Zeynep Oğrak
Izmir Institute of Technology
Faculty of Architecture
Urla/Izmir, 35433, Turkey
zeynepograk@iyte.edu.tr
ORCID-ID: 0000-0002-0884-5804

Zeynep Oğrak's academic background is in industrial design, with research interests centred on user experience and interaction design. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate at the Department of Industrial Design at Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University. Her work explores human–artificial intelligence relationships from a dialogue-oriented perspective, focusing on how interaction patterns can be designed to support meaningful, aesthetic, and empowering forms of human–AI collaboration. In this context, she examines the design processes underlying these interactions and investigates how designers can shape future human-non human partnerships.

Yener Altiparmakoğullari, Ph.D.
Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University
Faculty of Architecture
Meclisi Mebusan Street, No:24
Istanbul, 34427, Turkey
yener@msgsu.edu.tr
ORCID-ID: 0000-0002-8521-3093

Yener Altıparmakoğulları is an Associate Professor at Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, Faculty of Architecture, Department of Industrial Design. He earned his Ph.D. in 2017 with a dissertation examining haptic interaction factors within the framework of distributed cognition. His academic expertise centres on design ergonomics, human-centred design, user experience, and design methodology. He has supervised numerous graduate theses and contributed to nationally funded research and university–industry collaboration projects. He has authored several peer-reviewed publications in prominent design journals and presented at international conferences. His recent research focuses on artificial intelligence and post-human design paradigms that extend beyond traditional human-centred approaches.

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TRANSPARENT CULTURE OF NETWORK SOCIETY: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TECHNOLOGY AND HUMANS WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY

Zeynep OĞRAK– Yener ALTIPARMAKOĞULLARI

ABSTRACT:

This study explores the evolving relationship between technology and humans within the framework of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), focusing on how the rise of the network society has redefined cultural values through the logic of transparency. As data-driven infrastructures increasingly mediate social life, transparency emerges not only as a technical condition but also as a pervasive cultural discourse. By integrating ANT with Foucauldian discourse analysis, and adopting a critical ethnographic approach, this research aims to uncover how digital technologies function as non-human actors that co-construct meaning within sociotechnical networks. Rather than treating transparency as a neutral value, the study examines it as an ideological force embedded in contemporary design, media, and spatial practices. Through interdisciplinary case analyses, ranging from wearable devices and automotive interfaces to media artworks and cinematic representations, the research reveals how transparency manifests itself in varied forms: as bodily self-objectification, interface abstraction, aesthetic spectacle, and even social isolation. These artifacts are not passive reflections of culture but active mediators that shape perception, behaviour, and power dynamics. The findings demonstrate that in the network society, the ideal of visibility paradoxically leads to alienation, self-surveillance, and semantic impoverishment. ANT provides the analytical lens to frame these artifacts as dynamic actors, while Foucault's theory of discourse helps trace how power operates invisibly through transparency. Together, these frameworks allow for a nuanced understanding of the cultural implications of technology in contemporary society. Ultimately, the study positions transparency as a performative and ideological construct rather than a mere by-product of technological advancement. It argues that understanding the aesthetic, spatial, and ethical consequences of this logic is essential for rethinking design, architecture, and cultural production in the digital age.

KEY WORDS:

Actor-Network Theory, culture, network society, technology, transparency

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1 Introduction

Culture is a holistic system of material, social, and spiritual elements, including the objects produced, behaviours practiced, and ideas developed within a society (Malinowski, 1944). Therefore, understanding society is intrinsically tied to understanding its culture. While culture comprises many components, this study highlights technology as the central factor shaping culture in understanding the network society.

In the literature, determinist perspectives maintain that culture is a decisive force that directly structures the society (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952; Tylor, 1958). Similarly, technological determinism posits technology as the primary and exclusive driver of social change and transformation (Artut, 2014). For instance, French philosopher Ellul conceptualised *technology* as an autonomous, self-determining system akin to nature, independent of human intervention, which is frequently interpreted as a form of technological determinism (Ellul & Wilkinson, 1962; Ellul, 1964). As a result, technological determinists view technology as an autonomous force that reshapes individual lifestyles and social relations, thereby altering societal structure (Smith & Marx, 1994; Dusek, 2006).

On the other hand, a social constructivist perspective challenges this one-dimensional view by emphasising that the same technologies can be used differently in different social contexts (Pinch & Bijker, 1984; Hughes, 1987; Bijker, 1995; Feenberg, 1999). For social constructivists, culture is integral to the ongoing construction of social reality (Berger & Luckmann, 2016). In his work "Guns don't kill; people kill: Values in and/or around technologies", Pitt (2014) stresses that values lie not within technology but within the people who use it. Hence, he claims that technology can only be defined by the social context in which it exists. Thus, social determinists differ from technological determinists in arguing that technology must be considered within its context to understand social transformations.

