Introduction: Postfeminist Gothic

Benjamin A. Brabon and Stéphanie Genz

This collection of essays addresses and examines the intersection of two much-debated and controversial concepts: postfeminism and Gothic. The resulting category of “postfeminist Gothic” demarcates a new space for critical enquiry that re-invigorates previous debates on the Gothic, in particular the notion of the Female Gothic and its relation to second-wave feminism, as well as shedding light on the contemporary postfeminist conundrum. That this will not be a straightforward companionship or symbiosis is made explicit by the evasiveness and multiplicity of meaning exhibited by both terms: the Gothic has always resisted a monological definition and exceeded the laws of genre and categorical thinking, being as Fred Botting notes “an inscription neither of darkness nor of light, a delineation neither of reason and morality nor of superstition and corruption, neither good nor evil, but both at the same time” (9), and prefixing it with the equally polysemic “postfeminist” seems to complicate matters even further. Rather than putting forward a definite and singular signification of Gothic, postfeminism and by extension postfeminist Gothic, the following essays uncover and raise a new set of questions involved in this critical positioning: What does it mean to “post” feminism? How does the adjective “postfeminist” modify Gothic (and its various associations and subheadings) and what does the notion of “postfeminist Gothic” imply? As the variety of essays and topics in this collection attest, the answers to these questions are multiple and diverse, ranging from wholehearted dismissals and rejections of the possibility of “postfeminist Gothic” to scepticism and an optimistic embracing of the category. This collection is premised upon an interrogation and exploration of these terms, providing a site of exchange and debate, dialogue and conflict. It is not asking so much what postfeminist Gothic is; rather, it is asking about the future of Gothic and its connections with (post)feminism.
Post-ing feminism

The postfeminist phenomenon has confounded and split contemporary critics with its contradictory significations, definitional ambiguity and pluralistic outlook. Commentators have claimed the term for various and even oppositional understandings and appropriations, ranging from backlash to Girl Power to poststructuralist feminism. The point of contention that separates these different interpretations of postfeminism arises in part from the semantic confusion around the prefix and an argument as to how a “post-ing” of feminism can be read and explained. As Misha Kavka observes, the question that has haunted – or enlivened, depending on your point of view – the debate on and use of “postfeminism” can be summarized as “how can we make sense of the ‘post’ in ‘postfeminism’?” (31). Although the very structure of the term “postfeminism” seems to invoke a narrative of progression insisting on a time “after” feminism, the directionality and meaning of the prefix are far from settled and stable. The “post” prefix can be employed to point to a complete rupture, for as Amelia Jones declares, “what is post but the signification of a kind of termination – a temporal designation of whatever it prefaces as ended, done with, obsolete” (8). Diametrically opposed is the idea that the prefix denotes a genealogy that entails revision or strong family resemblance. In this case, the “post” signifies reliance and continuity, an approach that has been favoured by advocates of another “post” derivative, postmodernism. More problematically, “post” can also occupy an uneasy middle ground, signalling a contradictory dependence on and independence from the term that follows it. This is the viewpoint taken by Linda Hutcheon, who detects a paradox at the heart of the “post” whereby “it marks neither a simple and radical break from [the term that follows] nor a straightforward continuity with it; it is both and neither” (17).

Adding to this interpretive struggle is the fact that the root of postfeminism, feminism itself, is also characterized by polyphony and multiplicity that undermine the possibility of a universally agreed agenda and definition. Indeed, as Geraldine Harris emphasizes, feminism has never had “a single, clearly defined, common ideology” or been constituted around “a political party or a central organization or leaders or an agreed policy or manifesto, or even been based upon an agreed principle of collective action” (9). Instead, feminism can at best be said to have working definitions that are always relative to particular contexts, specific issues and personal practices. From this perspective, the attempt to establish and settle the meaning of postfeminism looks more and more futile and