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The Sound that You Do Not See. Notes on Queer and Disabled Invisibility

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore how (in)visibility is constructed and deployed in the construction of normalcy by using an intersectional approach to queer and disabled experiences. In the first part, the focus is on able-bodiedness and heteronormativity as similar systems of compulsion in the production and the definition of normalcy. In the second part, the challenges posed to the presumptions of systems of compulsion are discussed: inhabiting a grey zone of indefinite readability, these cases subvert common assumptions on visibility and embody the possibility of framing invisibility as a political choice. In the third part, the figure of the acousmatic subject is presented: a subject that produces voices from a position of invisibility, challenging the idea of passivity often connected to oppression and marginalisation. The final aim is to critically discuss some of the issues connected to (in)visibility and to overcome its limits through expansion towards a more encompassing metaphorical figuration.

Keywords Visibility · Queer · Disability · Invisibility · Illness

Introduction

In 1952, the famous composer John Cage visited Harvard University in order to try out the anechoic chamber, a room where scientists had created conditions of total soundproofing. The aim of the visit was to "listen to absolute silence". When Cage entered the room, he found himself disappointed in hearing several sounds, such as the beating of his heart and a continuous whistle coming from inside his head. What he concluded was that absolute silence is an impossible experience for human beings, because human bodies never cease to produce sounds (Cage 1967). Two challenging suggestions emerge from this episode: firstly, the idea that the

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environment in which we live is a constant soundscape; secondly, that our bodies, themselves, are never completely silent.

The two metaphors fit especially well when approaching the issue of silent and invisible subjects: in particular, the core of this discussion will be disabled and queer experiences. The reasons to explore the construction of the (in)visibility of disabled and queer subjects lie in the several common features that create a special connection between them: a shared history of oppression and discrimination; difficulty in accessing spaces of political legitimacy; a similar struggle between identitarian and anti-identitarian streams within activism and academia; finally, especially in the case of crip studies and queer theories, the contestation of normality and a proud claim of diversity.

Through an intersectional gaze on queer and disabled experiences, the paper aims to explore how (in)visibility is constructed and deployed in the construction of normalcy. In the first part, I will explore how able-bodiedness and heteronormativity work as similar systems of compulsion in the production and the definition of normalcy. In the second part, I will present how invisible disabled and queer subjects challenge the presumptions of these systems of compulsion: inhabiting a grey zone of indefinite readability, they subvert common assumptions on visibility and embody the possibility of framing invisibility as a political choice. In the third part, I propose the figure of the acousmatic subject: a subject that produces voices from a position of invisibility, challenging the idea of passivity often connected to oppressed subjects. The final aim is to critically discuss some of the issues connected to (in)visibility and to overcome its limits through expansion toward the realm of hearing as a useful metaphor.

Compulsory Existences: Heteronormativity and Able-Bodiedness

> "Fools, said I, you do not know
> silence like a cancer grows."
> Simon&Garfunkel, The sound of silence

Disability as a social issue is quite a recent concept, which has acquired different, sometimes contradictory, meanings, in particular in the last decades: a growing number of studies and scholars have moved the focus from disability as an individual and/or medical issue to a perspective that recognizes it as the product of power structures and dominant discourses on normalcy (Barnes et al. 2002; Hughes and Paterson 1997). In particular, the development of crip studies created a fundamental contribution not only to analyses of how able-bodiedness is constructed and reproduced but also on the intersectional character of disability (McRuer 2006). In addition, crip studies generated important connections with queer theories, based on shared features of the queer and disabled experience. In the first place, the focus on non-normative bodies: disabled and queer subjects share a history of oppression, medicalisation and demonisation, during which they were portrayed as deviant, monstrous, alien. Furthermore, both are objects of discrimination in employment, education, housing and social life: despite the

development of social security measures and the general recognition of specific rights, especially in Global Northern countries, disabled and queer people are still excluded from social, political and cultural arenas. Following Samuels:

> A number of disability theorists suggest that disability has more in common with sexual orientation than with race, ethnicity, or gender - other categories often invoked analogically to support the social model of disability […] The history of an oppressive medical model for homosexuality and the nature-nurture and assimilation-transformation debates in the modern LGBT civil rights movement offer additional areas of potential common ground with disability activism (2003: 234).