Another significant approach to the role of culture in society is Actor-Network Theory (ANT), developed by Callon, Latour, and Law. ANT conceptualises culture as a dynamic network continuously reproduced through the relations between human and non-human actors (Farías & Mützel, 2015). As digital technologies increasingly mediate social interactions, Actor-Network Theory has become a frequently used framework in fields like media studies and design. Its emphasis on the interplay between human and non-human elements provides a helpful way to understand how identities, systems, and meanings are shaped within these networks. Actor-Network Theory attempts to understand human-technology interaction through a conciliatory perspective, suggesting that social structures are formed through the mutual relationships of human and non-human actors. The networks constituting the structure are dynamic and constantly transformed by newly introduced actors. Therefore, the network involving humans and technology is fluid and perpetually in motion (Artut, 2014). Similar to Pitt (2014), Latour (1999) employs the National Rifle Association's slogan, "Guns don't kill; people kill," but unlike Pitt, he argues that neither the person nor the weapon alone is responsible, rather the action arises from the relationship between human and non-human actors (Latour, 1999). According to Actor-Network Theory, the mutual participation of actors gives meaning to the network. When the intent of the weapon aligns with that of the human within a network, the network gains meaning, and the act of killing emerges.

From this perspective, technology is seen as an active actor within the network where culture is produced and reshaped. Using the black box metaphor of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), this study examines human–technology relations to understand better our society, which is called *network society*. According to Latour, complex technologies incorporate a variety of developments and components over time (Latour, 2014). When these components establish connections with other actors in the network, they transform into "black boxes" that encapsulate all their intricate elements. When technological systems operate seamlessly, these black boxes are often ignored. The study does not aim to open the black box fully but to slightly unseal it to provide analytical insight into the network society.

2 Theoretical Framework

Castells (2000, 2010) describes the *network society* as one that has assimilated digital culture by integrating with network technologies in the configuration of everyday life. Van Dijk, comparing the network to the nervous system of society, defines it as a multilayered structure that produces order from chaos. He argues that understanding the structure of networks is only possible by focusing on the relationships between the elements forming the network, rather than the elements themselves (Van Dijk, 2012). In his view, since social network analysis centres on the morphology of links and nodes, it remains superficial; escaping this superficiality requires addressing the properties of the units that constitute the connections (Van Dijk, 2012). In this study, the network society is likewise examined through the relationship between the individual and network technology.

In the texts of Castells (1996, 2000) and Van Dijk (2012), it becomes evident that understanding the network society necessitates understanding communication and information technologies and, by extension, the characteristics of digital media. Manovich (2002) likens the logic of modern (mass) media to that of industrial society post-Industrial Revolution, while describing the logic of digital media as a manifestation of a post-industrial society comprised of unique individuals constructing their own personal lifestyles. While mass media are centred around a unified narrative, digital media emphasises individuality. Accordingly, Manovich (2002) defines Panofsky's (2020) linear perspective as the symbolic form of modern society, whereas he regards databases as the symbolic form of computer-based society. Perspective, the visual art of modern society, is defined by a centralised, emotionless gaze that dominates objects and spaces. On the other hand, databases do not require the dominance of vision and thus diverge from modernism's ocular-centric language. Cultural theorist Han (2016) critically discusses this through Bentham's Panopticon. Designed by philosopher and social theorist Bentham, the Panopticon features a central watchtower where the guard can see everything without being seen, surrounded by multi-level cells arranged in a circle (see Figure 1). The structure is based on the dominance of vision and a centralised perspective (Han, 2016). As a result, Panopticon residents feel surveilled regardless of the guard's presence. Foucault (1975) also addresses the authority of invisible power through the Panopticon metaphor in *Discipline and punish*.

Han (2016) separates the digital realm from the optical due to its lack of gaze, and asserts that today's Panopticon no longer needs a centralised perspective. Thus, "inhabitants of the digital Panopticon do not feel watched and, hence, feel free and voluntarily expose themselves. The digital Panopticon does not restrict freedom; it exploits it" (Han, 2016, p. 58). Similarly, Mathiesen (1997) refers to surveillance based on individual consent as the Synopticon. Unlike the Panopticon, which requires coercion, the Synopticon persuades individuals through enticement (Bauman, 1998). While Bentham's Panopticon is a phenomenon of the disciplinary society, the wholly digital Panopticon of the 21st century belongs to the transparency society (Han, 2012). Since digital surveillance requires no observer, the digital Panopticon, in Han's words (2016), provides a more pervasive form of vision than the "analogue Panopticon" by encompassing the individual from all angles.

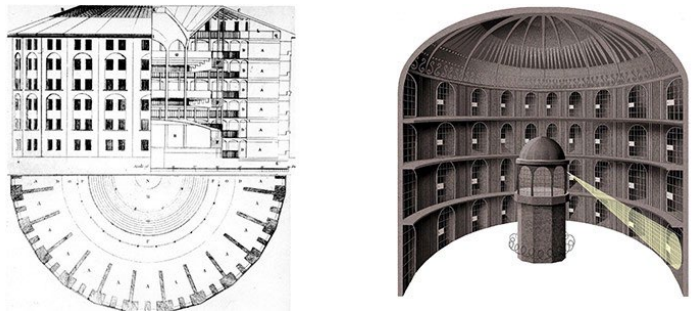

Figure 1: Jeremy Bentham's "Panopticon"
Source: Steadman, 2012

Han (2012) labels the network society a "transparency society", due to its database-based symbolic language that requires no gaze or domination. Han also sees transparency as a form of violence. He argues that, unlike Bentham's Panopticon, which enforced isolation, today's network society ensures transparency through hyper-communication amongst its members (Han, 2012). For Han (2020), constant presence in communication creates discomfort for the individual. Thus, Han offers a critical perspective on the continuous presence demanded of the individual in Actor-Network Theory.

