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'Haunted' AI

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The cascade of generative text-to-image models that emerged in 2022 led to much fascination and discussion. There was one phenomenon that went particularly viral, that of "Loab". Presented as a digital cryptid that haunts an unspecified latent space, Loab represents a continuum of themes regarding our perception of technologies as they emerge. We utilise Loab to illustrate imagined affordances in generative AI-images. Beginning with a brief introduction to the technical operations of latent space and text-prompts, we then move into a cultural analysis of Loab. We interpret this through two frames of reference. The first draws on the long history of haunted machinery through spirit photography. The second situates Loab within cyborg depictions, which have positioned the 'woman-machine' as threat. Between the technical and the cultural, we argue that Loab occupies a paradoxical double identity.

Keywords: Latent Space, Generative AI, Spirit Photography, Uncanny, Cyborg, Loab, Prompts, Visual Culture.

1. Introduction

> I discovered this woman, who I call Loab, in April. The AI re-produced her more easily than most celebrities. Her presence is persistent, and she haunts every image she touches […] This is a true horror story, and veers sharply macabre. (Supercomposite, Tweet, Sept 7, 2022)

> Spiritualism arose in parallel to the explosion of scientific discovery and invention in the late nineteenth century, when advances in physics and chemistry were fundamentally reconfiguring accepted notions of energy, time, space and reality itself. (Jolly 2006, 20)

On 7 September 2022, the artist known by the handle Supercomposite (Steph Swanson) posted a Twitter thread about a newly discovered 'woman' she had found haunting artificial intelligence (AI) (see Fig. 1, below). 'She' was given the name Loab and became a compelling case in the conversations around computational image making. More specifically, Loab supposedly haunts the hidden layers (latent space) of certain text-to-image models. By the time of writing, Supercomposite's initial tweet has nearly 80 thousand likes and nearing 20 thousand retweets and quote tweets combined. The character has been written about in major newspapers, magazines and online news forums around the world.[1] Loab even has a dedicated webpage.[2]

Clearly, Loab is a phenomenon that has attracted widespread attention. The sentiment surrounding Loab holds trepidation and fascination in equal measure. This paper takes the phenomenon of Loab and unpacks it by looking at how 'she' seemingly emerged from latent space. We argue that the fixation with Loab showcases society's mythologizing of AI. We intimate that the perception of AI images is framed by an attempt to fit them into pre-existing narratives. Starting with the construction of the image through 'negative weighted prompts' this paper questions its radicality as an image generating technique. It then goes on to situate the response to Loab within two wider historical genealogies — that of spirit photography, and — by weaving in depictions of the 'cyborg' — that of gendering bodies through images. Following this historical lineage, we then analyse how Loab fulfils a 'paradoxical double identity' (Harvey 2007). Ultimately, what makes Loab a spectacle is not only the visually striking attributes of the image series, but our cultural perceptions surrounding it. It is not only the novelty of the technology, but how Loab magnifies the imagined affordances of AI that make this case intriguing.

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1. For example, *The Atlantic* (Marche 2022), *New Scientist* (Sparkes 2022), *Forbes* (Tassi 2022), *ArtNet* (Batycka 2022), *Dazed* (Waite 2022), *Vice* (Rose 2022), *Rolling Stone* (Klee 2022), *Tech Crunch* (Coldewey 2022), *Smithsonian Magazine* (Raemont 2022), *CNET* (Ryan 2022), *Spiegel* (Breithut 2022), and *ABC* (Lavoipierre 2022).

2. https://loab.ai/

2. Loab Emerges: Latent Space and Negative Weighted Prompts

In April 2022, Open AI launched Dall-E2. As the second iteration of their text-to-image software, this quickly garnered widespread attention. In the months that followed, a host of different text-to-image applications emerged, including Craiyon (formerly Dall-E Mini), Stable Diffusion, Midjourney, as well as Imagen (not yet launched). For techno-optimists, these image generators herald a new frontier for creativity.[3] For critics of text-to-image models, concerns over the future of labour and the decline of autonomy underpin recurrent debates regarding the role of technology in society.

