

Ghosting and ghostbusting Feminism

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The past is never where you think you left it.

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Over the last two decades, feminist scholarship has consistently drawn attention to the “post-feminist sensibility” (Gill, 2007) overtaking cultural imagination, wherein feminism is only alluded to “in order that it can be understood as having passed away” (McRobbie, 2011). Described by Angela McRobbie as “the aftermath of feminism” (2008), postfeminism corresponds to the “undoing of feminism” in neoliberal societies, where discourses of choice, empowerment and individualism have made feminism seem unnecessary, obsolete, and deceased. Recently, however, after a period of sustained evaporation, the “f-word” seems to have reentered the sphere of public awareness, both in political discourse and popular culture. Phenomena such as Beyoncé’s appropriation of Chimamanda Adichie’s talk “We Should All be Feminists”, as well as ensuing criticism by Annie Lennox (Weidhase, 2015); Emma Watson’s #HeforShe campaign, through which she urged men to stand up for women’s rights; campaigns such as “this is what a feminist looks like” (Cobb, 2015); Hollywood actresses, from Jennifer Lawrence to Patricia Arquette, coming forward to denounce the gender wage gap; online feuds between Miley Cyrus and Sinead O’Connor over sexualized subjecthood (Brady, 2016); Facebook CEO Sheryl Sandberg’s bestseller *Lean In* (2013); the controversial success of Lena Dunham’s *Girls* on HBO (Nash and Grant, 2015; Ford, 2016); Germaine Greer’s criticism of Caitlyn Jenner (Abeni, 2015), among many other instances, have not only contributed to a

renewed visibility of feminism in social life, but also to conjure up the many demons that have haunted the social imagination of feminist ideas.

This issue addresses the problems and possibilities of such a feminist momentum through the figure of the ghost. On the one hand, this “feminist Zeitgeist” (Valenti, 2014) seems to contradict the idea that feminism is in extinction, an idea instilled by the “post-feminist sensibility” that took over popular media culture. In 1982, *The New York Times* published a story titled “Voices from the Post-Feminist Generation”, in which the author, a self-proclaimed feminist woman, interviewed to her dismay young women who declared feminism to be dead. In December 1989, “facing the nineties”, *Time* magazine ran a cover story asking whether feminism had a future. Nine years later, in 1998, it ran a further cover story titled “Is Feminism Dead?” with an imaginary timeline that went from Susan B. Anthony to Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, culminating with Ally McBeal. This time, their answer was a confident “yes” (fig. 1). In 1992, Gloria Steinem and Susan Faludi featured on the cover of the magazine, “fighting the backlash to feminism” (fig. 2). This is what a postfeminist media culture looks like, one that discursively acknowledges a backlash only to render it even more real. On the other hand, more than 20 years later, in 2013, the same magazine featured Facebook’s CEO Sheryl Sandberg on the cover, with the title “Don’t hate her because she’s successful. Facebook’s Sheryl Sandberg and her mission to reboot feminism” (fig. 3). The cover brilliantly epitomizes the shift to the current feminist moment: Sandberg is captured in a corporate shot, appearing attractive but proper, radiating dominant ideas of success, while feminism makes a triumphant comeback to the magazine cover, by the hand of a white high-profile “career woman”, and rebooted by the energy of techno-capitalist fantasy. As Angela McRobbie put it sometime ago, “in endless conjuring up a demon that must be extinguished (in this case feminism) that demon demonstrates something of its lingering afterlife and its ghostly power” (McRobbie, 2011: 183). This, then, is the new cultural life of feminism; apparently no longer disavowed or deemed dead, it reemerges in a new, barely recognizable, ghostlike but spectacular shape.

The gothic figure of the ghost that we call forth in this issue emphasizes this reemergence of ideas once declared dead, the spectacular ways of its apparitionality – often cultivated and recast by celebrity culture –, but also the fear and loathing they inspire, fueled by old misconceptions that continue to haunt and impair the politically emancipatory circulation of feminist thought, from essentialism to misandry. Furthermore, the immaterial and vanishing nature of the ghost draws attention to questions of invisibility and may help us shift focus to the blind spots that contemporary feminism precludes us from discerning, such as the material lives of subjects outside the spotlight of mainstream(ed) feminism (Livingston, 2016). Which

feminisms and feminist subjects attain visibility, and which remain or are pushed further to the sidelines of mediated attention? Are we past the post or more deeply entrenched in it?