In such a society, the form of existence is, in Sennett's words, "being isolated from others at the centre of visibility" (Sennett, 1996, p. 45). Han sees the transparent society as one deprived of truth, akin to Plato's cave deprived of light: "For the only thing that is completely transparent is emptiness" (Han, 2012, p. 61). According to Han (2012, p. 16) due to its purely transparent structure lacking dual meanings, the language of transparency is a lifeless, semantic-free language.

> The transparent language is a formal, even entirely mechanical and operational language that contains no ambiguity... Only machines are transparent. What makes life what it is – spontaneity, fullness of events, and freedom – do not permit transparency... A transparent relationship is a dead one, devoid of allure and vitality. That which is completely transparent is, therefore, dead... Transparency is a condition of symmetry. As such, the transparency society seeks to eliminate all asymmetric relations... Space becomes transparent when it is flattened, smoothed, and hollowed out. A transparent space is semantically poor.

The language of transparency functions as a montage language. Due to its technique, montage is devoid of meaning. The constant addition and removal of parts – or their inherent mobility – creates an enduring sense of incompleteness. This ambiguous language includes experimental traits that do not follow a clear logic or meaning. The logic of this ever-modifying language leads to a mindset centred around personalisation. Digital media platforms, which promote individuality by removing standardisation, grant users the right to create personal content (Halasz & Schwartz, 1994). These platforms, where users are both producers and consumers, eventually turn cyclical. In the face of an endless barrage of content that exceeds cognitive limits, individuals lose their connection to purpose and grow alienated and weary. Simmel (1918) describes this weariness as a result of nervous overstimulation leading to emotional dullness and detachment. Simmel (2023) notes that anonymity is the cost of superficial relations formed by humans disconnected from purpose in such a society.

With seemingly infinite user-personalised interfaces, subscription-based streaming services like Netflix emphasise digital media's cyclical and individual behavioural traits. The cycle must remain in motion; otherwise, the system may collapse. Platforms like Instagram and YouTube reels exemplify this loop. Baudrillard (1997, p. 222) identifies this circularity as the fate of systems that forget their goals and functions: "All institutions, systems, and organisations that forget their purposes and become self-sustaining machines are cyclic. These vast machines consume solely their energy to feed and reproduce themselves." Due to its cyclical production method, many digital media objects become non-narrative, standalone pieces of equal importance – a collection of singular items with no defined beginning or end (Manovich, 2002). The narrative absence of digital media prompts reflections on truth and reality. Plato's allegory of the cave, representing narrative and theatre, loses relevance in a narrative-less realm. Baudrillard (1997) states that as communication technologies bind societies together, every culture loses uniqueness and morphs into "a mass production of identical replicas" (Baudrillard, 1997, p. 116). Hence, he warns, "Man will only be defeated when he speaks only the language of the computer" (Baudrillard, 1997, p. 191). In the following, the study explores how this implicit language manifests in everyday interactions through art and design objects. These functional, symbolic, and communicative objects can reveal the latent meanings embedded in daily life.

3 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach that combines Actor-Network Theory (ANT) with Foucauldian discourse analysis in order to examine how transparency is enacted through cultural artifacts. Rather than treating technologies

as passive tools or symbols, the analysis views them as active mediators that participate in shaping social practices and discourses. This approach is particularly suitable for investigating phenomena such as transparency, which operates not only as a technical affordance but also as an ideology embedded in the design of objects, interfaces, and artworks.

The positivist approach, which posits that accurate knowledge can only be attained through empiricism, recognises as fact only those phenomena that can be objectively observed, rejecting the existence of elements that cannot be expressed numerically. This perspective, however, falls short in generating insights into the meanings underlying their actions (Mariampolski, 2006). In contrast, the interpretivist approach conceptualises reality not solely through what is measurable, but through the meanings actors assign to events. Accordingly, interpretivist approaches are favoured when seeking to understand actors who exhibit complex behaviours that cannot be explained through superficial responses (Goulding, 2005). Amongst interpretive approaches, ethnographic research aims to understand the social environment by examining the actors' interactions and the cultural meanings, values, and practices that shape these interactions. Ethnographic research methods can be divided into subtypes with distinctive epistemological orientations and methodological focuses. For instance, while classical ethnography seeks to maintain some degree of objectivity and focuses on describing and explaining the world, critical ethnography views the world as something that exists beyond the researcher and aims to change it by critically examining power relations (Foley & Valenzuela, 2005). From this perspective, critical ethnography locates reality within the interactions in which the structures and mechanisms behind what is visible mutually shape one another. This study positions reality within these interactions by conceptualising the network society as a constantly evolving structure shaped by the dynamic relationships between actors. Therefore, applying a critical ethnographic research approach, the study examines how technology is perceived, experienced, and interpreted within the network.

In this methodology, data collection, analysis, and interpretation processes are consciously directed towards revealing existing power relations. In addition, during this process, the researcher's role in gathering, interpreting, and representing knowledge is of central importance (Touraine, 1981). Decisions made during the research process are thus undertaken not under the claim of neutrality, but from a theoretical stance that serves a critical purpose. In line with the principles of critical ethnography, the research process was deliberately guided by the researcher's theoretical stance, shaping data selection, analysis, and interpretation towards revealing power relations. To uncover the power relations embedded in technology within the network society, the themes of technology–individual–society relations, the data society, and digital media were identified, reflecting the main dimensions through which these power relations are structured.