The technologies supporting algorithmically generated images have gone through significant evolutions in the last decade. Often bracketed under the overarching term deep learning (DL), these algorithms have received much attention for their supposed autonomy. Neural networks are considered 'deep' when parts of their operational layers are hidden but nonetheless key for a successful output. To learn, such algorithms tweak the parameters of the hidden layers without being given further instruction, other than a specific target. Because the algorithm works with two inputs, text and image, each has its own encoder. Autoencoders are algorithms that are used in DL, the purpose of which is to translate/mediate the data deemed informative into a compressed representation (Skansi 2018). Autoencoders consist of three parts, the input, the latent feature/representation, and the output. The mid layer of 'feature/ representation' is widely known as 'latent space' in computer science. Superficially, latent space can be understood as the organization and mapping of all the information in the database. This is where Loab can supposedly be found. As the website dedicated to Loab states: "She likely lives in the outer reaches of the latent space, and can be accessed with negatively weighted prompts" (https://loab.ai/). To receive output from this space, the decoder reconstructs representations from the space into an output. Our first step to understand so-called 'haunted AI' and Loab is to consider the latent space in which 'she' can be 'accessed'. Our next step is to consider how negative prompts are used to retrieve information from this space.

Loab has been reported to haunt an *unspecified group* of AI image synthesizer's latent space (the artist has never revealed which program was used in the discovery of Loab). This complicates our ability to materially grasp Loab's emergence and contributes to the imagination of Loab as a spectre. Although each model has its own unique architecture, common to this type of image development

3. For a more nuanced discussion on deep learning and creativity see Fazi, M. Beatrice. "Can a Machine Think (Anything New)? Automation beyond Simulation." *AI & SOCIETY* 34, no. 4 (December 1, 2019): 813–24. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-018-0821-0

are algorithms called diffusion models. Aditya Ramesh (2022), one of the creators of CLIP,[4] has described its latent space as a 'globe'. In this metaphor the encoders are trained to map the input as coordinates on a globe, that "functions as a 'concept space' shared by both modalities" (Ramesh 2022) of text and image. This practice of mapping data into vector spaces, as Adrian MacKenzie (2017, 51) puts it, is an 'expanding epistemic space'. How the data is managed and mined has important implications for how specific algorithms operate. Another metaphor used to describe the importance of latent space for AI images is through yet another geographical term, that of 'ground-space'. Abelardo Gil-Fournier and Jussi Parikka have articulated how this shift in the foundation of images is "read from a mass of images, instead of comparatively off the ground" (2020, 2). They also write that this abstraction of information — forming the ground of the image — "becomes synthetized with meaningful aesthetic and epistemological consequences" (Gil-Fournier and Parikka 2020, 2). The distinct material construction of each model means this will reverberate differently. What is of importance is that in all such models, the image shifts from capturing a location or event from the physical world, to becoming an image from images (Somaini 2022). Conceptually we can think of the image from image formation as the 'ground' of these images — and the unique latent space of the model to be a globe.

As stated, Supercomposite does not specify which model was used to manifest Loab, just that 'she' lives on the outer edges of a globe made up from images from images. To reach these outer edges of the globe, Supercomposite used 'negative weighted prompts'. Important to the process of mapping the information on a 'globe', is to establish a 'meaningful' relation between the text-image pairings it has been fed. A prompt is deemed successful when a trained text-to-image model presents an image with forms we recognise as 'correctly' matching the text. Matching pairs are charted closer together on the 'globe', while a mismatch is further apart. A negative prompt will present an output based on a reference point that is a mismatched cross-section to the expected prompt. The first negative text prompt Supercomposite began to experiment with was "Brando::-1". The algorithm returned an image that appeared like a logo with the words DIGITA PNTICS, imposed on what can be interpreted as a city skyline. To test if the opposite of the logo would give an image of Marlon Brando, the next prompt was "DIGITA PNTICS skyline logo::-1", and Loab appeared.