Disabled and queer people experience specific forms of exclusion that mark them as Others from the "normate subject" (Garland-Thomson 1997), namely the white, heterosexual, able, cisgender man. In the complexity of intersectional positioning along axes of power, both queerness and disability represent markers for exclusion which interweave with other markers, such as age, class, race, religion and political affiliation (Davis 2008). Clearly, underlining the commonalities between queer and disabled experiences does not represent an attempt at flattening their specificities; nor it is a way to consider queer and disabled as monolithic identities or positionings. On the contrary, queer and disabled are wide categories with blurred, often unfathomable boundaries. Therefore, I will accept here the notion of queer and disabled as floating categories, extremely fragmented within but clearly positioned in a minor, silenced, oppressed location when confronted with dominant discourses.

The difficulty to define the contours of disability countervails the complexity of describing what able-bodiedness is: issues like chronic illnesses, invisible disabilities, temporary impairments challenge notions of (dis)ability (Kafer 2003). Similarly, queerness has moved from its origin as strictly connected to sexuality and is progressively moving towards a broader epistemologic gaze that deconstructs heteronormativity in different areas, such as global politics, economics and human rights (Eng et al. 2005).

Both disabled and queer subjects are embedded in systems of power which produce them as deviant from the norm and create the political, social and cultural conditions of invisibility in which they are positioned. The starting point in order to address the issue of (in)visibility, thus, is to acknowledge that access to visible positions is negotiated within complex systems that produce norms on who can be seen and who needs to be invisible. If it may be common sense to attest that visibility is actively produced as such, it is also fundamental to recognize that invisibility is also a deliberate product, which is sustained, nurtured and controlled (Santos 2002). In the case of disabled and queer subjects, (in)visibility is negotiated within the same systems in which norms on "right bodies" and "wrong bodies" are set: heteronormativity, on the one side, and able-bodiedness, on the other. In order to understand how (in)visibility works as a mechanism that produces political legitimisation and inclusion for oppressed subjects, it is thus necessary to unravel its inner workings and highlight the intersectional similarities between different forms of oppression.

Starting from her critique on compulsory heterosexuality, McRuer proposes to reinterpret Adrienne Rich's concept to contextualize crip studies:

> The system of compulsory able-bodiedness that produces disability is thoroughly interwoven with the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness; […] compulsory heterosexuality is contingent on compulsory able-bodiedness and vice versa. (2002: 89)

According to McRuer, both heteronormativity and able-bodiedness may be considered systems of compulsion, which define and reproduce standards of normalcy through the systematic exclusion of non-conforming subjects and the active production of their invisibility. These systems of compulsion are based on four fundamental concepts which I will call "presumptions": while assumptions, in fact, are concepts based on proofs, presumptions have the same root as prejudice - "to judge without proof" - and are based on common (although unproven) ideas.

The first is the presumption that normalcy can be defined. Heteronormativity and able-bodiedness work as pervasive forces that steadily confirm a specific standard, defined as "the natural order of things", for which there is no room for equivalent alternatives (Garland-Thomson 1997). Within this order, those who do not conform, that exceed, that subvert the normal standard, are considered to be recognizable and labelled as deviant. As Rich (1981) shows, compulsory heterosexuality represents a natural, shared order: whatever leaks from this normalcy, such as lesbian existences, is not considered as a valid alternative but as a minor deviation. In a similar manner, able-bodiedness shapes the able body as the normal standard and designates the disabled body as a minor, deviant, abnormality that differs from the norm (McRuer 2002). This dynamic generates two main consequences. Firstly, being considered as a natural order, systems of compulsion have for a long time been absent from the realm of political discussion (Kafer 2003). The idea itself of the normate subject emerged when studies on Othernesses began to question the production of normativity: feminism, queer theories and disability studies, indeed, challenged it from its foundation, bringing what was in the background right into the centre of criticism. Secondly, the production of deviance is necessary for the existence of systems of compulsion themselves in order to confirm the basis on which they are founded: the example of old freak shows, indeed, conveys the importance of showing the freak in order to reassure "normal" people about their privilege (Garland-Thomson 1997) and is replicated in contemporaneity through various mechanisms.