To discuss power relations through the selected themes, the study employs Foucault's (1969) discourse analysis method, developed in his work *The archaeology of knowledge*. Law (2008), in *Actor-Network Theory and material semiotics*, describes *actor networks* as miniature versions of Foucault's discourses (Law, 2008). Law (2008) also indicates that Foucault's relational logic is not far removed from that of actor-networks. In his discourse analysis, Foucault considers non-human actors as crucial elements in shaping discourse. This aligns discourse analysis with Actor-Network Theory, which forms the theoretical foundation of this study.

4 Analysis

This study aims to analyse the network society not merely as a technical advancement but also as a discursive structure that redefines actors' position, role, and influence. This analysis provides a critical reading of the discourse of the network society through the individual's complex relationship with technology. Analysing this complex relationship requires discussing the network society as a cultural, social, and psychological condition.

The first section examines the conceptual discourse of the *network society* through a historical analysis spanning from modernity to the hypermodern present. Using texts that address technology-mediated relations between individuals and society, the study focuses on the works of Simmel, Bauman, Baudrillard, and Han, which were selected for their critical engagement with the intersections of technology, culture, and society. Building on this foundation, Simmel's (2023) notion of individual alienation during modernity evolves in Bauman's (1998) later works into the

critique of invisible control mechanisms. Baudrillard (1997, 2007) and Manovich (2002) emphasise the digital and software-based nature of control in the network society, while Han (2012, 2016, 2020) conceptualises it as a transparency society characterised by a semantically impoverished transparent language.

The second section analyses art and design objects as discursive elements embodying the transparency ideology of the network society. While some objects are examined as direct subjects of analysis, others are included as instrumental examples that support the critical framework by exposing the building blocks of discourse. Through this approach, the study demonstrates how technologically integrated artifacts function as aesthetic or functional entities and as communicative and ideological structures, thereby rendering the transparency ideology visible through visual culture and open to critical debate.

Each case was examined through close textual and visual analysis, focusing on the discourses of transparency articulated in design, representation, and interaction. The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, the artifact was contextualised historically and culturally. Second, the discursive logic of transparency (such as efficiency, spectacle, or exposure) was identified. Finally, using ANT, the artifact was coded as part of a network in which human and non-human actors co-construct meaning. This combination of discourse analysis and ANT made it possible to move beyond description towards an understanding of how artifacts function as discursive agents. To clarify the analytical process, Table 1 outlines the framework that guided the interpretation of the selected cases. The framework identifies case types, discursive focus, and expected insights, while situating each artifact within networks of human and non-human actors.

Table 1: Analytical framework: Case types, focus, and expected insights

Case Type	Example(s)	Analytical Focus (Discourse)	ANT Perspective (Actors & Relations)	Expected Insight
Wearables	Swatch, Smartwatch	Body, self-tracking, visibility	Human body, device, data, institutions	How technology renders the body transparent and measurable
Interfaces	Tesla Dashboard	Efficiency, immediacy, control	Driver, interface, algorithm, machine	How interfaces reshape human–machine relations as seamless but abstract
Media Artworks	Refik Anadol (data aesthetics)	Immersion, spectacle of data	Algorithm, dataset, exhibition, audience	How aestheticization turns transparency into visual experience
Critical Art	Monica Bonvicini (*Don't Miss a Sec!*)	Surveillance, exposure, critique	Architecture, public space, spectators	How transparency is revealed as confrontation and loss of privacy
Cinema/Film	Jacques Tati (*Playtime, 1967*)	Architectural transparency, isolation, visibility without intimacy	Built environment, architecture, glass facades, urban actors	How architectural transparency turns visibility into a condition of emotional disconnection and social alienation

Source: Own processing, 2025

As indicated in Table 1, this framework was not intended to predetermine results but to provide a systematic lens for linking discourse analysis with ANT. The subsequent section applies this framework to the specific cases under study.

5 Findings

In Cartesian epistemology, design has long oscillated between the dualism of function and meaning. This duality mirrors Locke's (1690) epistemological distinction between external, objective reality and internal, mental representation. According to Locke (1690), our experiences are based on primary qualities existing independently in nature and secondary qualities such as smell, sound, and colour which are formed in the mind through sensory perception. Nature, though real, lacks appeal on its own; the mind confers meaning and appeal. As an extension of this internal/external split, design came to be understood as the dressing up of an unappealing but materially real core with an external, dazzling yet unreal form – what Katz (1997, p. 453) describes as "taming or humanising objects for human use."

The functionalist approach, peaking with Sullivan's (1986) famous dictum "form follows function", asserts that life can be understood through rational principles and attempts to reconcile Locke's internal-external separation. According to functionalists, the external appearance of everything in nature depends on its internal structure. However, this outdated paradigm has been superseded by Krippendorff's (2006) meaning-oriented paradigm, which emphasises the mental over the material. Krippendorff's design approach places meaningfulness above functional reality. For him, the key to a product lies not in its function or form but in how users interpret it and approach it mentally (Krippendorff, 2006).