Interpretations of this feminist momentum have been polarized, with critics suggesting that the notion of postfeminism may no longer be adequate to read the current circumstances where feminist ideas are given new life, while others insist on the critical purchase of the concept. Diane Negra (2014) has suggested that the emergent “monetisation/corporatisation of feminism” and “growing signs of neo-patriarchalism” call for new critical tools, whilst Hester Baer insists that social media have allowed for new forms of feminist activism that have been “redoing feminism” (Baer, 2016) instead of reiterating its pastness. Others propose to rethink postfeminism as one word “for a productive irritation that helps keep feminist discourse alive in contemporary popular culture” (Driscoll, 2015), or see this new development as a new stage of postfeminist culture, wherein a heightened visibility goes hand in hand with disavowal. Indeed, McRobbie argues that this reappearance of feminism is concomitant with “an amplification of control of women” (McRobbie, 2015), in line with Catherine Rottenberg’s diagnosis of a “rise of neoliberal feminism” (2014), where classical feminist claims, such as gender equality, are made compatible with neoliberal ideas of individualism and profit, while less palatable feminist causes, such as sexual and reproductive rights, face further backlash. The very history of feminist thought is being rewritten along these lines, and “hijacked” (to borrow Rottenberg’s expression) by new interpretations jettisoning the plurality of feminist subjects and concerns with social justice.

The figure of the ghost in this issue thus stands for two pleas: for one, the new cultural life of feminism needs to be radically “ghosted” so that past and present claims, deemed dead or denied visibility, may appear again in plain sight, as Campion Decent argues in his article on Judy Chicago and Caryl Churchill. On the other hand, the feminist momentum needs to be “ghostbusted”, rid of the ghostlike feminism that keeps feminist ideas alive through depletion and (negative) appropriation, and do away with the ghosts of misconceptions that continue to mar critical debate and the full materialization of feminism. Both tasks require that we face present developments informed by a critical history of feminist thought and politics.



Fig. 1. Postfeminist times: covers of *Time* magazine, December 4 1989 and June 29 1998



Fig. 2. The backlash in postfeminist times: cover of Time magazine, March 19 1992



Fig. 3. Feminism rebooted: Sheryl Sandberg on the cover of Time magazine, March 18, 2013

To help us make sense of this contradictory scenario, we have invited key feminist thinkers to share their thoughts on the present conditioning of feminism. In the forum “Feminist Pasts, Feminist Futures”, a title borrowed from Heidi Mirza’s statement, we have set up a virtual reunion to advance this debate and tease out the incongruities that shape the circulation of feminist ideas in the present. In her contribution, Catherine Rottenberg addresses the already mentioned “neo-liberal turn” in feminism, whereby feminism’s mainstreaming has been accompanied by its alignment with dominant ideologies. According to Rottenberg, a strategic seizure of “certain strands of feminism” has contributed to “bolster oppressive hierarchies as well as neo-liberal and neo-conservative politics”. The resurgence of the work-family balance, brought back to the spotlight by Anne-Marie Slaughter and other high-profile figures (Slaughter, 2012), is identified by Rottenberg as the site in which the entanglement of feminism with neoliberalism is most clearly pronounced, at least in the United States. One could add to Rottenberg’s argument the dissemination of studies claiming that “closing the gender gap makes economic sense” or that “companies with women in senior roles are more profitable” (LaGarde, 2016), which tend to make gender equality contingent on profitability. Even today, on the 20th anniversary of Equal Pay Day, *Wired* magazine has published a well-meant article, quoting a McKinsey report that shows that “if women participated in the workforce at the same rate as men, held as many full-time jobs as men, and worked in the same range of industries, the resulting increased productivity would add \$4.3 trillion to the US GDP by the year 2025” (Lapowsky, 2016). The article makes the pragmatic case that if companies and governments are not motivated to fix this problem just to make the lives of women better, they should do it for the money. Using capitalism to advance gender equity carries its risks. Such claims, voiced by leading consulting firms or agencies such as the IMF, are often substantiated by essentialist categories, such as “feminine archetypes of leadership”, based on “improved decision making at the top, more creativity and innovation, and better problem solving, stemming from greater cognitive diversity”, all “feminine qualities” that allegedly contribute to a better future for business (Barsh, 2014). This essentialist over-gendering of all things business is further demonstrated by the increasing number of stories on “successful women”, of which Sandberg’s *Time* cover is a pivotal example. Such stories reflect the making of a “new ideal *feminist* subject”, as Rottenberg puts it, a subject that coheres to a normative ideal of capitalist womanhood, as Angela McRobbie has recently shown in her “Notes on the Perfect” (2015), and which is cleansed from radical feminist claims. “Inflected through and through by race and class”, this new *feminist* subject overshadows “her invisible and disposable *female* ‘other’”, as well as the multiplicity of feminist subjectivities that are denied public image or voice.