The definition of normalcy also establishes its compulsory character and generates the second presumption: the idea that normalcy is the best option. As Warner states, "nearly everyone wants to be normal. And who can blame them, if the alternative is being abnormal, or deviant, or not being one of the rest of us?" (1999: 53). Compulsion systems, thus, do not suffocate alternatives, as they are fundamental for their own survival. On the contrary, they reinforce dominant discourses pointing at the social undesirability of deviance from the able-bodied and heteronormative rule. In the case of disabled subjects, in particular:

> a system of compulsory able-bodiedness repeatedly demands that people with disabilities embody for others an affirmative answer to the unspoken question, Yes, but in the end, wouldn't you rather be more like me?. (McRuer 2002: 93)

The implicit question of the desirability of normalcy is, indeed, contained and also repeated in common stereotypes on homosexuality, which explain it as a "phase", a "temporary choice until you do not find the right man for you" or a "natural mistake" (Holtzman 2009).

The third essential is the presumption that social reality is divided into binary structures. Systems of compulsions are epistemologically oriented to dichotomous interpretations of social reality, which sustain a rigid division between what is good and what is bad: the dichotomy between able/disabled, heterosexual/homosexual, but also between male/female, white/black, rich/poor creates a fundamental reassurance about the sides of the fence in which normalcy is positioned and interplay with each other to build the normate subject (Haraway 1991; Garland-Thomson 1997). In these systems, therefore, those subjects whose intersectional identities position them on different sides at the same time represent a real threat, as in the case, for example, of genderfluid people. The same applies to those who do not clearly fall into one side or the other, such as invisible disabled people or lesbian *femmes* (Samuels 2003).

The fourth presumption is also linked to a binary division of the social world and is based on the conception of identities as monolithic and fixed. Dominant discourses represent able-bodiedness, sexual orientation and gender identity as stable features that cannot change during the life-time of individuals and which come from nature. Queer theories have indeed largely contributed to promoting the idea of sexualities and gender as socially constructed, evidencing the agency of subjects in choosing how to comply to heteronormative scripts: while heteronormativity is founded on an idea of immutability, queer theories propound fluidity and changeability (Eng et al. 2005). Moreover, "the fact that we will all become disabled if we live long enough is a reality many people who consider themselves able-bodied are reluctant to admit" (Garland-Thomson 1997:14): able-bodiedness is a highly precarious privilege, if we consider that each body is ceaselessly exposed to the risk of becoming disabled, not only due to ageing, but also because of accidents, illnesses or random events. As Klamer expresses:

> Our ill and dis/abled bodies are literal embodiments of our culture's insecurity regarding the mortality and imperfectness of the human body, and are therefore hidden and rendered 'private' matters'. (2009: 27)

The contradiction between a system based on ideas of stability and its effective transience is at the basis of what Butler defines as "the inevitable comedy" of heterosexuality – and of able-bodiedness, as McRuer suggests through analogy:

> heterosexuality [able-bodiedness] offers normative […] positions that are intrinsically impossible to embody, and the persistent failure to identify fully and without incoherence with these positions reveals heterosexuality

[able-bodiedness] itself not only as a compulsory law, but as an inevitable comedy (2002: 93)

Systems of compulsion that reinforce heteronormativity and able-bodiedness as normalcy are, therefore, based on an "inevitable impossibility" (ibid.): the impossibility of fully accomplishing the expectations of normalcy. It is, indeed, in the acknowledgment of this impossibility that the political potential of disruption proposed by crip studies (McRuer 2006) and queer theories (Eng et al. 2005; Warner 1999) lies.

