

In Translucence: Caught in the Act of Revealing Itself



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Viewers walk around a large display positioned as a sculptural object in the centre of the space. Within the sculpture are some exposed computer components, connected to the screen. Visible on the display is the live feed of a camera positioned nearby, pointed at the exhibit and surroundings. Viewers notice that while they and their surroundings can be seen in the camera feed, the exhibit at which they're looking isn't visible. The entire artwork is being erased from view in real-time by an offline AI model contained within the sculpture itself. As this camouflage becomes obvious it invites viewers to experiment, forcing the machine to make glitchy mistakes: the machine caught in the act of revealing itself. Advanced technologies of the past have vanished as they gradually subsumed into everyday utilities: the 'electric light' is simply a light. Though the proposed AI bubble threatens to burst, the tech has nonetheless become embedded in the lives of its users. How then might we consider futures for the likes of 'AI-powered journalism' or 'AI health-care'? We might describe a technology's propensity to disappear from view as its 'translucence'. Beyond semantic drift, translucence fundamentally alters the composition of technology, defining how we interact with it. In turn, translucent machines might work to conceal themselves, forming their own meta-translucence.

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Glitch Theory.



Fig. 1. *In Translucence* on display at Peckham Digital, London, October 2025. Photo credit: Mati Granica.

In Translucence

Advanced technologies are becoming ever-more closely interwoven with the lives of their users, as technologies increasingly mediate nearly every facet of day-to-day activity. To a greater degree than at any point in human history, technology can be seen intervening in how individuals communicate, how children learn, how society is governed, in the distribution of wealth or in the administration of healthcare and social services. (Issa and Isaías 2022, 192) Meanwhile, the changes wrought by these advanced technologies are met with an inflammatory mixture of both excitement for and fear of their future developments (Maher and Ivory-Ganja 2024).

However, many technologies of the past—previously considered advanced in their time—have in a sense disappeared despite the contemporary vociferousness of their novelty. Gradually they became pedestrian utilities subsumed into the everyday: the ‘electric light’ is simply a light, the ‘digital camera’ became an ordinary camera, and what once was proclaimed as ‘high’ definition video is now plainly standard. With consideration for today’s AI-related phenomena, how might tomorrow’s futures look if ‘AI healthcare’, ‘AI-powered journalism’ or ‘AI image generation’ are simply ‘healthcare’, ‘journalism’, or ‘images’? Though the current ‘AI bubble’ continues to tease a detonation (Howarth 2025), the tech embeds in our social and economic structures regardless; ossified perhaps, and not easily disentangled.

Technology’s Visibility

When approaching the path charted by these changing technologies, we might consider their ‘opacity’ or ‘transparency’ as an essential property. In this sense, machinery which has been perceived as opaque and concrete might become instead something intangible, and not perceived at all. This invisibility is by no means a novel idea; Marshall McLuhan famously articulated media analyses which defined content by looking past the tangible medium, declaring that “at the point where a new media-induced environment becomes all pervasive and transmogrifies our sensory balance, it also becomes invisible” (McLuhan 2009).

In contrast to McLuhan’s more definitive analysis of observed effects, we might consider this invisibility speculatively, looking toward futures and forming a conjectural picture whilst aware that no technology is perfectly transparent nor completely opaque. Rather, all technology holds some degree of ‘translucence’. *Translucence* is here a conjectural property, the result of a user’s potential to look ‘through’ rather than ‘at’ the machine, and this non-cognition must be considered when anticipating the harms (or perhaps benefits) a technology affords. *Translucence* is not the definitive quality of how visible a technology is, but instead an assessment of its potential to disappear. Candlelight cannot escape the candle; its presence is tied to its mode of production. However, the electric light’s ‘electric’ quality is less immediately apparent, and once no

longer positioned next to contrasting technologies it holds the potential to disappear; to join the cursory milieu of mononymic ‘light’. Thus, we might propose that the electric light is a highly *translucent* technology.

In the context of AI, we see an advanced and yet immature product, its presence often still leaning towards being opaquely known. Brightly-coloured icons and golden sparkle emoji noisily herald its presence, proudly strewn across productivity apps and search bars by tech giants eager to prompt user adoption. Translucence, however, speculates that in maturity these labels will disappear while the technology quietly persists. This suggests technological futures—some of which are now actively bleeding into the present—in which prosaic activities such as searching the internet, taking a photograph, or driving a vehicle are not just conducted with the assistance of AI, but surreptitiously do so without the full awareness of their users.

Beyond Semantic Drift

Semantic drift tracks shifts in meaning across time as concepts alter in significance, sometimes drastically (Stavropoulos et al. 2016). This drift is not always linear, nor is it necessarily natural: design is a part of the process, providing a crucial part of the feedback loop: ‘cultural intermediaries’ such as designers play an active role in measuring and articulating the gap between consumption and production (Nixon 1997, 183). What users understand of an object affects how its forms and interfaces are designed, thus the users’ interaction with the object changes, and in turn how it is designed is altered, and so on. Semantic drift does not merely alter the terminology of technology but fundamentally changes its composition.

Generative artificial intelligence is particularly relevant to this phenomenon: large language models rapidly and massively collate, synthesise and redistribute content at rates which outpace comprehension, catalysing the mass adoption of certain words, phrases and manners of writing while causing the decay of others (Parker 2025). In this sense, AI complicates semantic drift as users’ concept of technology is being changed not by the interaction of its users nor the influence of an external designer, but by the technology itself intervening in the construction of its meaning. Betti Marenko (2025, 8) describes a *meta-design*, the deployment of design to reflect on design itself, and in turn this idea presents itself here as a form of *meta-translucence*: a technology deployed to influence its own conception. The installation artwork *In Translucence* (Fig. 1) reflects upon this, illustrating the process of a machine being hidden from perception, not from the unattended evolution of its concept nor by the intervention of a human designer, but from the machine itself working to conceal its presence (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Prototype version of *In Translucence* on display at The Boardwalk, Glasgow, June 2025.

The Glitch as a Revelatory Tool

Translucence is distinct from transparency; no technology is perfectly transparent nor completely opaque. Like the displacement of light

through an imperfect lens, not quite hidden and not fully perceived, it leaves ghostly refractions of its presence. Glitches, the machine “caught in the act of revealing itself” (Marenko 2015), hint at the sleight of hand at play. These glitch-effects might be grasped at, played with and torn apart (Fig. 3), subverting the course of translucence and forcing the machine to unveil its tricks. Tomorrow, how might users choose to approach today’s translucent technology when its presence is no longer apparent? Should users oppose it, how then might technology adapt?

Fig. 3. Users interacting with *In Translucence*, on display at Peckham Digital, October 2025.



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