The casting of this new feminist subject is further animated in and through celebrity culture. In her reflections on “celebrity feminism” for this issue, Kirsty Fairclough-Isaacs concedes that the “precarious vehicle of celebrity” has contributed to democratize feminism, opening it up to “those who may not have encountered it if was it not for a particular celebrity claiming the term”. In some ways, celebrity feminism seems to have reverted the dis-identification from feminism on the part of younger women (and men) that characterized 1990s postfeminist culture. In their introduction to the special forum of *Celebrity Studies* on feminism and contemporary celebrity culture, Hannah Hamad and Anthea Taylor discuss the emergence of the figure of the self-professed feminist celebrity and the ensuing repackaging of feminism for the mass audiences (Hamad and Taylor, 2015). While for Fairclough this popularization of feminism via celebrity culture is not inherently negative for feminist politics, she is also cautious towards “how valid the entry points into feminist thinking offered up by these celebrities actually are”. Yet, one must concede that while celebrity culture can constitute a terrain where feminism is exhausted of its complexity and political impetus, it can also offer a forum – even if involuntarily – where the most challenging issues of feminism find an outlet. Fairclough mentions Beyoncé’s music video for the song *Formation* for disrupting the manifest whiteness of mainstream celebrity feminism, and for raising a conversation on black women, black feminism, racialized violence and self-representation. Commentaries on the video have also accused Beyoncé of pursuing “strategic consumerist dramatism rather than empowerment” and of operating within “the very system that has historically profited from black bodies, black culture, and now black activism” (London, 2016). Criticism of Beyoncé, and other celebrity feminists, ties into the previous argument that feminism is currently attuned with neo-liberal ideology. Within celebrity culture, the conflation of feminism and capitalism “is said to “masquerade as radical change” (London, 2016), absorbing the energies of activist efforts to keep the machine running. These ongoing debates about what feminism is or should be, or who can claim membership and the right to represent the interests of others, indicate that popular and celebrity culture is now a prominent stage for “discursive struggles over the meanings of feminism” (Fairclough). As such, celebrity culture has become an important symptomatology for the changes feminism has undergone in recent years, for the misconceptions marring its materialization, and for the challenges it has to face and come to terms with.

In response to these contradictory developments, wherein feminism reclaims the spotlight but is simultaneously seized and hijacked, Rosalind Gill offers a “manifesto” in which she makes the case for the critical persistence of the term “postfeminism”. In 10 short and key arguments, Gill contends that our times are deeply postfeminist, and that “postfeminist culture

should be our object of analysis, not a position or a perspective”. Drawing and extending on her earlier work on the term, and in line with other contributions to the forum, she regards postfeminism as “a patterned yet contradictory sensibility connected to other dominant formations such as neoliberalism”. Because cultural life is contradictory, she argues, new cultural trends can coexist with older ones, renewed visibility coexists with backlash and disavowal, and feminism can be deeply entangled with postfeminist and even anti-feminist formations. The analysis of postfeminism she calls for thus needs to be mindful of both continuity and change, and of the “double entanglements” (McRobbie, 2008) that continue to structure its transformations. Gill’s manifesto reminds us that the new cultural visibility of feminism encompasses many versions of feminism, some of which are antithetical to each other. While this plurality is not a novelty, for feminist theories and politics have always been multiple and often conflicting, the current context sees feminism being shaped by anti-feminist conditions, such as “patterns of exclusion and domination” that operate across class, race, and sexual identity. A critical analysis of postfeminism, Gill claims, “requires approaches that can offer subtle and complicated appreciations of the way that multiple and contradictory ideas can co-exist in the same moment”, neither celebrative nor dismissive, but rather attentive to “the messy, complicated, fine-grained texture of social and cultural life”. This also calls for an intersectional and transnational analysis – and practice – of feminism. Precisely because the current cultural visibility of feminism is construing an “ideal *feminist* subject”, predominantly white, middle class, heterosexual, cisgendered and ideally young, and because the focus of much research has been on media constructions of this normativity, our analysis also has to attend to the blind spots of this “return to normal” (to invert Halberstam’s term [2013]), from working class to race, queer and crip (Kafer, 2013).