Challenging (In)Visibility

When you hear a sound,/That you just can't place
Feel somethin' move/That you just can't trace,
When something sits/On the end of your bed
Don't turn around/When you hear me tread.
(Queen, Invisible man)

Presumptions at the basis of compulsory able-bodiedness and heteronormativity are pervasive and hard to unravel. They also constitute the basis for the construction, reproduction and reinforcement of (in)visibility. Both visibility and invisibility are produced within these systems as means to bolster normalcy. The affirmation of visibility has been a fundamental feature in theories and practices of identity within Western culture (Schlossberg 2001). In several disciplines, visibility has been deployed as the dominant aspect of an equation in which the "invisible" has functioned as synonymous with minor, oppressed, silent. In this perspective, visibility implies the promise of political readability and the assumption that what is visible is recognizable and what is recognizable can easily be placed within the system of compulsion (Samuels 2003). As Kafer underlines, "the meaning of disability, like the meaning of illness, is presumed to be self-evident: we all know it when we see it" (2013: 4). Quite similarly, queerness itself is expected and presumed to be self-evident and recognizable. This concept of visibility entails an inter-relational exchange between a subject that is seen (or goes unseen) by another subject: in this exchange, visibility or invisibility are means through which power imbalance is negotiated. The invisible subject is produced as such by eyes that do not want to see and plays a passive role in the process. Invisibility is thus not a condition per se: it is the product of a process actively prompted and sustained.

The connection between visibility and immediate readability is part of a dominant discourse which has several aspects in common with the presumptions of systems of compulsion: in particular, the idea that what is not aligned should be recognizable and that what goes unseen is ultimately not important.

Crip and queer theories criticize and challenge the dichotomy between visibility and invisibility and insist on the power structures that produce invisibility as a means to exclude and discriminate. Indeed, coming from a long story of invisibility, queer and disabled subjects developed strategies of survival and subversion that make a critical and surprising use of the means of oppression they faced. As Sandahl notes:

> Queers and cripples often experience profound isolation while growing up, since they are rarely born into queer or crip families, much less communities. To cope with this isolation, and to resist the negative interpellations of being queer or crippled […] members of both groups have developed a wry critique of hegemonic norms. (2003:37)

As a reaction to invisibility, LGBT movements have often insisted on the necessity of visibility as a political tool to overcome oppression and bring bodies right to the centre of the public scene. The accent on coming out has been constitutive of identity politics:

> In the dominant cultural discourse, as well as in lesbian and disability subcultures, certain assumptions about the correlation between appearance and identity have resulted in an often exclusive focus on visibility as both the basis of community and the means of enacting social change. Discourses of coming out and passing are central to visibility politics, in which coming out is generally valorized while passing is seen as assimilationist. (Samuels 2003: 244)

Not surprisingly, the values or dangers connected to passing have been highly debated, especially within transgender movements, often creating fractures between opposite visions: on the one side, those who interpret transgender visibility as a necessary means for social transformation and read passing as a normative longing produced by heteronormativity; on the other, those who regard passing as a fundamental stage in the complex transitioning process (Schlossberg 2001).

In the case of disability, this concept of visibility turns out to be highly problematic, since it suggests that some disabilities are always visible and the invisible ones are not real disabilities: again, it stems from the presumption of identities as monolithic and stable throughout time and place, flattening out the diversity of impairments, illnesses, and conditions that fall under the label of "disabilities" (Kafer 2003). In addition, it reinforces the idea that what is not visible is not serious or worth taking into consideration. On this basis, "invisible disabilities", such as chronic illnesses, temporary impairments and in general all disabilities that do not visibly mark the body as not-able (not-normal), create a destabilizing effect on the compulsory able-bodiedness system. On the one hand, in fact, disabled subjects are forced to pass in absence of a specific, deliberate and conscious act of coming out; on the other hand, since the "real" disability is assumed to be visible, people with non recognizable marks run the risk of being suspected of cheating (Clare 2001; Holtzman 2009). Therefore, passing as an able-bodied person seems to be more a destiny than a choice:

> While these physical problems have increasingly become more salient features of my identity over the past couple of years, because my illnesses/disabilities are invisible and my body appears to be healthy and able (most of the time), I struggle with negotiating the practice of self-identification. Since I don't fit into the prototypical mold of what disability has been constructed to mean in this culture and because I can 'pass' as an able-bodied person, I often feel unworthy identifying as dis/abled. (Klamer 2009: 27)

People with invisible disabilities, therefore, inhabit a grey zone in which both marks of normalcy and signs of disability are unexpectedly undercovered. Samuels unravels this double challenge proposing a further distinction between invisibility and nonvisibility:

