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Les Belles Images

Simone de Beauvoir's Prophetic Vision of One-Dimensional Woman

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Abstract

This paper reads Simone de Beauvoir's *Les Belles Images* as a warning about the future of gender equality in a neoliberal economy. Drawing on Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* and on contemporary neoliberal feminism descended from Betty Friedan's ideal of a "balanced life," it shows how capitalist and patriarchal norms underpin both consumer society and emancipatory discourse. Beauvoir resists these through her "unbalanced" protagonist, whose refusal of harmony gestures toward a provisional freedom within structures of control and alienation.

Keywords

Les Belles Images – work – Marcuse – Marx – Freud – neoliberal feminism – patriarchy – capitalism

Résumé

Cet article lit *Les Belles Images* de Simone de Beauvoir comme un avertissement sur l'avenir de l'égalité des sexes dans une économie néolibérale. En s'appuyant sur *L'Homme unidimensionnel* de Herbert Marcuse et sur le féminisme néolibéral issu de l'idéal de « vie équilibrée » selon Betty Friedan, il montre comment les normes capitalistes et patriarcales soutiennent à la fois la société de consommation et le discours

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émancipateur. Par son héroïne « déséquilibrée », Beauvoir esquisse une liberté provisoire face au contrôle et à l'aliénation.

1 A World of Freedom for Women without Meaning

Les Belles Images is an overlooked yet visionary novel from the writer who, some twenty years earlier, had enthusiastically endorsed the centrality of work to women's emancipation.¹ In the novel Simone de Beauvoir asks a series of uncomfortable questions, including, whether women's successful careers always ensure equality and fulfilment, and whether it is possible that capitalist development and consumerist governmentality might operate with and through women's liberation, actually making women less free?² In asking such questions, the novel conducts an implicit conversation with the viewpoints of two contemporaneous works—namely, Betty Friedan's more optimistic vision in *The Feminine Mystique* and Herbert Marcuse's bleak and darker version of society in *One-Dimensional Man*.³ It is in reference to these two thinkers that a less recognized element of Beauvoir's contribution to contemporary feminist thought can be highlighted. Indeed, the novel looks ahead with remarkable prescience not just to technological capitalism but to neoliberal feminism. It foretells a time when the “good life” has become synonymous with success, and yet such success is both hollow, defined by the ethos of the marketplace, and lacking in deeper, enduring existential meaning and value, as well as being enduringly gendered.

The story is told through the point of view of thirty-something Laurence, who is highly accomplished in weaving together career and motherhood but soon reveals herself to be one of Beauvoir's recurrent fictional manifestations of an “unbalanced woman.” Gleamingly accomplished—she is a high-flying

1 Simone de Beauvoir, *Les Belles Images*, trans. Patrick O'Brian, London, Fontana, 1969 [1966]. Subsequent references to this work are indicated by the abbreviation *BELE*. A new translation has recently appeared: *The Image of Her*, trans. Lauren Elkin, Vintage Classics, London, 2025 [1966]. I retain O'Brian's version here for continuity with existing scholarship.

2 I use this Foucauldian term to suggest consumerism as a key element in the technologies and practices of government as a diffuse network of power. Here it creates and controls subjects not as citizens but as consumers. See Michel Foucault, “Governmentality,” in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, Hertfordshire, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991, pp. 87–104.

3 Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, New York, W.W. Norton, 2010 [1963]; Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1964.

copywriter, with a handsome go-getting husband, a gorgeous apartment in Paris filled with all the latest gadgets, and two beautiful daughters—Laurence feels these accomplishments to be strangely meaningless. Like Betty Friedan's highly educated and depressed heroines, languishing at home with the children and the latest model of vacuum cleaner, Laurence had once been a stay-at-home mother and took up a career on the advice of her mother, Dominique, when, as the mother of two small children, she suffered a depressive crisis. Although subsequently thriving in the fast-paced world of advertising, and while savoring professional recognition, a sense of truer and deeper fulfilment eludes her. Certainly, her work as a copywriter in an advertising agency, though more fulfilling than staying at home, is smart but superficial and manipulative, and Beauvoir contrasts it with the greater authenticity of the working-class-born Mona, a talented illustrator, who complains that the agency prefers slick photographs to her brilliant but rougher sketches.⁴ The narrative begins with Laurence's dawning awareness of her own existential malaise, despite the fact that she "has it all." She worries that it presages another breakdown and tries to reassure herself that "there's no sort of reason for me to crack. I have as much work as I can do and people all round me: my life's happy."⁵

But there is indeed a crisis brewing for Laurence, and it is precipitated by her sensitive older daughter Catherine's questioning of the world. Prompted by terrible stories in the news and the political awareness of her precocious school friend, Brigitte, ten-and-a-half-year-old Catherine begs to know the cause of unhappiness in the world and how it can be ended. Looking on, Laurence begins to review the values by which she has been living. Hoping to reassure herself, she seeks in her close family the secret to their equanimity.