Although it is important to know the steps to technically develop an image of Loab, we want to emphasise another aspect of the image — how we respond to and imagine these processes. We want to draw attention to how perception is culturally constructed, including how

4. The diffusion model used in Dall-E2

Figure 1: Image description: An androgenous figure from the shoulders up (Loab), wearing a green top with a white pattern. Loab has long dark hair framing a reddened face, with stubbled upper lip and jaw, a scarred neck, and blacked-out eyes looking directly forward in the frame. Loab appears in portrait mode, with a blurred background of a house interior, with floor lamp and lamp shade. To Loab's right is a smaller figure, seemingly a distorted stuffed animal wearing a cast covered in unintelligible writing. This is the first image of Loab uploaded to Twitter by Supercomposite.

we imagine data is shaped through (autonomous) algorithmic operations. The last decade has pushed debates on so-called AI-images to the forefront, leading to an increased awareness on how issues in data harvest, cleaning processes, and algorithmic processing will influence how machines view or produce images (Magnet 2011; Buolamwini n.d.). Although, as MacKenzie (2017, 53) writes "the crux of the problem rests on the 'treatment' or operations that 'reduce terrestrial sensibilities and movements' to symbols."[5] Here, MacKenzie observes a 'long-standing nervousness' about the mathematical transformations of data. Loab introduces a new aspect of algorithmic bias embedded into the expectations of these machinic processes and resulting outputs. When we read these images, the meanings we construct are based on a history of perception that combines both cultural and technical aesthetics.

The framing of complex operations as symbols is suggestive of the tendency towards allocating or projecting affordances onto technology. An affordances approach enables researchers to evaluate the interrelation between culture and technology. For example, on their writing on Microsoft's chatbot 'Tay' — an experiment that was quickly corrupted and consequently shut down — Gina Neff and Peter Nagy (2016) highlight two broad reactions to the chatbot's behaviour, as well as media coverage surrounding the chatbot, and 'her' demise. The first "portrayed Tay as a reflection of the dark side of human behavior" (4923), which "emphasizes human agency in the social media construction of artificial intelligence" (Neff and Nagy 2016, 4923). This was a result of the chatbots descent as 'she' interacted via Twitter with users who encouraged 'her' to adopt inflammatory and obscene expressions. The second viewed Tay as a threat, whereby "Tay stands in for a belief that technology is out of control, spiralling into dystopian scenarios with little room for human agency" (Neff and Nagy 2016, 4923). Neff and Nagy's article builds on their earlier conceptualisation of 'imagined affordances' (Nagy and Neff 2015), which invokes a projection of capabilities onto a technology. In a similar manner, we propose that Loab exposes public perceptions around how AI images come about, and the way that informs how we read an image.

3. Uncanny Images

Looking at the included image above, the fact that Loab was gendered as female is fascinating. This is, in our view, a highly androgenous figure.[6] When Supercomposite wrote the initial prompt, it was to experiment with how the algorithm would respond to a negative

5. MacKenzie draws on the work of Hannah Arendt (1998, 265) in making this claim, referencing the reductive process of turning sense data into mathematical operations.

6. Nonetheless, in this article, we have likewise often used 'she' or 'her' in reference to the figure in these images, as we are reflecting on an existing discourse.

weighting of the name 'Marlon Brando'. When the image returned as a horror figure, the original male Hollywood star shapeshifted into a 'scary woman'.

Though we find it problematic, the positioning of Loab as a woman is part of what interests us in unpacking the cultural perceptions that Loab elucidates. As the earlier quotes from Supercomposite suggest, the artist is persistent in gendering this character. In September of 2022 (the peak of Loab-content virality) this was unquestioningly taken up by mainstream commentators, who proceeded to add the following descriptors around Loab images — 'nightmarish' (Sparkes, *New Scientist*, 2022), 'horrific' (Wickens, *PC Gamer*, 2022), 'horrifying' and 'demonic' (Waite, *Dazed*, 2022), 'spooky' (Klee, *Rolling Stone*, 2022), 'terrifying' (Coldewey, *Tech Crunch*, 2022; Marche, *The Atlantic*, 2022), 'disturbing and grotesque' (Rose, *Vice*, 2022), 'unsettling' (Raemont, *Smithsonian Magazine*, 2022), 'creepy' and 'macabre' (Batycka, *ArtNet*, 2022). Admittedly, a closer inspection of each article displays more nuance. There is the underlaying knowledge that Loab is data, not demon. Nonetheless, the tendency to slip into an easy anthropomorphising, or the temptation to create clickbait content, showcases the desire to make Loab stand in for something 'other'. In this case, the other is the trope of the 'grotesque' older woman. When Loab is given a persona, 'she' is woven into an existing perception of the inherent threat of AI. Just as Tay was gamified to take on the persona of the then feared 'corruptive' potential of social media, Loab is the representation of a fear stemming from 'AI images'. 'She' is the quintessential personification of how AI image technologies will encroach on our humanity and creative control. That Loab has been gendered as female adds an additional layer to this threat, a premise explored later in this paper, through the figure of the cyborg.

