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Jean-Pierre Boulé and Ursula Tidd, eds., *Existentialism and Contemporary Cinema: A Beauvoirian Perspective*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012. x + 188 pp. Index. \$70.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-85745-729-5; \$70.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-0-85745-730-1.

Review by Kristi McKim, Hendrix College.

In their introduction to *Existentialism and Contemporary Cinema: A Beauvoirian Perspective*, Jean-Pierre Boulé and Ursula Tidd accomplish this genre's most important task: framing the collection with an urgency that leads a reader to wonder how such a book didn't already exist. Tidd and Boulé's introduction grounds the volume within a convincing argument for how and why Beauvoir's thought and film analysis might here be yoked together. They summarize this affinity as follows: "[I]t is in *The Second Sex* that Beauvoir can be said to inaugurate feminist film theory by (i) establishing a synthetic methodology which, combining concepts from Hegelianism, Marxism, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, anthropology, ontology and ethics, analyses how woman becomes the absolute Other in western patriarchal societies through an ideological privileging of the heterospecular patriarchal economy and (ii) citing cinema as one of several cultural means through which this oppression of women is embedded and perpetuated in society through institutional, mythological and individual practices" (p. 6).

Their introduction credits Beauvoir with conceptualizing the "gendered 'othering' gaze" (p. 6), and draws out the specular underpinnings of Beauvoir's thought. Pointing to Beauvoir's "sole essay of film criticism" (p. 8) Tidd and Boulé dedicate several pages to Beauvoir's writing on Brigitte Bardot in relation to "the eternal feminine" in Roger Vadim's *And Woman...Was Created* (1956). Through reference to the explicit and implicit cinematic contours of Beauvoir's writing, the introduction establishes the collection as a vital contribution to both Beauvoirian and film scholarship.

Contributing a book-length volume of essays to this scholarly dearth (Beauvoir's thought has informed several prior essays and/or book chapters, e.g., Liz Constable's 2004 *MLN* essay on Beauvoir and Breillat's *Romance* (1999) [1], but has never enjoyed sustained book-length attention), Tidd and Boulé have collected a "rich set of resources for Beauvoirian readings of contemporary film...[that draws]...on a wide variety of filmic genres, namely: biography, comedy, drama, fiction, music, mystery, romance and thriller, spanning a roughly twenty-year period from 1988 until 2007" (p. 13). Offering chapter-length film analyses, these essays incorporate a variety of Beauvoir's writing, including *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, *She Came to Stay*, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, *The Second Sex*, *Old Age*, and *A Very Easy Death*. To the editors' credit, their choices here remind readers that Beauvoir's existential and feminist thought extends well beyond *The Second Sex* and has relevance to a vast array of films.

Outstanding contributions to this volume include Emma Wilson's beautiful essay that combines *Innocence* with Beauvoir's writings about childhood. With reference to Davina Quinlivan's essay on *Innocence*, Wilson studies the film's subtle movements ("we see sunlight reflecting off the wintery trees and glowing on the cream wool of her scarf. Her brilliant blue ribbons disrupt the frosted colours of the scene, signalling abruptly the sequencing of the girls' lives in the school" [p. 23]) as a means of arguing that "the child's fleshy engagement with the world...is productive of the child's subjectivity" (p. 23). With a lyrical pacing itself congruous with *Innocence's* own spatial movement ("The film winds round

itself in repetitions" [p. 26]), Wilson offers compelling formal analysis of the film's visual "sylvan idyll" in the context of *The Ethics of Ambiguity's* and *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter's* "secure, protected child" (p. 27) and "the gender programme that Beauvoir describes in *The Second Sex*" (p. 29).

Constance Mui and Julien Murphy's excellent essay on existential freedom in *Revolutionary Road* proves fascinating in its claims that a "Beauvoirian framework further allows us to understand the characters' struggles against an oppressive situation as an attempt to turn away from alienation toward authenticity as a possibility" (p. 69); through attention to plot intricacies, Mui and Murphy analyse the Wheelers' actions in light of "the existential cost associated with particular choices" (p. 70) as they also acknowledge "that it is grossly misleading to refer to the Wheelers' situation as a single, monolithic setting that issues the same demands and determines the same options for both spouses" (p. 71).