But neither her husband, Jean-Charles, her mother, Dominique, or her lover, Lucien, reveal more than a satisfaction based on consumerist success and status. Parties are full of the men's enthusiastic speculation about the advanced technology of the future, but this does not inspire Laurence. Even her father, Papa, whom she idolizes as living in a different, more authentic register, with values rooted in older eras, disappoints her during a trip to Greece. Where Papa sees a simple nobility in the Greek peasants, Laurence sees poverty and deprivation, and, in a way that particularly affects her, she also sees a starkly patriarchal society that crushes female potential. In one memorable scene during the last days of the holiday, she sees a small vivacious girl of three or four, dancing joyfully to some music, watched over by her fat, complacent mother

4 *BELE*, p. 24.

5 *BELE*, p. 17.

who is holding a baby, and the contrast chills her to the core. Was this the girl's destiny, then? If so, "[l]ife was going to murder her."⁶

This makes her think of Catherine, and with that comes the feeling that back in Paris she, too, is being "murdered"—prepared, that is, to grow up into an unrecognizable adult. Because, Laurence realizes, it is Catherine's *unhappiness* that is in fact most inspiring to her in her search for authentic meaning. It reminds her of her own feeling, her tears, at the world's injustices when she was Catherine's age—about Hiroshima, for instance, when her beloved teacher, Mademoiselle Houchet, who took such emotion seriously rather than dismissing it, "used to say: 'It will depend upon us whether these deaths were useless or not.'"⁷ The rest of the family, however, see only Catherine's slipping grades. Before going away to Greece with her father, Laurence has reluctantly conceded to Jean-Charles's wishes that Catherine go to a psychologist to see if they can find a way to restore her stability and her good grades. Laurence now regrets this bitterly.

Worse, on her return to Paris, Laurence discovers that the psychologist, Madame Frossard, has recommended Catherine be separated from Brigitte, and Laurence is shattered by grief and rage. She realizes that she does not want her daughter to become like her, primed to succeed *within* the system—that is, to be the "good girl"—where Mlle Houchet's influence was unfortunately outweighed by that of the others, where she was taught not to rebel even when rebellion was exactly what was needed. Now, although she is successful and wealthy in her own right, Laurence feels as impotent and as gaslit as any Victorian wife whose sanity is questioned and whose perspective, in identifying harsh truths, is dismissed as disturbed by the men in her life. Disgusted by this vision, she develops nausea and vomiting and cannot eat. She rises from her sickbed only to agree that Catherine can continue her friendship, under her condition that Jean-Charles yield. The book ends on an ambiguous yet potentially hopeful note: Laurence brushing her hair in front of a mirror and resolving that, though her own chances are hopeless, the children will have theirs.

Although there has been relatively little scholarly commentary on *Les Belles Images* compared to many of Beauvoir's other novels, the commentary that exists clusters around the themes of consumerism and inauthenticity, language, and madness, among other things.⁸ While recognizing the importance

6 *BELE*, p. 133.

7 *BELE*, p. 22.

8 On inauthenticity, see, for example, Yolanda Astarita Patterson, "Mothers, Daughters, and Kim Chernin's Theories of Eating Disorders in the Fictional Works of Simone de Beauvoir," *Simone de Beauvoir Studies*, vol. 6, 1989, pp. 40–48; Lynn Kettler Penrod, "Consuming Women

of these themes, I focus here on Beauvoir's vision of the future of gender relations. Specifically, I read the novel as both a warning and a prediction of how advanced technological capitalism may absorb the radical nature of gender equality in the service of both capitalism and patriarchy, thereby entrapping women all over again.⁹

In what follows, I bring out these themes in the novel in dialogue with the work of two contemporaries, Betty Friedan and Herbert Marcuse, and after this I look ahead to the light Beauvoir sheds on today's neoliberal feminism. The paper ends with a discussion of a typically Beauvoirian form of resistance of last resort: that of the unbalanced heroine.

