Existentialism and Contemporary Cinema: A *Beauvoirian Perspective.* Eds. Jean-Pierre Boulé and Ursula Tidd. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012. h / bk 188 pp. ISBN 978-0-85745-729-5. Price £60.00.

This edited volume consists of eleven essays that apply aspects of the existentialist and phenomenological philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) to the examination of various American, British, and French films released between 1988 and 2008. The volume would have been more accurately entitled *Phenomenology and Contemporary Cinema* since most of the contributions revolve around "[t]he phenomenological focus of existentialism on temporally situated 'lived experience' and its recognition of the specular [mirror-like] dynamic of self and other relationships [that] are highly relevant to the study of cinema" (3). Indeed, many of the authors take Beauvoir's ideas from Part Two of *The Second Sex* (1949), entitled "Lived Experience," as a jumping-off point for their film analyses. In addition to a concern with embodied lived experience, the themes of subject and object formation, authenticity, ambiguity, freedom, and bad faith figure prominently in the volume.

The theme of the Husserlian corps vécu (lived body) begins in Boulé and Tidd's introduction in their discussion of the body of French cinema's chief sex kitten in relation to Beauvoir's *Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita Syndrome* (1959). Bardot, Beauvoir argues, helped to complicate definitions of the gaze, the male subject, and the female object in roles such as that of Juliette in *Et Dieu...créa la femme (And God...Created Woman)* (1956) through her and director Roger Vadim's approach to embodiment. Interest in embodied experience continues in Emma Wilson's essay on dance and young female embodiment in Lucile Hadzihalilovic's French film *Innocence* (2004). In *Innocence,* the character of Alice competes for a spot as the lead dancer at her school in the middle of the French wilderness. Her dancing provides a visual representation of embodied lived experience, and she exhibits Beauvoirian authenticity "in a mendacious world of adults" (25), despite being overlooked for a spot that she was earlier promised by her instructor (Marion Cotillard).

The volume's interest in embodiment is carried beyond the sex-kitten and the young girl in essays by Claire Humphrey, Michelle Royer, Oliver Davis, Susan Bainbridge, and Kate Ince. Humphrey writes about the

ways that the "haptic" (tactile) cinematography in Karin Albou's *La Petite Jérusalem* (2005) works to evoke the embodiment of its isolated young female protagonist Laura (Fanny Valette) and how "the camera emphasises [sic] her identity as linked to her body" despite her desire to articulate her own personhood as based on her intellect, as a philosophy student, instead of as a French Jew living in the Parisian banlieu of Sarcelles, surrounded in her home by devout Jews (98). Humphrey convincingly concludes: "Albou therefore effectively communicates the relationship between ambiguity and freedom through narrative and cinematography and suggests, following Beauvoir's philosophy of ambiguity, that it is impossible to separate freedom from intersubjective ambiguity" (107). That is, for Laura as for Beauvoir, freedom is an endless process of becoming, forged in part through interpersonal relationships and in part through an acceptance of the ambiguous nature of existence.

Royer, Davis, and Bainbridge, meanwhile, concern themselves with the exploration of cinematic embodiment of the aging and dying body through consideration of Beauvoir's *Old Age* (1970). Royer reads Beauvoir through Yamina Benguigui's film *Inch' Allah Sunday* (2001), about old Maghrebi women living in France, arguing that the film "corroborates the dominant discourse on old age" — the old person is "the Other," an object to be gazed upon, not a subject capable of action in contemporary France — "which Beauvoir denounced in *Old Age*" (134). Davis examines Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino* (2008) in light of *Old Age* to posit that both works call for "violent egoic [*sic*] rage" in the face of social stigmatization and marginalization of the elderly which takes place simultaneously with the "bodily shock" of getting old (146). Bainbridge demonstrates Wendy's (Laura Linney) "bad faith" in deceiving herself about what her and her brother (Philip Seymour Hoffman) have done to their aging father (they have placed him in a nursing home) in Tamara Jenkins' film *The Savages* (2007). Each of these films pays careful attention to the embodied lived experience of the elderly.

Kate Ince specifically takes up the issues of embodiment and feminist phenomenology in the context of Sally Potter's films *Orlando* (1992) and *The Tango Lesson* (1997). For Ince, these two films "stage female physicality and historical becoming, envisioning dramas both echoed and elucidated [...] in *The Second Sex*" (170). In *Orlando,* Tilda Swinton plays the

title character as both a man and then a woman over four centuries of European history and it is her gaze and her subjecthood that are the driving forces of the film. In *The Tango Lesson,* Sally Potter plays herself as the main character learning how to tango. Here, Potter demonstrates and furthers Beauvoirian arguments about the possibilities of embodied looking.

The other essays in the volume are equally challenging and enriching while taking up a different set of Beauvoirian concerns. Ursula Tidd's chapter explores some of French actress Isabelle Huppert's roles playing a mother. Tidd shows how these performances present a Beauvoirian preoccupation with the idea that the mother and the child obstruct each other's paths to full individuality, and that, for Beauvoir, no maternal instinct exists. Jean-Pierre Boulé's essay on Claire Denis' film *Chocolat* (1988) explores the "politics of desire" and the possibilities of pursuing freedom within the racist and sexist bounds of colonial Cameroon. The volume really stumbles with Constance Mui and Julien Murphy's unconvincing attempts at a Beauvoirian reading of Sam Mendes' *Revolutionary Road* (2008), but gets back on track with Linnell Secomb's look at transcendence in the melodramas of Douglas Sirk and Todd Haynes and especially with Bradley Stephens' rich and clear article on ambiguity in David O. Russell's *I V Huckabees* (2004).

This is a lively collection of essays which thoroughly demonstrates the importance of de Beauvoir's thought to film studies.

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