This chapter's extensive consideration of characters' futures and possibilities both weaves *The Second Sex* into the film at hand and indirectly points to how future scholars might develop this analysis in relation to theories of spectator-screen relationships. What happens, for example, to cinematic identification in light of these suffocating spaces and eclipsed futures for the film's characters? What possibilities for spectatorial transcendence does the film invoke, with regard to time and space? "Mendes tortures the viewer by dangling freedom in front of the Wheelers, only to snatch it away when it comes close within their reach" (p. 75), claims Mui and Murphy; yet what about the relationship between the film and the viewer? Is this dynamic similarly one of patriarchal restriction? Does the style by comparison with the story yield a tension between freedom and restriction? How can we read spectator-screen relations in terms of the freedom, feminism, and phenomenology at the heart of Beauvoir's thought? In its many pages dedicated to Beauvoir's delineation of what "the wife" or "a woman" experiences in her middle-class existence, this essay offers a foundation by which future scholarship might incorporate attention to cinematic spectacle. How does the essentially narrative existence that Beauvoir outlines (narrative, insofar as Beauvoir establishes scenarios textually within which usually a singular woman is the character) interface with the spatial and temporal underpinnings of cinematic art?

With the exception of several essays, chapters of this volume similarly privilege either text over film or film over text. Several chapters of this volume treat individual films as actual realistic scenarios in which to test drive or otherwise see Beauvoir's ideas in action. Susan Bainbrigge's essay on *The Savages*, for example, speaks passively about how Beauvoir's ideas "are portrayed...are revealed...are depicted...come under the spotlight....This essay proposes to explore the ways in which a number of specifically Beauvoirian concerns are played out" (p. 150). Michelle Royer's essay claims that *Inch'Allah dimanche* "is a good illustration of Beauvoir's argument" (p. 128) and that "Benguigui's film provides an excellent illustration of the Self-Other relationships through the exchange of gaze" (p. 130). Yet this language establishes an imbalance between theory and film, one always at the service of the other--a binary that, I would think, Beauvoir's thought might otherwise want to dismantle. Certain chapters "use" films in the service of Beauvoir; other chapters "use" Beauvoir in the service of the film. Rarer chapters read these texts together, in ways mutually enriching and generative of new thought. Boulé's essay on *Chocolat*, for example, quite beautifully analyses the film's power dynamics among Protée, France, and Aimée; however ironic, the Beauvoir portions of this essay seem the weakest, as if somehow her thought has been awkwardly wedged in amidst otherwise compelling analysis. Finally, in the final paragraph of this essay, Boulé's argument emerges with clarity and power, and I wish that the analysis throughout the chapter had felt more seamlessly interlaced with instead of disrupted by turns to Beauvoir.

From the opening sentence through to its final claim, Oliver Davis' chapter on *Gran Torino* and Beauvoir's *Old Age* shines as one of the collection's most compelling. Claiming in the first paragraph that Walt Kowalski (Clint Eastwood), as he reads his horoscope ("Extraordinary events culminate in what may seem to be an anticlimax") "could just as well be reading Beauvoir's despairingly anticlimactic account of the ageing subject in her unjustly neglected essay, *Old Age*, or listening attentively in her autobiography to the curious backwash of depressive anxiety from the extraordinary events of her

intellectual and semi-private life,” Davis moves beyond a general and self-apparent claim that Beauvoir offers some valuable insight to this film analysis and foregrounds just how and why this text and film might be paired (p. 135). Davis admirably refuses “to ‘apply’ Beauvoir’s thought to the film” and “endeavours to avoid repeating a subordinating move now so commonly decried, even if still so often repeated” (p. 135), in which philosophy bears some measurable use-value in analyzing art without reciprocally reading *together* the text and film.

