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Simone de Beauvoir: Two Interviews. 90 min. DVD. (Icarus Films, 2012). \$298.00 U.S.

Review by Ursula Tidd, University of Manchester.

Recorded sixteen years apart, these two interviews with Simone de Beauvoir are compelling viewing for those who wish to know more about Beauvoir's landmark 1949 publication *Le Deuxième Sexe*, the evolution of her feminism and ethical philosophy, her political and religious views, and her approach to writing.

The first interview, which lasts forty minutes, was filmed in Beauvoir's apartment in Paris in 1959 for Radio-Canada and is a general interview which addresses a wide range of topics: existentialism; the nature of political commitment; the situation of women; love and jealousy; religion and the existence of God; her autobiographical project; her writing and views on contemporary literature; and her view of women's situation in China and the USA. Due to the variety of topics chosen and the initial reluctance of the interviewer to ask follow-up questions which would have encouraged Beauvoir to develop certain of her responses further, the interview moves from one topic to another quickly. Moreover, there appears a certain gendered dynamic in play which influences the tone of the interview. Beauvoir is nonetheless at the height of her intellectual powers and cuts an impressive figure of trenchant lucidity, eloquence and concision, and one whom her interviewer sometimes struggles intellectually to follow.

The theme of political and personal commitment weaves through the majority of Beauvoir's responses and was inevitably a powerful circumstantial backdrop to the interview, given that it was taking place during the later bloody years of the Algerian War, when Beauvoir and Sartre were vilified for their support of the *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN). Beauvoir aligns herself clearly and conclusively with the non-Communist, anti-colonial, left-wing struggle and as a strong advocate for human freedom, be it by supporting the independence struggle in Algeria, in advising economic independence for women or in promoting autonomy in romantic and familial relationships. Beauvoir explains here that she rarely takes the political stage unless she has things to say—such as on the recent question of the 1958 referendum and De Gaulle's return to power, against which she campaigned. Questions posed such as whether Robert Dubreuilh or Henri Perron (characters in her 1954 novel, *Les Mandarins* [1]) were right in their respective stances on the ethics of divulging the existence of the Soviet gulags to the French public have a contemporary political relevance in 1959 when the existence of transit and concentration camps in Algeria was becoming public knowledge and torture was known to be widespread.

In this interview, Beauvoir assumes a united intellectual front with Sartre, presenting herself as in accordance with his existentialist philosophy and political stance. In a lengthy part of the interview, Beauvoir comments on her multi-volume project of memoir-writing. Encouraged by the reception of her first volume, *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* [2], which had been published in France the previous year, Beauvoir explains her plans for further volumes and her desire to describe her relationship to her era as a young intellectual before the Second World War and the subsequent impact of the war and the Occupation on French society. Adhering to her anti-naturalist philosophy, Beauvoir explains here how

she is also keen to explore how circumstances have shaped her as a human being and a writer and to chart the ideological and sentimental impact of the war upon her.

Interestingly, we learn that the title of her first volume of autobiography was adapted from Tristan Bernard's *Mémoires d'un jeune homme rangé* (1899) and how she composed the book in successive multiple drafts: the first being a rapid mapping of memories followed by redrafting of the manuscript enriched by the documentary and press research which she conducted on the history of the early decades of the twentieth century. Beauvoir likens her autobiographical craft to that of a painter, initially working with an outline, then reworking and retouching each chapter until she cannot add anything further. Asked if one can write one's memoirs and "cheat" by selecting certain episodes in preference to others, Beauvoir characteristically defends the autobiographer's right to choose and foregrounds instead the literary "problem" of the autobiographer's distance to her past and her quest to adopt a discriminating yet sympathetic relationship to her material.

Perhaps the most controversial of her views expressed in this interview are concerning God and religion, which explains the original censorship of the interview at the request of the Catholic Church. Describing her loss of faith in her early teenage years, Beauvoir explains how her personal philosophical reading encouraged her to abandon metaphysical and ontological speculation concerning the chain of causes and effects which result in human existence. She condemns those who exploit religion as a cover for oppression and says that God's existence and will are always interpreted within the constraints of a human conscience and vision of the world, hence in her view it makes no difference to the existential isolation inherent in the human condition whether or not God exists. As such, she affirms her adherence to the Sartrean existentialist view of God as the unthinkable synthesis of the 'en-soi' and the 'pour-soi' categories of being.

