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Jean-Paul Sartre & Simone de Beauvoir, directed by Max Cacopardo, 1967. Director First Run/ Icarus Films, Brooklyn, NY, 1967. Video and DVD, 60 mins., b/w.

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A "time capsule" was how Simone de Beauvoir described Max Cacopardo's documentary about her and Sartre, made for Canadian television in 1967 and re-issued in 2005. She was certainly right about that. This film is nothing if not a sentimental journey back to a time when Paris felt like a collection of contiguous small villages and Sartre could describe the relevant geography of his life from his apartment window-- "There's where Castor lives, and over there, my mother." He talks about leaving St. Germain des Près and coming to Montparnasse as if he had traversed a small country, and not merely the Luxembourg Gardens. (We now know that he would be buried in the cemetery directly beneath that same window.) Back then, Sartre could be described as "the best known and most controversial writer of his time," and--more jarring to present-day sensibilities--a French bourgeois intellectual (from the hexagon) could be considered a "universal conscience" and a "representative and ally of peasants, students and revolutionaries everywhere." A scene in which we see him innocently playing the piano with his adopted daughter, Arlette El Kaim, neglects to mention that El Kaim had been his secretary and lover before she was his daughter. Finally, that Sartre and Beauvoir can be described (without irony) as a "free and intimate couple" will cause even those who still admire their defiance of mid-century notions of sexual decorum to wince. Here's my recommendation for the twenty-first century romantic in search of an example (though surely idealized) of a long-term relationship that blended work and love *and* weathered at least some of the insecurities, ego, temper, and dalliances that inevitably accompany creative brilliance and fame: Go see *Valentino, the Last Emperor*. [1]

When Beauvoir's memoirs first came out, (*Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* (1958), *La Force de l'âge* (1960), and *La Force des choses* (1963)), they gave readers a sense of an intrepid intelligence, remarkable accomplishment, and candor. The brilliance and accomplishment stand, but candor has taken a beating in recent years. Because so much more of her writing has now been published, [2] we now know how assiduously she reworked her self-presentation. In many cases her letters offered one version of a day, event, or relationship, her diaries another, and her memoirs yet a third. [3] Sartre did some of the same, though less in print (*Les Mots*, 1964), and more on camera. *Sartre par lui même* (1976) devotes over three hours to his changing political positions and errors. The Cacopardo documentary was the first filmed interview that Beauvoir and Sartre authorized, and they did so because the interviewers were friends (and then some): Madeline Gobeil was a sympathetic Canadian journalist and Claude Lanzmann, who later made *Shoah* (1985) had been an editor of *Les Temps Modernes* as well as Beauvoir's lover from 1952 to 1959. The documentary, then, is not only a "time capsule," but earns its place in a long line of Sartre and Beauvoir self-presentations.

It is not the most interesting work in that series. Originally offered as a conversation with two celebrated intellectuals who rarely granted interviews and limited by the television format to sixty

minutes, the film has little time for either background or development. Still, it has some nice moments. In 1967, Sartre was president of the Bertrand Russell tribunal on war crimes in Vietnam, and he delivers a powerful indictment of American imperialism, one that is not limited to Southeast Asia; it is more Marxist than existentialist, as was Sartre in the 1960s. [4] He reflects briefly on the Geneva conventions, the Nuremberg trials and the conditions under which human rights tribunals can be legitimate. Neither he nor the interviewers mention Algeria. He explains his decision to turn down the Nobel prize for literature in 1964 on the grounds that he valued common humanity over “small distinctions and prizes” – his insistence on being, in the often-cited phrase from *Les Mots*, “...un homme, fait de tous les hommes et qui les vaut tous et que vaut n'importe qui.” Lanzmann quotes a friend who remarked that no matter what he said, Sartre remained “décidément plus n'importe qui que n'importe qui.”