2 *Les Belles Images* and *The Feminine Mystique*

Beauvoir and Friedan engaged in conversation, at least through translators, almost ten years after the publication of *Les Belles Images*.¹⁰ In that discussion the differences between them were starkly revealed. For example, while Friedan advocates giving housewives the minimum wage, Beauvoir considers that regressive and focuses on encouraging women into the workforce as a norm, while restructuring the family and the myths of maternity to give a new social foundation to the shift into the workforce. In a sidebar article, Friedan reflects that she finds this preposterous and repellent.¹¹ The reader gets a sense of friction and frustration on both sides.

My concern here, however, is with the dialogue I imagine Beauvoir implicitly having with Friedan, ten years before they actually met up, through Beauvoir's exploration of the importance of work and what might happen in terms of women's sense of fulfilment and meaning in life should they enter the

Consumed: Images of Consumer Society in Simone de Beauvoir's *Les Belles Images* and Christiane Rochefort's *Les stances à Sophie*," *Simone de Beauvoir Studies*, vol. 4, 1987, pp. 160–175. On language and madness, see, for example, Alison Holland, "Simone de Beauvoir's Writing Practice: Madness, Enumeration and Repetition in *Les Belles Images*," *Simone de Beauvoir Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1, 1999, pp. 113–125. See also Elizabeth Fallaize, *The Novels of Simone de Beauvoir*, London, Routledge, 1988, pp. 118–142. This brilliant summary of the novel picks up many diverse themes in a very rich commentary.

9 Hester Eisenstein, "Feminism Seduced: Globalisation and the Uses of Gender," *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 25, no. 66, 2010, pp. 413–431.

10 This was published as Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir, "Sex, Society, and the Female Dilemma: A Dialogue between Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan," *Saturday Review*, June 14, 1975, pp. 12–20, 56–57.

11 Betty Friedan, "No Gods, No Goddesses," *Saturday Review*, June 14, 1975, pp. 16–17.

workplace as equals to men. There are similarities and differences between Beauvoir's and Friedan's approaches to work. Both agree on its importance for women's freedom and self-development, and both agree on the significant power of the (patriarchal society's) concept of femininity over men's approach to real-life women and over women's own self-conception. This is what Beauvoir refers to as the myth of femininity and what Friedan terms the feminine mystique. Friedan calls on women to embrace education and meaningful work, and Beauvoir concurs with this—although for Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex* at least, work is good in itself, even if it is less rewarding and meaningful than it might be. Like Karl Marx, Beauvoir believes that work enables self-fashioning and self-making and that even drudgery offers the chance of economic self-sufficiency, helping one gain personal strength, character, and some freedom from control by husband or family.¹² In passages throughout *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir makes this point in various ways. For example: "It is through work that woman has been able, to a large extent, to close the gap separating her from the male; work, alone can guarantee her concrete freedom."¹³ She explains:

When she is productive and active, she regains her transcendence; she affirms herself concretely as subject in her projects; she senses her responsibility relative to the goals she pursues and to the money and rights she appropriates. Many women are conscious of these advantages, even those with the lowest-level jobs.¹⁴

But she also observes, without elaborating in *The Second Sex*, "work today is not freedom," although *not* working is certainly not the answer.¹⁵ In *The Second Sex* she discusses the problems with manual labor as being work with a very constrained possibility of transcendence; and for the middle-class Independent Woman, the problem she identifies is one of uncertain balance between her femininity and her transcendence, private and public domains. This is a structural issue, and Beauvoir writes: "These two destinies are not reconcilable; she hesitates between them without being exactly suited to either, and that is the

12 Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton, London, Penguin and New Left Review, 1975, pp. 329–330. Text originally published in 1932.

13 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, New York, Vintage Books, 2010 [1949], p. 737. Subsequent references to this work are indicated by the abbreviation ss.

14 ss, p. 737.