Such an intersectional plea is at the heart of Heidi Mirza’s closing reflection, in which she invokes Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s thoughts on “epistemic violence” (Spivak, 1998), the violence of knowledge production, most notably by white feminists in their writings on women and feminism in the global South, where “white women are seen as the only legitimate agents of struggle and ‘third world’ women are mute, invisible objects” (Mirza). Referring to the release of the film *Suffragette* (Sarah Gavron, 2015), upon which the (white) female cast, headed by Meryl Streep, wore t-shirts inscribed with Emily Pankhurst’s famous quote “I’d Rather be a Rebel than a Slave”, Mirza discusses appropriation, intersectional tensions, and the “strong thread of colonialism that runs through mainstream feminism”. Echoing Spivak’s question whether the subaltern can speak, Mirza asks whose voices do we hear through the platform of contemporary feminism. While intersectionality may have become a “buzzword” in current public feminism,

Mirza worries that it has not truly challenged feminist thought and practice, which continues to perpetuate the epistemic violence diagnosed by Spivak long ago. In championing collective causes under the sign of solidarity, mainstream feminism often loses sight of universalizing categories and distortions that it might be replicating, including the generalizing of Third World women's conditions as those who lack agency and need saving. As Mirza points out, in the zeal of saving the imaginary, distant "other", "we forget to look at the poverty, mental health, destitution and sexual violence women are universally subjected to right here on our doorstep in Europe". In face of new struggles and the persistence of old ones, that more than ever operate across race and class, Mirza calls for a reconsideration of intersectional solidarity with a "truly universal, inclusive feminism" in mind, because "the enemy, patriarchy, is greater than the sum of our feminist parts".

In our own "ghosting" exercise, this issue also pays tribute to feminist film theorist and filmmaker Laura Mulvey, who visited us last year, in November 2015, on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of her germinal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). Within the program of the 5th Graduate Conference in Culture Studies on "Mind the Gap: The Artist in Culture Studies", her film *Riddles of the Sphinx* was shown at Cinema Ideal in Lisbon, in a rare opportunity to engage with the past and present of feminist film theory and filmmaking. The dossier "The riddles of feminist film theory" includes an interview with Laura Mulvey, a text by Isabel Capeloa Gil that reflects on the reception (or non-reception) of feminist film theory in Portugal, and a contribution by Patrice Petro on the evacuation of feminist film theory from contemporary film studies. Indeed, the anniversary of Mulvey's essay has contributed to unearth yet another form of epistemic violence through which feminist film theory is acknowledged (when at all) to be immediately dismissed – both in scholarship, education and film criticism. Over the last year, Mulvey was asked many times to look back on this essay and reflect on its impact and legacy (Mulvey, 2015a, 2015b; Mulvey *et al*, 2015). In her humble retrospective reflections on the text, Mulvey is still surprised by its "long and continuing life" (Mulvey, 2015a). It is worth reproducing Tamar Garb's testimony on the essay, delivered at an event organized by the British Film Institute and later published by *Screen*:

When it was first published in 1975, "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema" was the most formative articulation of the politicization of the visual I had ever encountered. For me it was the text that described most compellingly how the process of looking was imbricated with power relationships and, inevitably, with politics. It opened up questions of the relationship between eroticism and power, spectacle and authority, and of the way in which the act of looking is infused with a set of relationships that were very different from those that I had been taught as an art history student. What it did fundamentally and crucially was to move

away from the pervasive idea that looking was disinterested, that the study of art existed in a cordoned-off realm called the aesthetic that was somehow divorced from life and from our construction as subjects (Garb, 2015).

The critical relevance and impact of the text upon film studies and visual culture studies, here echoed by Garb, is hard to deny and difficult to measure. After all, it remains today the most widely referenced and cited article of *Screen* journal. Yet, the conditions of citationality of the text deserve further attention. As Mary Ann Doane noticed in 1989, in a special issue of *Camera Obscura* on “The Spectatrix”, “for a while, it seemed (and often still seems) that every feminist writing on film felt compelled to situate herself in relation to Mulvey’s issue” (Doane, 1989). Years later, in a special issue of *Signs* titled “Beyond the Gaze: Recent Approaches to Film Feminisms”, both Doane and Linda Williams voiced their reluctance to address the history of feminist film theory of which Mulvey’s essay was the starting shot. Williams’s contribution to the issue was titled “Why I did not want to write this essay”, where she confessed to feel “weighed down by the burdens of what feels like orthodox feminist position taking”, but using the opportunity to examine what might lie behind her “personal backlash” (Williams, 2004: 1264). Both texts suggest a curious postfeminist double entanglement at work in feminist film theory, where “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” is acknowledged as a founding moment that has to be superseded and moved on from. In the same issue of *Signs*, in a text titled “Feminist Film Studies, Early and Late”, Patrice Petro already realized that feminist film theory had been relegated to the past by new avenues of film studies, “now dismissed by some as a one-dimensional orthodoxy (by way of the shorthand “seventies film theory” or “gaze theory” or by referring to psychoanalysis, semiotics, and the ideological analyses that derived from these schools of thought)” (Petro, 2004: 1272). Petro resumes this theoretical backlash in our forum, taking issue with David Roderick’s book *Elegy for Theory* (2014), where he argues for a “philosophy of the humanities” and a return to the work of Stanley Cavell, sidelining feminist theory or diluting it into a theoretical potpourri that includes “formalism, myth criticism, Marxist criticism, psychoanalysis, feminism, queer theory, critical race theory, postcolonial theory, new historicism, cultural studies, media studies, and so on”.