Encountering this claim as late as page 135 in the collection but as early as the second paragraph of the chapter immediately heightened my expectations for this essay as a whole, as it gave voice to some of my prior concerns as to how Beauvoir’s thought and film analysis seemed too static and immobile in their linkage. The promise of this essay soon evolves into a thrilling encounter with densely-written turns of phrase that convey substantive connection between Beauvoir and *Gran Torino*. Davis acknowledges the tension between Eastwood’s “violent, heroic, American masculinity and conservative sexual politics” and Beauvoir’s “constructivist second-wave feminism,” as he hopes that “[t]he argumentative yield of this critical approach will be to demonstrate that, for all that they differ in their gender politics, in their accounts of ageing Beauvoir and Eastwood share a strikingly similar commitment to vigorously combative self-assertion” (p. 136). Throughout the essay, Davis attends to cinematic nuances as illustrative of Beauvoir’s own “combatively self-assertive moments” in *Old Age*, and his sentences brilliantly model a gorgeous reciprocity between theory and film. The quality of this essay unfortunately outshines other contributions that merely adopt a passive-voiced less imaginative “application” of Beauvoir to a film at hand.

Likewise, Kate Ince’s contribution on feminist phenomenology and Potter’s films smartly performs a reciprocity between film style and Beauvoirian thought. Analyzing a love scene in *Orlando* (1992), for example, Ince argues “this gentle caress of Swinton’s torso is no display of female nudity or objectification of the feminine, and ends instead on a long close-up on Orlando’s eye. In addition to privileging the woman’s look at this point in the action, the shot reminds us insistently that the look itself is embodied, rather than transcendent and immaterial” (pp. 166). Similar to Davis’s deep connection between theory and cinematic drive, Ince observes “the core of the convergence between Potter’s envisioning of womanhood and Beauvoir’s theorizing of femininity, which I see in the type of energy driving their filmic and philosophical narratives—the positive desire of becoming, and becoming-woman” (p. 164). Ince’s chapter models how future feminist film theory might learn from Beauvoir’s privileging an existential phenomenology—embodied and visual—over a transcendental phenomenology, similar to arguments that Vivian Sobchack poses in her groundbreaking book on phenomenological film theory, *The Address of the Eye*.<sup>[2]</sup>

Linnell Secomb’s essay on Douglas Sirk’s and Todd Haynes’s melodrama builds toward a wonderful claim that “*Far From Heaven* creates alternate visions and new interpretations of existence. In doing so, it does more than merely represent transcendence, authentic love and alternate ethical possibilities: it also opens new worlds, futures and perspectives to its audiences, encouraging us all to question convention and pursue and facilitate our own and others’ freedoms” (p. 95); film scholars might expand upon these ideas by considering how transcendence and immanence work in relation to close-ups and camera movement—something that Claire Humphrey accomplishes in her essay on *La Petite Jérusalem*, writing that “[t]he film shows us through its narrative how the personal is always imbricated with the social, and it further underlines this point through a cinematic style which uses many lingering close-ups of the blurred edges of the body” (p. 101).

Secomb’s lovely work with genre and *Far From Heaven* (2002) leads me to ask how cinematic space relates to freedom and possibility. She reads the love in *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) as “the means to her freedom at the same time as it also hints at the cost involved...this scene reveals that this seeming freedom is only available on the condition that she moves from her current entombment in her dead husband’s home to a similar imprisonment in his newly converted old mill-house” (p. 92), yet how might

this claim also feature cinema's visual and aural qualities, which themselves constitute space and time? Does one particular setting seem more open and possible than another? Does Cary (Jane Wyman) enjoy greater visual freedom or agency—in that she can bear and carry a look—in one particular home over another? How does Secomb read the glass walls of Ron's (Rock Hudson) home in comparison with the domestic conventions of her suburban existence? This essay's momentary sensitivity to cinematography—opening with a wonderful example from *Far From Heaven* and further claiming that “Cary's entombment is visualised through the cinematography” (p. 91)—inspires me to wish that Secomb had built upon existing key essays on film melodrama (e.g., Mary Ann Doane's article on Sirk and Haynes [3]) instead of attempting to reinvent dynamics of space, gender, and genre. Secomb describes how *Far From Heaven's* Raymond (Dennis Haysbert) “see[s] beyond the surface” to a “vision of another world beyond the restrictions of everyday life” (p. 89), and I wonder how the camera similarly follows or critiques such a visual “beyond.” Phenomenological film theorists Sobchack and Laura Mulvey might explore how this film—and others in the collection—enrich and/or thwart *our* spectatorial freedom, the camera suggest vanishing points or flat spaces.

