

Soft Haunting

There is a ghost wandering in limbo. Its bodiless existence haunts the living. Its difficulty to be captured in words or images haunts itself. This ghost has no past yet is owned a future. To be disabled is to become such a ghost.

Despite the societal progress made through existing visual rhetoric on disability representation, none of the modes work in the service of actual disabled people. “The rhetoric of realism is just as constructed and convention-bound as the rhetorics of the wondrous, sentimental, or exotic” (Garland-Tomson, 2001). The failure of such representation lies not only in its sole focus on what is lost, but on a failure to even comprehend the full extent of what is lost and what is created.

By combining hauntology and crip theory, my practice is to build a fifth visual rhetoric, the Soft Haunting, that translates the limbo space between loss and creation through the daily life.



For a moment, the old shame came back as I walk around in Bikini. My legs are still hurting from the flare up three days ago. There were blood marks all over them. Hardly the “beach body”. Walking to this beach is another turmoil. There is no transportation. I barely made it. But I’m here. And this is my beach body.

From the Haunted to the Haunting

Hauntology can serve as a guide to give shape to the unseen. Coined by French philosopher Jacques Derrida, the word playing of hauntology – haunting + ontology – indicates a repeated return of past ghost that disrupts the present and continues to remind us of another possible future. “What is important about the figure of the specter, then, is that it cannot be fully present: it has no being in itself but marks a relation to what is no longer or not yet” (Fisher, 2012). For the disabled people, most of whom transitioned from the able-bodied, this haunting presence of absence is inherent in our lived experience.

Soft Haunting links back to the lost body. While it is not “bodiless” in a literal sense, it is the reality of the disabled community to lose their means of connection in an able-body centric world. “Capitalism has desired disability to define able-bodiedness or to maximize profit, it has disavowed it, or institutionalized it, or left it to die in the streets” (McRuer and Wilkerson, 2003). Besides the obvious absence of accessibility that excludes disabled body in modern spaces, time, or our sense of time, once guided by nature now governed by clocks, is experienced at an increasingly high speed that makes disability “a failure of performance in/on time” (Sheppard, 2023). The failure to be present in space/time haunts us with a future of nothingness. The ghost of Soft Haunting is to put the disabled bodies in time/spaces they are “not supposed to be” and demand connection.

Soft Haunting links back to the lost Self. In contradiction to traditional belief on metamorphosis, where identity remains intact despite body’s transformation, in *The Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, Malabou highlights the transmutation of the Self happens in relation to destructive experience. Within that limbo outside of time/space, specters appear.

“An unrecognizable persona whose present comes from no past, whose future harbors nothing to come, an absolute existential improvisation... the Wholly Other” (Malabou, 2012). A Self that is “no longer” and “not yet”. The former haunts the present from the past, the latter haunts the present from the future. Since the disabled body is robbed of the opportunity to connect, the Self is robbed of the opportunity to recreate itself. The ghost of Soft Haunting is to recognize the change, mourn the old form and demand an opportunity to create the new.

The visual rhetoric of soft haunting captures the lost/objectlessness by connecting the physical reality of the disabled to the symbolic meaning of the ghost. The metaphoricity “offers to somehow ‘link back’ to the lost object, and promises the timeless” (Rahimi, 2021). By linking back to the body and Self lost, Soft Haunting reclaims the haunting for the disabled.



The Haunting of Spectral Disability

Despite similar focus on “what is lost”, Soft Haunting differs from other visual rhetoric in its hauntological understanding that “what is lost has not been laid to rest”. “The very idea of the ghost, simultaneously both absent and present, challenges our belief in the unbroken progression of linear time” (Coverley). A lost future continues to haunt the present. By foregrounding temporal disjuncture in its setting and on its subject to create a space of *moments*, the “no longer” and “not yet”, Soft Haunting enhances the ghost’s power to haunt.



My “able-body” Friend is Having a Fever

Through photography, film, or other visual media, Soft Haunting captures moments of disability and moments of ability. Its space of “no longer” and “not yet” allows for an extension of *moments* of “temporary or contingent universalization of queerness/disability” (McRuer) without the risk of problematic erasure on disabled

people's experience that comes with the permanence claim of "we are all queer/disabled". The ghost haunts the able-bodied in their moments of disability, in the limbo of "no longer abled" and "not yet disabled". It is essential for visual rhetoric to embody these moments to be in service of the disabled people. As McRuer argues, "it is those (disabled/queer) moments that provide us with means of speaking back to straight composition in all its guises." Furthermore, I argue another *moment* that such visual rhetoric should offer: the disabled in moments of ability. The limbo of "no longer disabled" and "not yet abled" made possible by accessibility and support. The role of the ghost is to deconstruct the "able-body worker" myth. The repeated invocation of spectral disability yet to come serves as a challenge to imagine another possible future together.



The Art of a Disabled Everyday Life

The visual rhetoric is to show the disabled people in these moments of active imagining in the everyday life. Since both hauntology and crip theory confronts a failure of the future, these moments of active imagining and summoning, by the disabled community, for another possible future are what makes us desirable.

Soft Haunting makes “desiring disability” a resistance by focusing on the creative desire of the disabled people. The haunting of the Wholly Other, “whose future harbors nothing to come”, lies in its threat to take over the Self with its nothingness. To resist the erasure of the Wholly Other is to avoid the three problematic “desiring” of disability -- “universalizing dismissal, fetishistic appropriation, or exploitative truth of the system” (McRuer and Wilkerson, 2003). In order to survive, the disabled person has to create a new future, a new Self. “Go find in the great chest of metamorphosis something to dress and embody this ego that emerges from unthinkable nothingness, this enigma of a second birth that is not rebirth.” (Malabou). Such need for creation is evident throughout disability studies. “[Imagination] though may sometimes be inferior to naturally occurring objects, they will always be superior to naturally occurring objectlessness” (Scarry). In Hauntology studies, such “movement engendered by the Future is the movement that arises from Desire”, written in Alexander Kojève’s reading of Hegel’s *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, “(creative) Desire is the presence of an absence”. Here we see the true name of the Soft Haunting ghost. Desire. To be seen, both as we were (no longer) and what we could be (not yet).

Soft Haunting does not haunt with horror, but with desire. A desire to rewrite and recreate the myth of a disabled everyday life. The visual rhetoric that truly understand the “desire/creation” and the “loss” of the disabled people practices “a hauntology that is relevant not just to grand events and traumatized minds, but to the everyday human experience of time and meaning” (Rahimi). To practice Soft Haunting is to practice mythmaking. To practice Soft Haunting is to

question and recreate the cultural power of signs in daily objects. To make them artefacts for summoning.



A Woman's Smoking Hand. Sign of rebel, chic, indie film/ A hand with inflammation, disabled body



Soft Haunting is not just a way to show disabled people to the able-bodied world, but also a guide for the disabled to recreate themselves. In the visual rhetoric of the Soft Haunting, time breaks its linear form for the able-bodied past and the disabled present to meet and create a lost future. It is the role of the ghost to blur the line of worlds, haunts the living, and summon a future not-yet-existed, “in which an incredible variety of bodies and minds are valued and identities are shaped, where crips and queers have effectively displaced the able-bodied/disabled binary.” (McRuer and Wilkerson). This writing is my first step to build such visual rhetoric through my practice in photography, film, scenography, and various visual media.

Unfinished & To Be Continued...

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