
#GHOSTFEMINISM

#POSTFEMINISM

UNCANNY DOUBLES IN POSTFEMINIST SENSIBILITIES — Feminism appears hipper than ever, shining in new (and expensive) clothes (e.g. in a €620 Dior shirt, Lubitz 2017). At the same time, women's marches and echoes of #metoo are shaking up the media landscape. Yet anti-feminist sentiments, most visible in the form of the conservative alt-right's political success, seem to be growing more powerful.

— Scholars have observed these "ambivalences of visibility" (Hark/Villa 2010: XVII) since the start of the millennium and grouped these phenomena under the contested term "postfeminism." Rosalind Gill, in the most comprehensive approach, understands these often-contradictory phenomena in terms of a *post-feminist sensibility*, a mode characterizing cultural life which can be described as gendered neoliberalism that has become hegemonic, commonsensical (Gill 2017: 611).

— It seems that a core feature of the gothic genre is central to this postfeminist mode. In 2013, Nancy Fraser deplored the fact that feminism had "gone rogue" (224), departed from the truly critical second-wave's potential, and turned into an "*uncanny double*" (ibid., emphasis added). By understanding the ambivalent representations of postfeminism as *ghost feminism*¹⁾ which channels the gothic's *uncanniness* and the figure of the *double*, we can make sense of current postfeminist sensibilities. This, in turn, enables us to critically read the contradictory messages conveyed by post/ghost feminist cultural artifacts.

— Fraser's "uncanny double" harks back to the Freudian uncanny (the secretly, repressed familiar), but also to the gothic trope of the double that appears "whenever a character confronts an external projection of some deeply repressed material" (Daffron 2018: 75). On the cultural level, an uncanny double of feminism can thus be understood as the strangely-familiar-but-not-quite-the-same feminist artifact. It displays feminist claims entangled with a neoliberal agenda, which, on a closer look, strips it of its critical potential. As a result, the double marks those repressed – in the neoliberal context, devalued – emancipatory qualities of feminist endeavors, a strange residual phenomenon that emerges as "a ghost [...] returning for [...] recognition" (Bacon 2018: 3). The gothic terminology offers a way to focus the blurry boundaries that the

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The terminology is also used by Munford and Waters (2014), who identify a "ghost feminism" in which images of past ideals of femininity and feminism haunt current popular culture.

postfeminist commonsense hegemony entails. It enables a *postfeminist literacy* that can formulate questions such as: “What is secretly familiar in terms of feminist ideals, but may be presented in a re-appropriated way, (thus referring to its repression)?” — Regarding our introductory example, the Dior shirt can then be read as promoting feminism on a representational level while at the same time repressing a capitalist critique that is central to feminist projects (see e.g. Federici 2004) through its high-fashion pricing. Another example: The social networking site Girlboss® (for “strong, curious, and ambitious women”) represents the attempts to gloss over the difficulties of “having it all”, especially for the working woman striving to ascend in a male workplace (see McRobbie 2015). As a result, the uncanny quality of neoliberal feminist representations also serves to normalize oppressive, or even anti-feminist notions. This may shed light on why the “new cultural prominence of feminism” seems to be accompanied by a “rapidly intensifying misogyny” (Gill 2017: 611). Gothic vocabulary, especially the mode of the uncanny, therefore proves to be a useful analytical tool for a postfeminist literacy that is needed to articulate implications of contemporary postfeminist representations.



// Figure 1

Businessinsider (2017): Dior is selling a plain cotton t-shirt that says ‘We Should All Be Feminists’ for \$710

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Fig. 1: Screenshot: Businessinsider, <https://www.businessinsider.com/dior-we-should-all-be-feminists-shirt-2017-3> (13.12.2021).

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