Thus, several of this collection's essays could be significantly sharpened by considering the potential for the screen as its own surface, its own status as phenomenological object with which a spectator and scholar engages. Beauvoir's contemporaries in French film theory, for example, aren't mentioned anywhere in this collection; yet *Cahiers du Cinema's* André Bazin famously champions the long take and deep focus as qualities of cinematic realism that foreground spectatorial freedom (unlike montage, which predetermines where and how a spectator should experience a film). How might a scholar synthesize this cinematic freedom in light of existential freedom? How might a contemporary scholar yoke together stylistic and worldly experiences of such agency? Mui and Murphy's arguments about *Revolutionary Road* suggest the power of moving images to conceal the constructedness of character—a construction at the heart of Beauvoir's fundamental arguments about *becoming* a woman. The ways in which actors become characters—and then these characters figure as players in a Beauvoirian drama that illustrates more than enlivens her thought—suggests the value of future scholarship that can expand the arguments here collected.

Moreover, as an unmentioned tenet of Beauvoir's status as prototypical feminist film scholar, Beauvoir's emphasis upon the temporal underpinnings of feminist thought seems extraordinarily productive to more contemporary discussions of cinematic time: Doane's brilliant *Emergence of Cinematic Time*, Tania Modleski's essay “Time and Desire in the Woman's Film”, or Mulvey's interest in movement and stillness [4], seem waiting in the wings of several of these essay's exploration of Beauvoir's own claims about women and temporality. Humphrey describes “Laura's experience of time, which evolves as she moves towards freedom,” (pp. 102-103), and this essay—or this collection as a whole—might be all the stronger by engaging cinema's own temporality, its continual straddling of the moment and its duration, its enduring ephemeral constitution, in light of Beauvoir's philosophy and film style. Future scholars might productively expand this work by thus incorporating phenomenological film theory or theories of cinematic time into some of this book's arguments.

By the time I'd reached the end of the book, I wanted more: more theory, more analyses, and a conclusion by Boulé and Tidd comparable to their exciting introduction (how does Secomb's incorporation of “touch” compare with Laura Marks's “haptic,” as introduced by Humphrey in the following chapter, for example?). I wanted to read how they imagine Beauvoirian-focused film analysis might unfold in future years, and I wanted to know more about the contributions and strides they imagine their own collection to have established. That I wanted more suggests the strength of this book, its provocative existential claims a compelling reason for its own existence.

## LIST OF ESSAYS

Jean-Pierre Boulé and Ursula Tidd, "Introduction"

Emma Wilson, "Beauvoir's Children: Girlhood in *Innocence*"

Ursula Tidd, "'Devenir Mère': Trajectories of the Maternal Bond in Recent Films starring Isabelle Huppert"

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Linnell Secomb, "Simone de Beauvoir, Melodrama and the Ethics of Transcendence"

Claire Humphrey, "*La Petite Jérusalem*: Freedom and Ambiguity in the Paris *banlieues*"

Bradley Stephens, "How Am I Not Myself?" Engaging Ambiguity in David O. Russell's *I [Heart] Huckabees*"

Michelle Royer, "Encounters with the 'Third Age': Benguigui's *Inch'Allah dimanche* and Beauvoir's *Old Age*"

Oliver Davis, "Eastwood Reading Beauvoir Reading Eastwood: Ageing and Combative Self-Assertion in *Gran Torino* and *Old Age*"

Susan Bainbrigge, "*Les Belles Images?* Mid-Life Crisis and Old Age in Tamara Jenkins' *The Savages*"

Kate Ince, "Feminist Phenomenology and the Films of Sally Potter"

## NOTES

[1] Liz Constable, "Unbecoming Sexual Desires for Women Becoming Sexual Subjects: Simone de Beauvoir (1949) and Catherine Breillat (1999)," *MLN* 119(2004): 672-695.

[2] Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

[3] Mary Ann Doane, "Pathos and Pathology: The Cinema of Todd Haynes," *Camera Obscura* 57(2004): 1-21.

[4] Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Tania Modleski, "Time and Desire in the Woman's Film," *Cinema Journal* 23(1984): 19-30; and Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006).

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