Beauvoir is interesting on her memoirs and their centrality to her projects. She set out in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, she explains, to “disinter” or “rescue” her childhood, all but buried by adulthood. She had not originally planned to continue the project, but she felt compelled “to account for how she had used her hard-won freedom.” That existentialist view, in which every life moment is packed with meaning and presents an opportunity for either freedom or paralysis, fulfillment or failure, very much structures her memoirs, giving them a melodramatic cast. As she acknowledges in the film, she sees the world in black and white. While that outlook may not make for great literature, it was certainly not incidental to her success as a popular writer, for many of her readers discovered in her writing an expanded sense of both their own possibilities and the significance of their ordinary lives. [5] The documentary offers an eye-opening glimpse of her apartment, shelves full of folk art and keepsakes from Cuba, China, the Soviet Union, Mexico, or from hitchhiking across North Africa. As her readers know, her memoirs also chronicle those trips in enormous detail, some for their political interest and others as existential adventures. To travel was to embody freedom, to experience the world and in her case, pointedly, to do so unencumbered by the fact of femaleness. Some parts of Beauvoir’s memoirs read like a feminist or political intellectual’s *On The Road*, minus Kerouac’s engaging whimsy—and considerably slower paced.

She’s asked to talk about feminism. “Encore?” she asks ruefully, reprising the introduction to her most famous work: The subject is irritating and perhaps we should speak no more of it. She goes on, however, to deliver a terse analysis of the condition of women in 1967 which, she says, had “regressed” since the years of *The Second Sex*. Her postwar hopes that a new era would usher in fundamentally new gender relations (witness the conclusion of *The Second Sex*, with its vision of human fraternity and the reign of liberty) had been dashed. [6] Asked to explain this “regression,” she offers a lightning fast but vague answer about women being excluded from the labor force. She says nothing about feminism as a movement or, more surprisingly, sexuality and the ongoing battle over contraception, even though the Neuwirth law, which partially legalized contraception, was being debated that same year. (It passed in December of 1967.) It would be interesting to ask about those silences, or to reflect on what her remarks show about the late 1960s turning back to the lost opportunities of the war’s aftermath, honing its militancy on those disappointments. But the film does not linger on these topics. Instead, it cuts to Lanzmann asking the question he says is on the public’s mind: does Beauvoir feel “incomplete” or “mutilated” because she has never had a child? (This is not Lanzmann’s finest hour as an inquiring mind.) There are thousands of ways to live as a woman (*vivre sa condition de femme*), Beauvoir parries. And in the signature fashion that won over so many readers and encouraged them to articulate their desires, she reminds Lanzmann that being childless is not necessarily “an emptiness” (*une manque*)— but that “unsatisfied desire” is. [7]

At sixty minutes, the film could be useful in the classroom as a possible springboard for discussion. How did the wars in Algeria and Vietnam become international? From whence the postwar optimism about gender and why the perception in 1967 that the condition of women had “regressed”? How do we account for Sartre and Beauvoir’s stature; what popular chords did their work strike? But other books

and films -- *Les Mots*, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, Sartre's presentation of *Les Temps Modernes*, and Beauvoir's introduction to *The Second Sex*, to name just a few, as well as all the excellent new scholarship on philosophy, postwar culture, politics, the anti-war movement, and the origins of the 1960s -- might do the job better than this oddly framed film, whose take on its subject is probably too lite even for the uninitiated. Seemingly in search of the substance it has failed to turn up, the film tacks between Beauvoir and Sartre, asking repeatedly whether their lives have been fulfilling. They understandably find the question tiresome, and so might viewers.

[1] Produced and directed by Matt Tyrnauer in 2009.

[2] Most recently Simone de Beauvoir, *Wartime Diary* (Champagne-Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

[3] "Simone de Beauvoir, a Centennial Symposium," Humanities Center, Harvard University, February 2009.

[4] See <http://www.vietnamese-american.org/a1.html>.

[5] Readers' letters to Beauvoir are part of my work in process: "Simone de Beauvoir and Mid-Century Sex." I discuss them briefly in "Historicizing *The Second Sex*: Beauvoir and Her Readers in 1949," *French Politics, Culture, and Society* 25, 3, (Winter 2007).

[6] *Le Deuxième sexe*, vol. II, pp. 651-652. "...entre les sexes naîtront de nouvelles relations charnelles et affectives dont nous n'avons pas idée.... C'est au sein du monde donné qu'il appartient à l'homme de faire triompher le règne de la liberté."

[7] « *Les désirs inassouvis* » is a 1928 Dali painting. Lanzmann's new memoir, *Le Lièvre de Patagonie* (Gallimard, 2009) is a terrific and fresh perspective on France coming out of the war and riveting on the production of *Shoah*. He is discreet but interesting on his relationship with Beauvoir.

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