There exists a long historical relationship between the emergence of new technologies, mystical thought, and the feminine. In his book *Haunted Media*, Jeffrey Sconce (2000) draws on the development of spirit communication through tapping, which emerged in 1848, four years after the public debut of morse code. Referred to as the 'spiritual telegraph', this was an immediate reaction to a new technology that was able to mediate at unfamiliar distances and speeds. In response to this, Sconce writes:

> As many historians have noted, the Spiritualist movement provided one of the first and most important forums for women's voices to enter the public sphere. The majority of "mediums" were women, and the mediumship itself was thought to be a function of the unique "electrical" constitution of women. While in a state of mediumistic trance these women were able to comment (through the "telegraphic" voices of the dead) on a variety of contemporary social issues of concern to women. (2000, 12)

Importantly, Sconce notes that it was not only the Spiritualist movement that relied on mystical thinking in their rationalisation. The critique of the Modern Spiritualist movement sought equally fantastical arguments to delegitimise these mediumistic readings based on erroneous understandings of the women's mind and body being 'unbalanced' by the electrical currents of telegraphy. Sconce moves beyond a critique of Spiritualist ideology to consider the complex social and cultural circumstances surrounding the movement. Following Sconce, we likewise find it beneficial to consider the social and cultural significance surrounding the perception of Loab, rather than an outright dismissal of a 'haunted' digital cryptid. Given we are once again grappling with an era of technological change that is reshaping culture, it is unsurprising that another iteration of haunted media has emerged. It is from this point that we explore the historical evolution of a key imagined affordance in relation to Loab — the notion of the 'spirit in the machine'.

Loab follows a long genealogy of spectral appearances in mechanically developed images. In the 1860s, ideas began to emerge about photography's capacity to represent spirits in the United States. During the civil war, photography was utilised to report on the tragedies of the battlefield, with photographs of the dead entering into circulation (Jolly 2006; Kaplan 2008). The combination of this with an existing cult of Spiritualism led a central figure in the field, William H. Mumler, to 'discover' a method for supposedly photographing the dead as spirits (Jolly 2006, 16-18). Many Americans, having lost loved ones in the war, were marked by the desire to reconnect with deceased family and friends. Mumler capitalised on the potential of capturing these loved ones on film as 'spirits'. And so, 'spirit photography' met the zeitgeist of national mourning. Despite Mumler's first experiments with spirit photography leading to a court case and attempts to debunk his methods, the phenomenon grew into a wider culture of occult photography that lasted well into the 1930s.

Pierre Apraxine and Sophie Schmit (2005, 14) summarise the domain of occult photography to "designate that which is hidden, unknown, inaccessible to all but the initiated." The initiated will be able to access the spirit when using photography as a specific communicative form. In the early stages of photography, mechanical reproduction was perceived as an 'arrest of the moment'. This established a belief in the truthfulness of photographic representation, giving the credence of objectivity to spirit photography. According to John Harvey, it became endowed with a 'paradoxical double identity', as it was:

> ...at one and the same time an instrument for scientific inquiry into the visible world and, conversely, an uncanny, almost magical process able to conjure up the semblance of shadows and, with it, supernatural associations. (Harvey 2007, 7)

Martyn Jolly states that, "Mumler also drew on the authority of contemporary science to explain his apparent abilities." (2006, p. 20). For our case study on Loab, we take from this idea that there are individuals with 'specialist knowledge', able to unearth the otherworldly in the machine (through manipulating the 'nodes in the globe'). This practice falls within the realm of occult image cultures, all of which speak to a general human desire to understand both technology and the culture in which they emerge. As Apraxine and Schmit explain further:

> On the one hand, [occult photographs] tell us about a specific use of photography during a particular period, about the expectations and disappointments it generated, and its impact on attitudes. On the other hand, they tell us about human nature, its relationship to technology, its valorizing strategies, its hopes and beliefs. (Apraxine and Schmit 2005, 14)