> While the term invisible may be used in a literal sense to signify an unmarked social identity, the metaphor of invisibility has long been used to indicate the marginality or oppression of a social group. […] I employ nonvisible to indicate the condition of unmarked identity and invisible to indicate social oppression and marginality. (Samuels 2003: 251)

Invisible disabilities are often delegitimised because they challenge some of the presumptions of compulsory able-bodiedness and question the immediate readability of non-conforming bodies; similarly, those who perform a gender expression which is not expected to be linked to a non-conforming sexual orientation experience similar discredit, as in the case, for example, of lesbian *femmes*. For a long time, *femmes* have experienced exclusion within queer communities and from the heteronormative context (Coyote and Sharman 2012). While showing marked feminine appearance and being visible as superwomen, performing female gender in a hypervisible way, they also reclaim their homosexual orientation, generating a short circuit in the heteronormative system (Brownworth 2011). Their political readability as non-conforming subjects is enacted through a deliberate coming out that disappoints expectations connected to their appearance: passing as "normal women" is, indeed, in the first place a destiny which can be subverted only through a conscious coming out.

In a framework that recognizes the political potential of invisibility, coming out acquires a different meaning. In her analyses, Ellen Samuels (*ibid.*) underlines the difference between "to come out" and "to come out *to*": the former refers to a first time in which a subject recognizes his/her own identity as non-conforming, while the latter points to a specific event of disclosure to someone else. Whilst "coming out" signifies a process of making visible a non-conforming identity and recognizing that it is valuable, meaningful and important (although society may consider it deviant), "coming out to" requires the presence of someone external, recalling the interrelational feature of visibility. The grammatical difference is actually explicative of different discourses deployed in queer and crip studies toward the issue of visibility. When a disability is visible, that is, when the disabled body is recognizable as such because of marks, signs, visible impairments or difficulties in performing "normal" activities, the act of disclosure is, indeed, a "coming out to", a "process of revealing or explaining one's disability to others, rather than as an act of self-acceptance facilitated by a disability community" (*ibid.*: 239). This process finds immediate resonance in the acts of visibility performed by queer subjects whenever they show their non-normative practices or bodies in a public space or in the more intimate context of families, friends and colleagues (McRuer 2002). On the contrary, when a disability is invisible, the process of coming out goes in an opposite direction, because it requires the ability to challenge the equation of appearance with ability and to deliberately withdraw from the dominant privilege connected to the possibility of passing. These choices "weigh issues of stigma, pride, prejudice, discrimination, and privilege but rarely put the matter to rest" (Brune and Wilson 2013: 2):

they reflect the conundrum of marginalisation, fear and victimisation socially related to disability.

From being the "alienating consequence of coming out in a hostile context" (Derricotte 1997), invisibility acquires the meaning of being a valid option to cope with compulsory able-bodiedness and challenge its contours, revealing the failure of its alleged stability. Similarly, invisibility can become a choice undertaken by those queers who engage with the heteronormative context challenging the paradigm of visibility as a necessary political tool (Hedva 2015; Jones 1997). The equation between visibility and otherness reinforced by heteronormativity and compulsory able-bodiedness risks creating, on the opposite side, a discourse on "compulsory coming out" or "compulsory visibility", which has, indeed, often been deployed in LGBT activism.

Systems of compulsion work in order to present a dichotomic idea of visibility, in which visibility and invisibility are passive and cannot coexist. On the contrary, the experience of invisible disabled and queer subjects shows that it is possible to re-frame invisibility as active strategies, with equal subversive power, which can result in disruptive practices and challenging politics.

The Voice of the Invisible: Acousmatic Subjects

> Mandíbula marcada, palabra preparada/cada letra filada está en la cresta de la oleada
> sin pena ni gloria escribir esta historia/el tema no es caer, levantarse es la victoria […]
> Liberarse de todo el pudor, tomar de las riendas/no rendirse al opresor
> Caminar erguido, sin temor/respirar y sacar la voz.
> (Ana Tijoux, Sacar la Voz)[1]

Going back to the story of John Cage in the anechoic chamber, we find the suggestion that bodies are always speaking and are never silent. A semantic move from the metaphorical area of sight to the one of hearing may offer interesting elements in order to frame (in)visibility in its complexity without falling in the trap of dichotomies.