Latour argues that modern humans, as a product of Descartes's philosophy, created a modern divide between the external (function) and the internal (meaning). He attributes this divide to the human tendency to objectify everything except themselves and to observe objects as external entities. Rather than building bridges like Krippendorff or Sullivan, Latour proposes that people immerse themselves in the flow and allow themselves to drift (Latour, 2008). Alongside Callon and Law, he developed Actor-Network Theory (ANT). This theory suggests a new mode of existence based on the mutual transformation and interaction of all human or non-human entities designated as "actors". As a relational theory, ANT prioritises interaction, flow, and transformation over either function or meaning (Latour, 2005, 2010).

Examples selected from the fields of art and design are analysed in this study using a discourse analysis approach focused on interaction. This analysis investigates how "transparency" is perceived via design and art objects, particularly those chosen from everyday life. These objects are assessed not merely for their aesthetic or functional characteristics but as discursive structures carrying communicative, cultural, and ideological meanings. Technology integration was a key criterion when selecting examples. Some objects serve as direct subjects of discourse analysis, while others function as instrumental critiques, highlighting the components of discourse. The analysis of selected cases illustrates how transparency functions as a cultural discourse across different domains of the network society. By examining everyday technologies and cultural artifacts through the lens of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and discourse analysis, it becomes evident that transparency is not a single condition, but a constellation of meanings produced in diverse contexts.

Wearables: From Swatch to Smartwatch

In the epistemological framework introduced earlier, where personalisation and individuality define the mindset of the network society, the evolution of the "watch" is analysed as a representative example. In the interaction between humans and timepieces, early watches, which were housed in ornate brass cases and attached to the body by various chains, were often unreliable in their accuracy and thus served more as jewellery for the nobility than as timekeeping devices. The emergence of electronic watches in the 1970s, equipped with mechanisms that accurately measured time, marked a shift from luxury jewellery to industrial tools (Norman & Verganti, 2014). The relationship was again redefined when the Swatch company began marketing colourful, patterned watches as emotional, fashion-oriented accessories. Whereas previously a single watch sufficed, Swatch encouraged consumers to own multiple watches, much like handbags or shoes (Norman & Verganti, 2014). This redefinition reflected a profound understanding of the individualism emerging with postmodern culture (Glasmeier, 1994; Norman & Verganti, 2014). De Vere (2014) also associates the influence of individualisation in the network society with personalised product design. By

reinterpreting watches as emotional objects using diverse colours and patterns, Swatch transformed them into a design object catering to individuals' desire to express their uniqueness (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Swatch watches
Source: Swatch, n.d., 2024

Smartwatches, however, have introduced a much more complex layer to the human-watch relationship (see Figure 3). As part of the Internet of Things ecosystem, smartwatches continuously connect with various networks and devices, offering personalised data and analysis on heart rate, step count, blood oxygen levels, and calorie intake. These devices rationalise the human body by visualising what is normally invisible in daily life, such as biometric data. This process can be interpreted as an objectification and transparency of the body. By reducing the body to measurable metrics, smartwatches influence users' perceptions of their own bodies. Wu et al. (2015) found that such technologies, which form close relationships with the human body, could diminish users' sense of humanity and encourage self-objectification. Baudrillard (2007) refers to this objectification in human-technology interaction as "the art of disappearance". With the transition from analogue to digital timekeeping, the "distorted image" is replaced by a synthetic, digital one. As Baudrillard puts it, this digital image is transparent and consists of a series of automatic instructions, devoid of meaning (Baudrillard, 2007).

Figure 3: Apple smart watch
Source: Apple, n.d., 2024

The transition from analogue wristwatches such as the Swatch to digital smartwatches reflects a broader cultural shift. While the Swatch emphasised individuality and style in the 1980s, today's smartwatches embed biometric sensors and networked applications that track and display bodily states. What once served primarily as a fashion statement has evolved into a tool of constant measurement. In this sense, the body itself is rendered transparent, redefined as a stream of data points. From an ANT perspective, the smartwatch acts as a mediator between humans, data, and institutions, producing new forms of self-knowledge but also self-objectification. The wearer's body is no longer private but publicly legible, often framed as health awareness but simultaneously normalising surveillance.

Interfaces: The Tesla Dashboard

Another object emphasising subject anonymisation is the "Smart Tag" tracking device. Though often used for safety, these tools make the subject traceable and surveillable within the network, even if they voluntarily joined it. As in Han's digital Panopticon, the network subject is observable without the dominance of vision and becomes anonymous, existing solely as "data". In other words, humans become persons through the interface. Baudrillard (1997) sees this anonymity as symptomatic of a society in which everything loses uniqueness and becomes a copy of a copy. This condition extends to automobile dashboards, which have evolved from tactile, semantically rich panels into seamless digital interfaces. The dashboard design, which features numerous buttons and panels, involves various concerns, including formal, semantic, and ergonomic aspects. On one hand, these concerns aim to ensure that functions are perceived quickly and accurately by the user, and on the other hand, to give the vehicle a distinct character. With technology integration into automobiles, all these indicators and panels have begun to transform into interfaces. Tesla's minimalist control panels, for example, are largely devoid of buttons and are driven by data flow and visualisation (see Figure 4). The shift from physical form to data-centric interface renders previous concerns with form and meaning obsolete. This transformation parallels ANT's emphasis on movement and interaction over fixed structures. Here, the user interacts with a montage language as functions can be added or removed from the screen interface. Thus, both functionalist and concerns regarding meaning lose importance as design yields to data. Without traditional buttons' tactile feedback or formal character, data-centred design evolves into seamless, intuitive, and invisible interaction, exemplified in voice-command digital assistants. The design of the Tesla dashboard exemplifies transparency in the register of efficiency. According to ANT, this helps to show that the interface is not a passive display but an active agent, shaping the ways drivers perceive and act. In this case, transparency reduces complexity, but at the cost of material connection: control becomes predictable, standardised, and ultimately alienating.

