daily overflow of digital content. In turn, we are prompted to view, activate and intersect with this content, using those very platforms – clicking, scrolling, selecting, viewing. As Derrida says, 'it is as if one fills a void' and the feeling heightened here through the endless scrolls of messages and images we are fed is that 'it produces no relief' and is 'assigned in the structure [of our lives] by the mark of emptiness' (1997, p.145).

In these performances, it is at the inter of their practice – the places and experiences and engagements, where I meet the digital content being activated through my device – that the digital surplus and supplement becomes starkly active. This is not the comforting excess of digital images in play, creating other worlds, shifting actual physical materials and transporting me to other realms – this is the here and now, the hard, political edge of ‘behavioral surplus’. The lack and excess of human experience, played in and through the all too familiar possibilities of endless digital content and communication, is felt and realised in these simple interactions with devices in the space and time of performance. I therefore assert the value of that mix – the particular ‘inter’ it creates - as formed of distinct and separate processes in uneasy engagements. This is not the embedded state that a postdigital perspective might propose and not an experience where ‘the ontologies of the performance and media converge’ (Causey 2016, p.430-431). Rather, I feel the edges between things more sharply, the spilling over of content, the excesses of the images and messages and condensed nowness of what is presented in ordinary-extraordinary, present and engaged ways.

It is also in the everyday interactions with digital content that the pieces prompt that productive affective states emerge: complicity, uneasiness, nausea, vertigo, shame even. Also, perhaps, a renewed sense of wonder – or a more productive and active sense of *wondering* – that emerges through the capacities and excesses of digital content and communication sitting at the heart of the performance event. In *Rich Kids* for instance, the live broadcast sections of the piece, where the Instagram app is used to frame a particular moment through live streamed video and text content, are also simply staged in front of us. We are asked to click the icon on the app to see the video and text being generated, but we can also see Sadeghian behind the folding doors, creating the video and Alipoor sitting right in front of us, watching the feed and sending messages. As she broadcasts and speaks to us through the camera of her phone, her face is strangely (but in a familiar way for many of us) disintegrated and digitally re-formed, manifesting in a broken, splintered and glitched image on the screens of the many phones in the audience. We are asked to shift attention between what the screen is generating and what is present in front of us. The words she speaks slide into indistinction as they are echoed through so many tinny smartphone speakers and it doesn’t seem to really matter what is being said – it is more about that prickling and uneasy sense that emerges through the mode of creation and engagement and through the small screens we hunch over. We are deliberately gathered and divided - sharing content, but only able to experience that individually, via the personal screen of the phone, where Sadeghian’s direct address to us is activated. The digital supplement here, as centred in the smartphone screen, could ‘make one forget the vicariousness of its own function’, but its simultaneity with the revealed acts of construction on stage indicates a lack; that it



‘pass[es] for the plenitude of a speech whose deficiency and infirmity it nevertheless only supplements’ (Derrida 1997, p.144).

It is also significant that the device is mine in this moment and that it has been co-opted for the purposes of the piece. It re-activates the familiar in uneasy ways, it outsources the performance to my place of personal activity and digital interaction, it places its content alongside all that I engage in habitually, it pushes its excesses in alongside my own and fights for room there. Digital content manifests here as ‘an infinite chain, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing they defer’ (Derrida 1997, p.157) – our feelings, our relationships, our desires, our hopes. If we do indeed occupy ‘a social system fully familiarized and embedded in electronic communications and virtual representations’ (Causey 2016, p.432), then I contend that exposed and engaged modes of intermediality that are active within performance events of this nature, bringing renewed attention to the discourse between human and digital processes, are necessary to sharpen our sense of what this embeddedness is, does and means.

## Conclusion

I started by claiming that pieces such as *Believers* and *Rich Kids* mark a shift from the digital spectacular and I finish with the thought that if this is true, then perhaps what they replace that with is more productive and active wonder and wondering at all that has arisen in recent years, what passes through such platforms and processes, some interrogative awe at what we have produced and what this is doing to us and to human experience more widely, some more sceptical engagement with these intensely complex and unknowable systems, as well as what sits behind and beneath them.

This is undoubtedly a reflection that is influenced by those postdigital theories that look to account for our experience after the digital revolution, when computational processes are thoroughly embedded in our lives. However, the focus on everyday human engagements with devices that these two pieces prompt, shifts and complicates the idea that we are now thinking digitally. Rather, the surplus of the digital – its overflowing content, autonomous processes, proprietary systems and the physical materials that make this infrastructure possible – is brought to the fore. The ‘inter’ of our meeting is foregrounded, highlighted and opened to scrutiny and the ordinary crisis of our dependence on and consistent giving up of ourselves as data to these processes is made present. The stripped back classic liveness of our encounter with the performer and the live activation of content we receive through our devices places emphasis on the everyday human experience of engaging with the digital - how we meet and intersect - and what uneasy modes of experience are formed there. The wonder

I felt at the end of both pieces was not a satisfied sense of plenitude, but a renewed sense of gaps and lacks, of the spaces between, of what cannot be counted and computed and a productive unease at the otherness of such processes in my everyday existence. Such otherness is also communicated through Alipoor's final Whatsapp messages in *Believers*, which he asks audience members to read aloud and which I borrow to complete this article:

"We hunch over screens and cripple our necks."

"But at the edge of our decaying bodies lies a network of power greater than any tyrant has ever dreamed."

"Here we sit."

"No light, but the soft yellow glow on our faces. Together in the dark."

"This is the end of the show."

(Alipoor 2018, p.58).

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