As previously affirmed, visibility and invisibility are inter-relational concepts, since they require more than one subject to engage in the process: an individual is not (in)visible per se, but is produced as such through the presence and the active engagement of others that see, watch or close their eyes. Moreover, (in)visibility is the result of multi-layered performative, fluid and unstable processes: invisibility and visibility may be performed *at the same time* in different aspects of identity or positioning, and this inter-relation may change according to the context. Going back

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[1] "My jaw is set, the word is ready, every letter pointed, it's at the crest of the wave, no pain and no glory, I'll write this story, It's not about falling, getting up is the victory […] Free yourself of all the shame, Take hold of the reins, Don't give into your oppressor, Walk tall and without fear. Breathe, and raise your voice" (translation by the author).

to the resonances between queer and disabled experience, a person may be visible as lesbian but not as disabled in the workplace, while not coming out about her homosexuality with her family doctor. If visibility is mostly intended as the result of a power position, invisibility has been framed, in the dominant/dichotomic discourse, as a passive condition, in which there is little choice left and only in the direction of visibility, for example through coming out. However, what happens if we frame (in)visibility as a hearing issue? Audibility needs a subject which produces sounds or is silent and which may be listened to or ignored by another subject: it is, again, an inter-relational exchange. Nonetheless, the audible subject produces its own voice and has the power to speak, to remain silent or to emit sounds which exist independently from the subject that will be hearing and giving them sense and recognition. There is, of course, a difference between *fonè* (pure sound) and *logos* (discourse), as the first may not be a significant or coherent emission, while the second is intentional, rational and always political (Dolar 2006). However, in this discussion, what is most important is that each person has a voice per se, a voice which is closer to *logos*, and this is independent from who is listening and the conditions in which this voice is emitted. Therefore, a silent subject is different from a silenced subject. This difference reinstates agency in both ends of the relation: for the subjects who speak (or decide not to) and for the subjects that listen (or do not listen or do not create the conditions for the voice to be heard). This way, we can imagine the existence of silent but visible subjects. Also, we can imagine invisible but speaking subjects, for which the chosen or forced invisibility does not equate to a non-existence.

Taking this differentiation, I suggest the figure of the acousmatic subject. "Acousmatic" is an adjective that refers to sounds produced in absence of a visible source: in other words, acousmatic sounds are those that are heard but whose source is not visible (such as the sounds from radios). Since they break the immediate equation between sound and source, hence between visibility and audibility, acousmatic sounds produce an effect of uncertainty and confusion. In literature and popular culture, this effect has often been used to represent the existence of Power, as a disembodied entity which is everywhere and nowhere (Dolar 2006). However, the disappearance of a visible source focuses attention more on the sound than on the source from which it comes. I suggest that invisible disabled and queer people that challenge compulsory visibility may actually work as acousmatic subjects: while being invisible for the systems of compulsion of able-bodiedness and heteronormativity, they, indeed, create voices, stories and sounds through a strategic use of invisibility as a political choice.

The dichotomy between visibility and invisibility is founded on the necessity of a second subject that proves the existence and legitimacy of the oppressed subject. The acousmatic figure broadens the border of this concept of visibility, adding the agency of subjects and the importance of their choices in the use of (in)visibility to produce voices. If (in)visibility refers to the inter-relational dialogue of oppressed subjects, the metaphor of the acousmatic subject underlines the complexity of individual positioning, underlining the importance of agency and choice. Acousmatic subjects negotiate the contours of their invisibility through strategic uses of visibility, coming out, passing and normalization. This way, they challenge the idea that only what is visible exists and deserves validation. Furthermore, through the accent

on agency, acousmatic figures reinstate the possibility of blurring dichotomies in order to rewrite different sets of narratives on their bodies and experiences.