In her own contribution to the *Camera Obscura* forum, Laura Mulvey, mindful of these developments, addressed the lost continuities and the increasingly difficult conceptual dialogue between the now of 2004 and the feminist film theory of the 1970s. I recall this earlier discussion to make sense of the most recent retrospectives of Mulvey’s essay. Karen Boyle, in her contribution to the 40th anniversary for *Feminist Media Studies*, noticed the same ambivalence in her students: “There is, for some, a sense of familiarity – this feminist, academic argument, is

something that they (think they) know and accept. At the same time, it is consigned to the past, judged as naive or an historical relic” (Boyle, 2015: 885). This sensibility was very much present in the room of the Portuguese Cinematheque in Lisbon last week, where Laura Mulvey introduced and steered the conversation around five films by Douglas Sirk. The few times spectators broached issues of female and male subjectivity, gaze, gendered desire and viewing positions, members of the audience readily dismissed them as symptoms of an outdated, unsophisticated approach, “irrelevant and not up to the task” of understanding the complexity of film texts, perhaps voiced by “feminist killjoys” (Ahmed, 2010) of Sirkian melodrama. Recalling Tamar Garb’s testimony on Mulvey’s essay, it does seem that the study of art has been readmitted to “the cordoned-off realm called the aesthetic that was somehow divorced from life and from our construction as subjects”. Yet, in another contradiction, the audience was there to listen to Mulvey, the author of “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, founding figure of feminist film theory, a theory that, so goes the introductory text written by the Cinematheque, “the author herself has never ceased to reevaluate and rethink”.

In the interview for *Diffractions*, and in the introduction to a recently co-edited book, titled “1970s Feminist Film Theory and the Obsolescent Object”, Mulvey acknowledges that “changes in modes of spectatorship between the 1970s and the late 1990s render the premise and argument of ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ archaic” and that as “feminist film theory moved forward to engage with and benefit from ideas associated with the politics of race and queer theory, 1970s film feminism was left looking somewhat white and heterosexual” (Mulvey, 2015c: 18). This is, perhaps, what the writer of the Cinematheque’s text had in mind when asserting that the author has reconsidered the premises of her founding essay. Indeed, Mulvey delivered a sophisticated analysis of the opening sequence of Sirk’s *Imitation of Life* (1959), attentive to how film language constructs viewing and viewed subjects across gender, race and class, proving – somewhat surreptitiously – the continued relevance of feminist film theory for today’s spectators and critics. In her discussion of the obsolescence of film feminism, drawing on Emily Apter’s reflections on the *démodé* and the violence of outdating, Mulvey makes the bold claim that precisely in its obsolescence, feminist film theory “might still reemerge in a new context and for unexpected uses” (Mulvey, 2015c: 19). Mulvey relates this productive obsolescence with the figure of the ghost that refuses to be laid to rest, constantly reminding us of the persistence of the past in the present. Both the obsolescent and the ghost challenge the chronological and the linear and open up ways for bridging divergent times despite obvious historical contrasts. “Rather than simply suggesting that the theories of the past are straightforwardly relevant to now”, Mulvey proposes that, in their pastness, they might

renovate interest in the history of feminist thought and thereby unearth the unexhausted promises and possibilities that may speak to the present in relevant ways:

Any re-appropriation or re-cycling of feminist theory today should neither be “as such” nor a strange survivor lingering and aging across the chronological decades but rather rethought in terms of women’s contemporary oppression. And it seems to be widely acknowledged that, with the economic poverty and precariousness of neoliberalism, the loss of a socialist aspiration, and the massive rise of religion of all kind, women are newly vulnerable (Mulvey, 2015c: 20).

Because the past is never where you think you left it, as Katherine Anne Porter put it, feminism needs to be ghosted instead of laid to rest, so that its continued and unexhausted relevance might speak again to a present that urgently needs it – inside the obsolete film theatre but mostly everywhere else.

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