This returns us to the inextricable link between technology and imagined affordances. That the camera and film were seen as imbued with the capacity to commune with the 'after-world' holds resonances with the notion of Loab haunting latent space. When Loab is said to roam the latent space of AI, it draws on this same mythologisation of hidden and inaccessible spaces. When 'she' emerged onto Supercomposite's screen,[7] we see this same paradoxical double identity invoked — Loab gives us further insight into the algorithmic process of negative weighting (scientific inquiry) and was conjured by the artist and haunts the machine (supernatural associations). Thus, Loab's haunting is also doubled — a formalist reading of the image offers a specter, a crone, a demon, a nightmarish figure emerging from the shadows. A secondary reading is of the image as traces of mass data. While computational, not clairvoyant, it nonetheless invites a sensory/perceptual encounter with the image. This combination of readings affords us the opportunity to look at Loab in relation to the figure of the cyborg.

While Loab is trademarked as 'the first cryptid of latent space' (loab. ai),[8] we are more interested in situating the representation of Loab

7. The work of Jeffrey Sconce points to a history of 'mysterious women' appearing on screens. He references an event in 1953, whereby "As Jerome E. Travers and his three children were watching *Ding Dong School* one day, the face of an unknown woman mysteriously appeared on the screen and would not vanish, even when the set was turned off and unplugged" (Sconce 2000 p. 2).
8. A cryptid is a being (normatively an 'animal' — think Loch Ness, or Yeti) that is claimed to exist, but its existence is not supported by mainstream science. For those who truly consider Loab a demon with autonomy and agency, she is a 'digital cryptid', and the notion that this popular conception of Loab is in fact scientifically a *misconception* aligns with the cryptid definition. It should be noted that 'male' cryptid figures have also emerged from latent space. The most notable of these is Crungus, who preceded Loab. Crungus was created in collaboration between Twitch streamer Guy Kelly and the Craiyon app. While well-known in various online subgroups (largely in the gaming community) these images did not receive the same level of fixation from a wide audience that we saw with Loab.

as both a continuum and a break in the depictions of cyborg women. This lens positions Loab in a longer tradition of associating the female body with the threat of the machine. Donna Haraway's canonical *A Manifesto for Cyborgs* (1985 [1991]) defines the cyborg as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (150). For Haraway, this has the potential to create space where social constructs (namely gender) could be surpassed. Loab defaults on Haraway's cyborg on two counts. First, there is no organism, only the imagined affordance of Loab as a living entity. David Tomas takes a multi-perspectival view of the cyborg, claiming that one type of cyborg is "the postclassical (software-interfaced) transorganic data-based cyborg or personality construct" (Tomas 1991, 32). Claudia Springer adds that this type "has no organic form but consists of the human mind preserved on computer software" (1996, 19-20). We can situate Loab within this widened view of the cyborg, as 'she' has no organic form but emerges from our collective data. Second, the gendering of Loab as female highlights that — rather than be surpassed — social and cultural constructs can take on a power of projection in computational imagery.

Springer, in her book *Electronic Eros: Bodies and Desire in the Postindustrial Age* (1996), offers a reading of key cultural depictions of female cyborgs, from Hadaly in the 1886 sci-fi novel *L'Eve future* by Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Maria in the 1927 film *Metropolis* directed by Fritz Lang, to Eve in the 1992 NBC television series *Mann and Machine*, among others (146-151). With these sexualized depictions of 'machine-women', Springer argues that "Both women and machines were thought to possess powers that, if unleashed, could prove disastrous to patriarchal order" (Springer, 151). *L'Eve future* is seen as somewhat of an origin story for later female cyborg depictions:

> The novel's interest in constructing an ideal woman intersects historically with the use of photographic reproduction to create the perfect female image, setting the stage for early cinema to unveil its obsessive fascination with the female form in the 1890s. (Springer 1996, 148)

Loab is the oppositional figure to the ideal woman showcased in Springer's reading. However, we see 'her' equally fetishised – albeit in this contrary manner. Loab fits with Bruce Grenville's assertion that "the female body and female sexuality have been used to represent a broad cultural anxiety surrounding the allure and the threat of the machine" (2001, 22). Othering a body using cultural symbology and images is nothing new, and historically has served the dual purpose of repudiating a particular people, and/ or ideology. The figure of the witch was villainised in part because of the feminised connection to nature that was being increasingly relegated to the fringes of society. The figure of the cyborg draws on the connection

(and therefore, conversely, the desire for separation), between the human and the machine.