A timely example of acousmatic subject can be found in the images circulated through the campaign "This is what disability looks like". The campaign was launched by crip activists as a response to the global success of memes and images that depicted disabled people together with inspirational quotes, such as "the only disability in life is a bad attitude" (McRuer 2018). The campaign featured images spread through social media in which people would show the real conditions of disabled life, in unapologetic, often confrontational ways. Each image would depict a person, accompanied by the claim that "this is what disability looks like". Several invisibly disabled persons also participated in the campaign, contributing with photos of their bodies. Their example can be read as an acousmatic strategy: as we look at the pictures, indeed, we see people who do not look disabled (therefore, that could easily pass as an able-bodied person). However, the pictures are accompanied by the statement (the *logos*) that "This is what disability looks like". The short-circuit is created through the apparent contradiction between what is objectively in front of our eyes - a non-disabled person - and what is stated through the claim (the voice, the discourse, the statement). The confusion produced through the image is the reflection of all the presumptions that are at the basis of able-bodiedness, that are challenged not through something that is *seen* but through something that is *said*. The invisibility of disability, in this case, is not a qualifying element of disability (or able-bodiedness, as the opposite): it is a "function of how austerity of representation trains us to look", as McRuer articulates in his analyses of the campaign (2018: 84). The example also provides the opportunity to reflect on the combined effect of (in)visibility and audibility. In the pictures of the campaign, in fact, the statement questions the idea of visibility at the core, through an insistence on what disability looks like. The type of visibility expected in an able-bodied compulsory system is thus challenged not by making visible what is usually invisible, for example, through showing which parts of these bodies are actually affected by impairment or disability, but by making audible the "inevitable impossibility" at the basis of able-bodiedness. The process of disorientation initiated by acousmatic figures, then, entirely embraces the queer politics of "disturbing the order of things" (Ahmed 2006: 161).

From a bi-dimensional and dichotomic concept of visibility versus invisibility, acousmatic subjects embody another level of political subjectivity, that can be useful in order to understand the intersectional positioning within systems of oppression, in which silence and invisibility may be equally politically productive as voices and visibility.

Conclusions

"Everything we do is music".
John Cage, On silence

John Cage affirmed, in several interviews, that "4′33" was the best piece he ever composed: it is a song in which the musician remains silent, in front of the piano,

for four minutes and thirty-three seconds. It was composed after the visit to the anechoic chamber. Although the official aim of the composer is to make the audience listen to silence, the sounds and noises produced by several bodies gathered in the same room create a soundscape which is everything but silent: the creek of chairs, coughing, people's breathing, the noise of the lights, all constitute elements of a composite soundtrack. The environment we live in is, indeed, a constant soundscape: for queer and disabled people, this environment is made of heteronormativity and able-bodiedness, a complex setting of norms, expectations, presumptions and definitions of normalcy.

The unexpected use of (in)visibility and silence, as well as the combination between different positionings, holds the political potential to create a short circuit in the systems of compulsions that expect normalcy and deviance to comply with determined rules on (in)visibility. In particular, the grey areas between the expected dichotomies are favourable terrains to perform positionings that deconstruct dominant discourses on (in)visibility and unveil the inconsistence of the able-bodied/heteronormative rule.

The figure of the acousmatic subject leads towards a more complex reading of intersectional identities and opens out to the challenges posed by discourses on (in)visibility based on gender, class, age, race. It is a figure that also raises awareness over the power of these discourses and their side-effects: on the one side, the celebration of visibility at all costs, a discourse still very much engrained in collective politics and activism; on the other, the delegitimisation of invisibility and passing as a strategy of passivity and compliance with normativity. Moving the focus away from these narratives, acousmatic figures state their inadequacy and rewrite marginalization through fluid processes of engagement with invisibility, visibility and audibility at the same time. It is nevertheless important to underline how these processes do not romanticise invisibility as a sort of ever-winning undercover strategy, inasmuch as they do not reject visibility in terms of its political potential. It is not just a crip call they respond: it is, ultimately, the queer call to a "space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projecting horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies" (Berlant and Warner 2005).

Acousmatic figures show that there is more than one way out of the dichotomic setting in which able-bodiedness and heteronormativity are embedded. Through the critical stance towards these multiple challenges, they may in the end represent a political figuration that embraces (in)visibility in all its possible nuances and transforms it into a collective call for transformation: through invisible voices that disorient, visible silences that speak and a ceaseless work of disruption of normalcy.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The author declares she has no conflict of interest.

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