Figure 4: Tesla dashboard design
Source: Tesla, n.d., 2024

Cinematic Critique: Jacques Tati's *Playtime*

Tati's *Playtime* (1967) provides an early but still relevant cultural critique of transparency. The film's sterile modernist buildings, filled with glass facades and uniform interiors, stage a world where visibility is constant yet intimacy absent. In these spaces, humans appear reduced to spectators of their own lives, trapped in environments of exposure. Architecture, as ANT reminds us, is not a neutral background but an actor shaping social interaction. In *Playtime*, the built environment transforms transparency into a form of social isolation: everyone can be seen, but no one truly connects. The film depicts a world where privacy diminishes, personal spaces shrink, and city inhabitants live isolated from one another despite being constantly visible. Although people appear to be in interaction due to constant visibility in shared spaces, the superficiality of these relationships and the weakness of these connections are made visible through minimal dialogue and visual cues.

The film symbolises a world in which everything is made visible, yet argues that such visibility and accessibility weaken and trivialise human relations – a critique of transparency. In one scene, the televisions in adjacent apartments

turn on simultaneously, making it seem as if these separate spaces are connected and communicating (see Figure 5). With this powerful visual metaphor, Tati demonstrates how the supposed interconnectedness brought by technology is, in fact, shallow and weak. The persistent sense of exposure and loss of privacy, even in ostensibly separate living spaces, becomes a recurring theme and critique throughout the film. The disconnect and individualism of visible yet isolated people are made evident as a visual discourse of transparency.

Figure 5: Jacques Tati, 'Playtime', 1967, street view of households in ultramodern apartments
Source: Tati, 1967

Media Artworks: Refik Anadol and Monica Bonvicini

Artistic practices also make visible the multiple dimensions of transparency. Refik Anadol's data sculptures transform vast datasets into immersive visual spectacles. The aesthetic effect is dazzling, presenting transparency as a celebration of information flow. Yet the very act of aestheticization can conceal complexity, reducing data to a surface of sensory pleasure. By contrast, Monica Bonvicini's Don't Miss a Sec! (Linders, 2004) offers a critical inversion: a transparent public toilet that exposes its user to complete visibility. Here transparency functions as confrontation, laying bare the violence of hypervisibility. In this work, Bonvicini installs a prison-style toilet inside a mirrored glass cube – transparent from the inside but reflective from the outside – and places it in one of the busiest urban centres (see Figure 6). With this, she challenges the obsession of modern individuals to remain visible at all times, even during the most private of moments.

She highlights the discomfort caused by hyper-visibility in public spaces and critiques the compulsion to stay perpetually connected to the network. The artist explicitly questions society's obsession with being seen and staying online, exploring the fragile boundary between privacy and exhibition. Using a prison toilet, an artifact of control and confinement, underscores how individuals, in ensuring their transparency, become both imprisoned and surveilled. As Kennedy (2003) notes, the installation criticises society's internalisation of surveillance and the illusion of freedom under the guise of voluntary visibility.

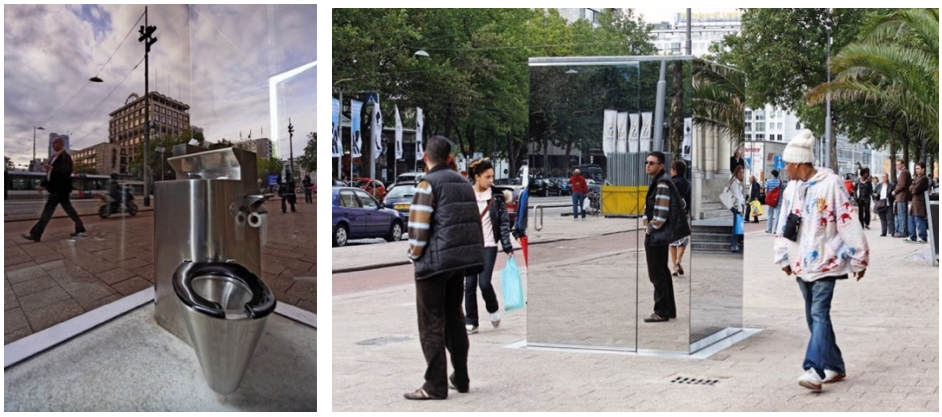

Figure 6: Monica Bonvicini, "Don't Miss a Sec', 2024
Source: Linders, 2004

In his book *The society of singularities*, German sociologist Reckwitz (2020) discusses how the influence of media technologies has led to growing individualism and a cultural emphasis on uniqueness. He observes that such works often attempt to distinguish themselves through aesthetic intrigue or unique institutional narratives. Anadol's data-driven installations exemplify this trend. By translating public datasets into immersive audio-visual environments, Anadol creates experiences prioritising sensory engagement over semantic clarity (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Refik Anadol, "Machine Memories: Space, 19th March – 26th April 2021'
Source: Anadol, 2021