By contrast, Beauvoir's 1975 television interview with Jean-Louis Servan-Schreiber is a more focused fifty-minute discussion about *Le Deuxième Sexe* and its reception, sexual politics and issues for contemporary feminist struggle. It is a landmark event because it was the first time that Beauvoir appeared on French television, since she and Sartre had been reluctant to contribute to their *médiatisation* by the French state broadcaster because they did not agree with contemporary right-wing government policy. However, Beauvoir agreed to participate since it offered a strategic platform to publicise the political aims of the French feminist movement and to communicate her own feminist vision. As such, it offers a collection of key statements on feminism by Beauvoir which complement the series of interviews with Alice Schwarzer in which she participated from 1972-1982. [3]

The interview was recorded on 18 February and broadcast on 7 April on TF1. Servan-Schreiber's attitude towards Beauvoir is respectful and circumspect, although he does invite her occasionally to consider a more moderate perspective on aspects of the contemporary feminist struggle. Much of what she says concerning the reception of her pioneering 1949 text is now known due the scholarship which has emerged since the renaissance in Beauvoir studies since the late 1980s and the many interviews with Beauvoir which are now available.[4] Here, she offers a pithy explanation of the epiphanic phrase, "on ne naît pas femme, on le devient," and explains how femininity is not a natural phenomenon but a historical construction and how girls are fashioned by patriarchal ideology into women. She argues that biological difference is established as a pretext upon which women's secondary status in patriarchal society is built.

Noting that she did not experience her gender as a handicap because she did not have to compete directly with men nor wish to have a husband or children, Beauvoir explains how research into child-raising has shown the existence of discriminatory attitudes against girls from the time of breastfeeding onwards, which are then transmitted from one maternal generation to the next. Accordingly, argues Beauvoir, boys are encouraged to be exhibitionist, autonomous and to value themselves, whereas girls are inculcated with a sense of shame and modesty. Commenting on the reception of her work, Beauvoir

reveals herself to have been disappointed by the lack of Communist support for *Le Deuxième Sexe*. She observes that the history of women and Communism in France is complicated due to the struggle for sexual equality being subordinated to the class struggle as a primary terrain for revolutionary action.

Asked what “sexism” means in the contemporary era, Beauvoir argues that it is analogous to racism and that much of contemporary feminist struggle is concerned with eradicating the language and images of sexist discrimination against women which are prevalent in society because it does not accord women the same respect as men. Sixteen years after the Radio-Canada interview, Beauvoir was clearly a more radicalised figure in terms of her vision of feminist praxis, arguing that she had abandoned her earlier faith in the socialist revolution to achieve real change for women. She now argues in 1975 that the fight against capitalist values should not be confused with the feminist struggle. She uses this interview as an opportunity to promote the work of the *Mouvement de libération des femmes* (MLF) and particularly its recent achievement in the legalisation of abortion. Beauvoir is scathing of the newly-created *Secrétariat à la condition féminine* by Valéry Giscard d’Estaing. She complains that it has no budget and is simply a public relations ploy to pay lip service to feminist demands—a situation which was later to be remedied by the advent to power of François Mitterand in 1981 and the establishment of the Ministry for Women’s Rights under Yvette Roudy, to which Beauvoir would lend substantial support.

Drawing on her work in the second volume of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Beauvoir argues trenchantly in the interview that men cannot understand women’s “lived experience” and are usually reluctant to give up power to women. Citing the example of the Black Panther Afro-American revolutionary socialist movement in the USA, she speculates that separatist feminist struggle may be a necessary political phase to achieve female emancipation. She contends that the way forward for women is to gain the highest level of professional qualifications possible in order to gain an interesting and well-remunerated job and to ensure financial independence from men. Beauvoir predicts that a key future area of feminist political action will be the equitable sharing of domestic work between partners in heterosexual couples and for women to ensure that they are not exploited by the changing sexual behaviour which has resulted from increased contraception and the availability of abortion.

NOTES

[1] Simone de Beauvoir, *Les Mandarins* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954).

[2] Simone de Beauvoir, *Mémoires d’une jeune fille rangée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1958).

[3] Alice Schwarzer, *Simone de Beauvoir Today* (London : Chatto and Windus, 1984).

[4] Eva Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence: Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex* (London: Athlone Press, 1996); Ursula Tidd, *Simone de Beauvoir, Gender and Testimony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Sylvie Chaperon, *Les années Beauvoir 1945-1970* (Paris: Fayard, 2000); Christine Delphy and Sylvie Chaperon, *Cinquantenaire du Deuxième Sexe* (Paris: Éditions Syllepse, 2002); and Ingrid Galster, *Le Deuxième Sexe de Simone de Beauvoir* (Paris: Presses de l’Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2004).

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