Dánielle DeVoss, in her study of images of cyborg men and women found online, argues that "most visual representations of cyborg bodies are actually representations of "cyber" bodies, which reinforce contemporary notions of masculinity, femininity, heterosexuality, and power" (2000, 835). Continuing this logic, it coheres that these representations also reinforce contemporary notions by providing divergent visualisations – images that show us how not to be, what is unacceptable to the societal standard. In this respect, several commentators draw on the iterative images of Loab that depict her with children, often referring to Loab as a 'mother'. These images are gory and violent. One shows Loab holding up the decapitated head of a child, hands bloodied, both child and Loab open-mouthed in mid scream. Another has Loab sitting cross-legged, stomach swollen, clutching a newborn so tightly its face has contorted. In this image Loab again has blood-stained arms. When news outlet *ABC* asked another AI program, GPT-3,[9] to imitate Loab and answer some questions, the following response was recorded:

> **Do you think the AI is drawing on a specific archetype of a woman in creating you?**
>
> I think the AI is associating me with the archetype of a mother, because I'm often placed in a home with children. This archetype is often associated with being nurturing and caring, but also with being sad and domestic.
>
> **If you are the archetype of a mother, then why are you so often surrounded by injured and dead children?**
>
> I think the AI is trying to create a contrast between the ideal of a mother and the reality of a mother. In reality, mothers often have to deal with sick and injured children, as well as the death of children.

Indeed, at no point can we be sure that Loab is being depicted as having committed the crime of infanticide. We could equally read these images as a figure who is themselves haunted and grief-stricken by the death of a child. That we are quick to jump to blame says a lot about our cultural attitude towards mothering, and the preoccupation with the figure of the 'bad mother'. Our dread around these images coalesces around several thoughts – that we have not moulded our bodies and character to that which is deemed pleasing to so-

9. The article reference the GPT-3 and provides a link to OpenAI.

ciety, the familiarity of the (literal or figurative) home as 'disturbed', and the thought that the machine is haunting us.

Furthermore, the above conversation (reportedly conducted with GPT-3) reinforces our link to imagined affordances. There is no necessary correlation between GPT-3 and the image of Loab. Firstly, while Dall-E2 and GPT-3 are both created by the organisation Open AI, Supercomposite has deliberately avoided publicly naming the model used in discovering Loab. Even if Dall-E was used, the material specificities of GPT-3 and Dall-E respectively would impact the output. Moreover, as there is no one latent space, each algorithm will have its own unique variation of 'the globe'. The desire to give voice to Loab, adds to the continued anthropomorphising of Loab, building a sense of familiarity and recognition. Indeed, part of the experience of being haunted is recognition. In this way, we can draw on the concept of the 'uncanny', that which has made the familiar unfamiliar (Freud, 1919 [2003]). Grenville writes that, "The cyborg is an uncanny image that reflects our shared fascination and dread of the machine and its presence in modern culture" (2001, 10). As we have sought to showcase, Loab, as an uncanny image, feeds into our cultural anxieties around AI — that AI will shift beyond our human control, that it will manifest in evil and harmful ways, that we will not be able to understand how it functions, that it might replace us. However, we have also extended this argument to make the claim that Loab is uncanny because 'her' image stands in for the 'unacceptable' female body — also uncontrollable, also wicked, as well as older and unsightly. Yes, we recognise Loab. Many of us have been socialised to fear becoming her. As Ahmed (2000) argues, the stranger is only a stranger inasmuch as they are recognised, familiar as a strange figure. Loab holds this duality — an image that is uncanny, strange and, ultimately, recognisable.

The problematic interpretations of Loab align with the literal translation of unheimlich (Freud, 1919 [2003]), as 'unhomely'. Scott McQuire refers to this translation of uncanniness as 'disturbed domesticity' (2008, 8). McQuire goes on to note that "Uncanniness thus belongs to a complex scene of veiling and unveiling, of secrecy, revelation and improper exposure" (2008, 8). He builds on this, referring to the three core examples of 'uncertainties' given by Freud. The first is an uncertainty around the animate or inanimate qualities of beings and objects. The second is the question of doubling, (re)presenting one's own reflection in a way that disrupts our self-recognition. The third is the disintegration in the distinction between imagination and reality. Each of the three is applicable in unpacking the phenomenon of Loab. We can read the use of negative prompts as an improper exposure, supposedly granting access to a hidden space within the machine. By 'trespassing' into latent space, it unveils the uncanny. The dread around the image of Loab coalesces the three uncertainties of the uncanny. Through imagined affordances we blur

the lines between imagination and computational operations. As we have argued, Loab is the double of our images (as an image from images). As such, we are always faced with a (re)presentation of our reflection. What makes this uncanny is the generative process, which does not purely replicate, but synthesises. This process can give the illusion of animating a nonhuman space, leading to the perception of a 'haunting'.