The presentation of vast datasets beyond the limits of human perception and comprehension as fluid, tactile forms that slide, merge, and flow within one another, accompanied by meditative music, creates a hypnotic, synesthetic experience for the viewer. Amid this ever-shifting visual stream, meaning becomes ambiguous. This is because the only constant within the changing images is the database itself, which exceeds the grasp of human cognition. Therefore, what truly matters is not the content, but the experience that renders this database tangible. The image, stripped of meaning, resembles Baudrillard's (2022) synthetic image, conjured from nothing and destined to disappear. By transforming massive, abstract datasets into fluid, immersive, and tactile digital forms accompanied by meditative soundtracks, Anadol's installations induce a hypnotic, synesthetic experience for viewers. However, amid the constant flow of changing visuals, meaning becomes ambiguous. The only constant is the database itself, beyond human comprehension. Therefore, the proper focus is on the experience of visualising the database rather than interpreting its semantic content. The image, stripped of meaning, echoes Baudrillard's (2022) synthetic image, created from nothing and destined to vanish.

Approaching Anadol's art requires accepting certain implicit conditions. Viewers are deliberately deprived of meaning, logical interpretation, or semiotic reading to strengthen sensory and bodily engagement. Yet, guided by aesthetic pleasure and harmonic visuals, they do not experience dissatisfaction or disorientation. However, a centralised narrative persists. For example, when Anadol labels an image as "Nature's Dream", the viewer is expected to accept this title without any verifiable reference. Gaoyuanne (2022) describes this reception as a leap of faith towards ambiguity, suspending disbelief. In this way, the data-based art of Anadol surpasses modernism's ocular-centric language and evolves into a new experience-centred paradigm. Within this paradigm, the intellectual is excluded, and all emphasis is placed on elements that intensify the sensory experience. From the perspective of Actor-Network Theory, Anadol's installations can be interpreted as active agents that restructure the relationship between humans and data. Rather than being mere representations, these artworks participate in the network by shaping perception, emotion, and sensory engagement. These examples underline the ambivalence of transparency as both seductive and oppressive. They also highlight how non-human actors (algorithms, architectures, exhibition spaces) actively participate in the production of discourse.

6 Synthesis

Across these cases, transparency emerges in different guises: as bodily self-objectification (wearables), as efficiency and abstraction (Tesla interface), as aesthetic spectacle and critique (Anadol and Bonvicini), and as isolation through visibility (Tati). Despite their differences, what unites these examples is the recognition that artifacts do not simply reflect transparency but actively produce it as a cultural ideology. Technologies, artworks, and architectural forms are revealed as discursive agents that normalise transparency in ways that both empower and constrain. The comparative analysis of all five cases is summarised in Table 2. While each artifact enacts transparency in distinct ways, the table highlights the common logic that emerges across domains.

Table 2: Comparative analysis of discourses of transparency

Case / Artifact	Observed Discourse of Transparency	ANT Perspective (Actors & Relations)	Key Findings
Smartwatch / Wearables	Body as transparent, datafied	Human body, device, health platforms, institutions	Enacts self-objectification; normalizes everyday surveillance
Tesla Dashboard	Efficiency, immediacy, abstraction	Driver, interface, algorithm, machine system	Reduces tactile engagement; produces alienation through standardized control
Refik Anadol (Data Artworks)	Immersive spectacle of data flows	Algorithm, dataset, exhibition space, viewers	Aestheticizes transparency; conceals complexity, prioritizes spectacle over meaning
Monica Bonvicini (*Don't Miss a Sec!*)	Hyper-visibility, critique of surveillance	Architecture, public space, spectators	Exposes loss of privacy; transparency revealed as confrontation
Jacques Tati (*Playtime*)	Visibility without intimacy, isolation	Urban architecture, humans, cinematic framing	Transparency produces exposure without connection; visibility becomes alienating

Source: Own processing, 2025

As Table 2 illustrates, transparency appears as self-objectification in wearables, as abstraction in interfaces, as both spectacle and critique in artworks, and as social isolation in film. These findings underscore the ambivalence of

transparency as a cultural discourse, paving the way for the theoretical discussion that follows. These cases together suggest that transparency is less a stable quality of technology than a cultural logic enacted through specific configurations of human and non-human actors. What appears at first as efficiency, openness, or aesthetic spectacle often reveals itself as abstraction, objectification, or alienation. In this sense, transparency is not only a technical affordance but a performative discourse that simultaneously empowers and constrains. Recognising this ambivalence is crucial for understanding how digital culture is shaped today. The following discussion situates these findings within broader debates on Actor-Network Theory, Foucauldian discourse, and critical reflections on the "transparency society".

7 Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight that transparency, often celebrated as an inherent virtue of digital culture, is in fact a complex and ambivalent cultural discourse. By analysing a range of artifacts, from wearable devices and automotive dashboards to media artworks and cinematic representations, it becomes clear that transparency operates not only as a technical feature but also as an ideology that structures how humans relate to technology and to one another.