15 ss, p. 737.

source of her lack of balance.”¹⁶ Furthermore, this is not possible without the “sacrifices and juggling that keep her in constant tension.”¹⁷ This points to the gendered ambiguity that Beauvoir highlights, in contrast to existential ambiguity, which results from her situation as subject and object in patriarchal society and is part of her experience of oppression. In her conversation with Friedan in 1975, she also puts an onus on middle-class educated women to refuse to be among the elite of patriarchal capitalist society and advocates that they should instead use their educational and cultural capital to change this society.¹⁸

Friedan, whose focus is entirely on middle-class women or, at least, through the notion of the American Dream, on aspirational middle-class life (theoretically accessible to all), is also concerned with balance. Her view, however, is that an equilibrium can and should be reached between work and motherhood, arguing that this is the kind of good life that feminism should be supporting, rather than childlessness with a focus on work, as Beauvoir personally embodied and which she refers to in their later meeting.¹⁹ Friedan does not critique the nuclear family in principle and even declares that the notion that women have to choose between a career and family is a myth, part of the myth that shores up the feminine mystique.²⁰ “In actual fact,” writes Friedan, “it is not as difficult as the feminine mystique implies, to combine marriage and motherhood and even the kind of lifelong personal purpose that once was called ‘career.’”²¹ In the last chapter of *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan finds many examples of women seeking and achieving this balance. For example, one woman says: “I’m not such a darned patient, loving, perfect mother anymore. I don’t change the kids’ clothes top to bottom every day, and no more ruffles. But I seem to have more time to enjoy them.”²² Friedan later continues: “[W]ith the vision to make a new life plan of her own, she can fulfill a commitment to profession and politics, and to marriage and motherhood with equal seriousness.”²³ The emphasis here is on individual success within the system. Finally, where Friedan criticizes consumerism for its role in confining women to the

16 SS, p. 283.

17 SS, p. 752.

18 Friedan and Beauvoir, “Sex, Society, and the Female Dilemma,” p. 20.

19 Despite the Aristotelian overtones of the good life portrayed here, Aristotle is not an explicit influence on either Friedan or the neoliberal feminists that follow her.

20 Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, p. 67.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 297.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 296.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 329.

home and channeling their discontent into the desire for gadgets and appliances, she does not consider the possibility that consumerism can also trap and alienate women working *outside* the home.

Nor is there any acknowledgement of the darker side of family life, including its influence in perpetuating gendered norms. On the contrary, Friedan points out that it is single women teachers and role models who were repellent to her as a young woman with ambition:

The only other kind of women I knew, growing up, were the old-maid high-school teachers; the librarian; the one woman doctor in our town, who cut her hair like a man; and a few of my college professors. None of these women lived in the warm center of life as I had known it at home. Many had not married or had children. I dreaded being like them, even the ones who taught me truly to respect my own mind.²⁴

By comparison, Laurence's envisions the family as a form of anesthetizing slumber that keeps at bay the kind of disturbing questions she cannot answer. Where Friedan sees family as the "warm center," Laurence sees instead a life that is "full, warm, a nest, a cocoon" that is drowsy and stupefying: "[A]ll that was needed was a little care to prevent anything breaking in upon this security."²⁵ The security it affords is also a form of imprisonment, in which she had been schooled in feminine self-control: "[I]f you are overcome by anger drink a glass of water and do some exercises."²⁶ Interestingly, only Mlle Houchet, who is one of the "old-maid" teachers decried and pitied by Friedan, encouraged her otherwise, toward her own identity: "Form your own opinion!" she had urged the girls—and "[h]ow disappointed she would be if she could see me today!" Laurence concludes sadly, turning Friedan on her head.²⁷

3 *Les Belles Images* and *One-Dimensional Man*

Les Belles Images' rich critique of the new world of work chimes with Marcuse's criticisms of technocapitalism published just two years earlier. Before discussing the resonances between Beauvoir's depiction of contemporary society and Marcuse's work, it may be useful to set out the key aspects of the latter's

24 *Ibid.*, pp. 66–67.

25 *BELE*, p. 38.

26 *BELE*, p. 111.

27 *BELE*, p. 37.

thought and explicate his conceptual apparatus, which brings together Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx. Marcuse's starting point for Freud is *Civilization and its Discontents*.²⁸ In this seminal text, Freud claimed that for civilization to be possible, restraint and repression of libidinal impulses and desires is necessary. These impulses and desires include sexual pleasure, hedonism, and happiness, which are instead channeled into work and marriage or else sublimated into creative and intellectual pursuits such as art and science, which latter are then capable of generating friction with social reality.²⁹ This process describes the domination of the pleasure principle by the reality principle, a bargain that substitutes immediate pleasure and gratification for security.³⁰ Freud saw this process as sociohistorically universal in society and, in individuals, as a sign of developmental maturity.