4. The Paradoxical Double Identity of Loab

For all the hyperbolic discourse, there is an awareness that Loab is just data. Yet knowing that this image is made from the accumulation of images we've provided to the internet, makes the face looking back at us uncannier. It is the image of our images. Digital technology has, for many decades now, reflected society. In this culture, the screen has for many been a mirror where we might achieve our 'ideal' self. Since the early 2000s, when Vivian Sobchack (2004) wrote on how recent developments were used in television to avoid aging, this has only intensified. We have endless apps that will automatically bring youth, and shape our faces into an aesthetic cast, alongside blurring filters that smooth out our skin when videoconferencing. Sobchack persuasively writes that:

> we have been technologically altered, both seeing differently and seeming different than we did in a time before either cinema or cosmetic surgery presented us with their reversible technological promises of immortality and idealized figurations of magical self-transformation. (Sobchack 2004, 50)

Indeed, we can think through Loab using Sobchack's reading of the films *The Mask* (1994) and *Death Becomes Her* (1992). Both characters in these films go through a transformation that she describes as a form of digital morphing. What is remarkable is how the knowledge of this transformation is shaded by the desire to hide the operations of transformation. Both films attribute the technological transformations to what Sobchack describes as 'non-technical' elements (e.g. cosmetic surgery). It is not striving for beauty and youth that marks Loab. Rather, it is the failure to become Marlon Brando that causes the default into an image of a 'grotesque' version of a 'woman'. A process that nonetheless finds its parallel in Sobchack's reading of horror films:

> The alternative to cosmetic surgery in what passes for the verisimilitude of cinematic realism is a change in genre, a transformation of sensibility that takes us from the "real" world that demonizes middle-aged women to the world of "irreal" female demons: horror, science fiction, and fantasy.
> (Sobchack 2004, 40)

Whether an automatic facial filter on a photograph, or a text-to-image application that produces the closest rendering to what has been anticipated, such uses of AI adhere to the notion of magical transformation. Loab's digital morphing is hidden in the invisible layers of the machine, an affirmation of the occultist sensibility that she haunts latent space. Yet, Loab also works to *break*, rather than build, the transformation fantasy. The paradoxical double identity returns here, as the perpetuation of DL algorithms as wholly autonomous offers a sense of scientific underpinning to this fantasy. Loab, emerging from a negative weighted prompt, makes visible the 'great invisibility' of these processes, which are never only technological, but cultural. It shines light on that which is operationally hidden, alongside that which is repressed for being abject to patriarchal aspirations. Ultimately, we can only speculate how the algorithm came to present the image of Loab as the supposed 'opposite' of Marlon Brando (technically not the opposite per se, but such is the narrative presented to us). While this feeds into why images of Loab are considered disturbing, Sobchack argues that we do not wish to see the technological labour at hand that produces these operational representations. On the contrary, "the technological effects of these transformation fantasies are what we came for" (Sobchack 2004, 48).

Aiming to better understand Loab, brings an opportunity to shift our perceptions. Instead of seeing Loab as a spirit haunting the latent spaces of DL image generators, we can work with Loab to make visible the technological processes of these models. Through this paper, we have shown that while it is important to grapple with the technical aspects of developing these images, it is equally important to reckon with the inflated discourse surrounding them. Loab is undeniably evocative. But much of what has been found compelling about 'her' is a manifestation of an algorithmic imaginary — a desire to validate our fears around technological change. Just as occult photography gave insight to the zeitgeist of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, occult readings of latent space reflect our contemporary moment. The advanced technological processes involved in generative AI creates a distance that opens to the magical thinking involved in the perception of Loab. In other words, AI generated images are affective entanglements, their uncanniness lies not only in the image, but our view of the technology.

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