One of the central contributions of this analysis is to show how non-human actors participate in the production of transparency (Figure 8). Actor-Network Theory offers a useful lens here: smartwatches, dashboards, architectural forms, and artworks do not passively reflect cultural values but actively shape them. The smartwatch, for instance, reconfigures the human body into a site of continuous data production, while the Tesla dashboard reframes control as seamless but abstract efficiency. In both cases, the artifact is a mediator that scripts social practices, rendering transparency as calculability and predictability.

The artworks considered extend this perspective by demonstrating transparency's dual capacity for seduction and critique. Refik Anadol's installations aestheticize transparency, presenting data as a luminous spectacle that invites fascination yet conceals underlying complexities. By contrast, Monica Bonvicini's "Don't Miss a Sec!" exposes the violence of hypervisibility, confronting viewers with the loss of privacy in public space. Together, these works illustrate that transparency is not a uniform discourse but one that oscillates between immersion and resistance, normalisation and critique.

Tati's *Playtime* adds a temporal and architectural dimension to this discussion. The film anticipates contemporary debates by showing how environments saturated with glass and steel create visibility without intimacy. Here, transparency does not promise openness but enforces isolation. What is seen is not necessarily what is understood, and what is visible does not necessarily produce connection. This reminds us that transparency as a cultural ideal is fraught with paradoxes.

Taken together, the cases demonstrate that transparency in the network society should be understood as a performative and ideological construct. It is produced through networks of human and non-human actors, and sustained by discourses of efficiency, visibility, and control. From a Foucauldian perspective, transparency aligns with disciplinary mechanisms: it normalises self-surveillance and produces compliant subjects. From an ANT perspective, it is enacted through the agency of artifacts themselves. The convergence of these perspectives underscores transparency's ambivalence: while it promises empowerment, it simultaneously risks objectification and alienation.

This discussion contributes to current debates on digital culture in three ways. First, it reframes transparency as a cultural ideology rather than as a neutral affordance, extending theoretical work on media, design, and cultural studies. Second, it demonstrates how discourse analysis of cultural artifacts can be combined with ANT to reveal the performative role of technologies in shaping meaning. Third, it critically highlights the risks of a transparency-driven culture, where visibility is valorised at the expense of ambiguity, privacy, and human depth.

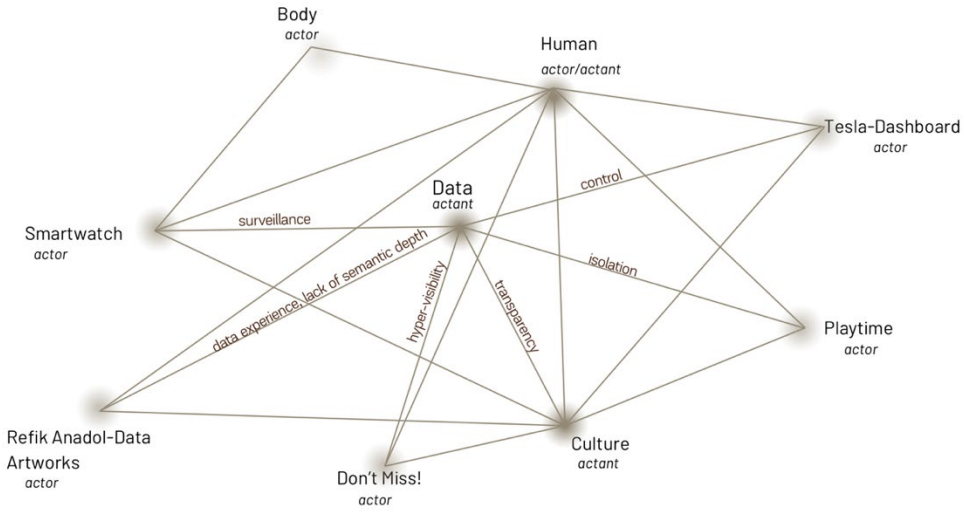

Figure 7: The transparent culture of the network society according to actor-network theory
Source: Own processing, 2025

This article has examined transparency as a cultural discourse within the network society by analysing wearable technologies, digital interfaces, media artworks, and cinematic representations. The findings reveal that transparency is not a neutral property of technological systems, but a performative and ideological construct enacted through the interplay of human and non-human actors. Whether framed as efficiency, spectacle, or critique, transparency emerges as a logic that shapes subjectivity, mediates interaction, and structures cultural meaning.

The study makes three key contributions. Theoretically, it reframes transparency as a cultural ideology within the framework of Actor-Network Theory, extending debates that have often treated transparency as either a political condition or a technical affordance. Methodologically, it demonstrates how discourse analysis of artifacts can be combined with ANT to systematically investigate the active role of technologies in shaping meaning. Critically, it underscores the ambivalent consequences of transparency: while it enhances visibility and efficiency, it also risks objectifying the body, alienating users from material engagement, and eroding the conditions of intimacy and privacy.

By situating transparency as a cultural rather than merely technical phenomenon, this article invites a reconsideration of the values driving digital culture. Future research could build on these findings by exploring how users themselves negotiate transparency in everyday practice, by conducting cross-cultural comparisons, or by extending analysis to emerging domains such as artificial intelligence and algorithmic governance. Ultimately, transparency should not be assumed as progress but interrogated as an ideology that both enables and constrains the possibilities of human–technology relations.

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