Marcuse modified some of these ideas, weaving Freud and Marx together in a dialectic that in turn modifies both in a new synthesis. Firstly, countering Freud's notion of the unchanging nature of human psyches, Marcuse sees the psyche as shaped by and embedded in historical regimes. In late modernity, or what he called advanced technological society, he suggests that the reality principle has shifted to the performance principle, underpinned by the distinction between "basic" and "surplus" repression.³¹ Where the former is necessary for civilization, the latter becomes a tool for more totalitarian domination. The "instinctual energy" that would otherwise threaten the social order is instead aligned with it, where "its interests have become the innermost drives of its citizens."³² The urge for endless productivity sits here, an unnecessary creation of work for work's sake that feeds this system. As part of this process, sublimation is increasingly absent, and artistic and creative pursuit has ceased to be oppositional and is rather channeled into preserving the hegemony.³³ Laurence's work in advertising is a key example of how this plays out in *Les Belles Images*. In advanced technological society, sexuality, another danger to the established order, is not repressed but freely permitted and encouraged; yet at the same time it loses its subversive quality. Marcuse writes: "Pleasure, thus adjusted, generates submission."³⁴ Laurence herself displays all the symptoms of repressive desublimation, with sexuality defanged of all its transgressive elements.

28 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. Joan Riviere, London, Hogarth Press, 1930.

29 *Ibid.*, especially pp. 62–63.

30 *Ibid.*, pp. 12–13, 27–36.

31 Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, pp. 56–83.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

33 *Ibid.*, pp. 56–80.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 75.

Sex with her husband is a “perfect physical understanding” that “did not change the colour of life,” and her relationship with Lucien is coolly indifferent, as if it were rather a symbol of the “modern woman” as she sees it, all image without substance.³⁵

Adding Marx to the mix, Marcuse sees surplus repression as jointly a psychic and social alienation, the latter engendered by an increasing specialization of labor. In such conditions, departing from Freud’s concept of “introjection,” which posits the private, autonomous realm set apart from that of external structures, Marcuse instead suggests that advanced technological society claims the entire individual; and this is because consumer products “carry with them prescribed attitudes and habits, certain intellectual and emotional reactions which bind the consumer more or less pleasantly to the producers and, through the latter, to the whole.”³⁶ Indoctrination comes via lifestyle, and Marcuse calls this a “one-dimensional” existence “in which ideas, aspirations, and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced in terms of this universe.”³⁷

This is deeply resonant with a scene in *Les Belles Images* in which Laurence and her husband, Jean-Charles, go Christmas shopping. Jean-Charles is determined to buy Laurence a present, feeling that, in the wake of recent friction between them, this will somehow “represent” them as a close and loving couple and thus make them so. The scene is written in gorgeously evocative language, capturing the bewitching nature of the consumer realm, as Zygmunt Bauman describes it, and its lush ability to conjure up a life through ephemeral building blocks.³⁸ Captivating as it is, I will quote this passage at length:

The windows slowly went by one after another. Scarves, clips, chain-bracelets, jewels for millionaires—a diamond and ruby choker, a long rope of black pearls, sapphires, emeralds, gold bracelets [...], glass bubbles with brilliant ribbons inside them, twirling in the light [...]; scent, lotions, atomizers, feather waistcoats, pale pullovers made of wool and camel hair, the frothy coolness of the underclothes, the softness, the downy softness of the housecoats in pastel shades [...], the contrast of leather and fur in which each set off the other, clouds of swansdown, foaming lace.³⁹

35 *BELE*, pp. 23–24.

36 Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, p. 110; Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 12.

37 *Ibid.*

38 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2000.

39 *BELE*, p. 116. This is a pastiche of segments of Émile Zola’s novel set in the newly built Parisian department stores of the late nineteenth century. Zola, *Au bonheur des dames*,

The illusion swirls temptingly round Laurence, a magician's castle, before disintegrating in ragged wisps of smoke because, alas for her, lucky for her, she can see quite clearly how they were designed to work on her psyche. For the sake of marital harmony, however, she reluctantly accepts a necklace from Jean-Charles, even though she recognizes its role in constructing an aspirational representation of them as a couple: "[A] perfect picture of the couple who still adore one another after ten years of marriage. He was buying conjugal peace, the delights of the home, understanding, love; and pride in himself."⁴⁰ Similarly, Jean-Charles, demonstrating his focus on images and the superficial, chooses a gift of a camera for Catherine. Laurence's priorities are different. She reflects: "[I]t's something else that I should like to give her: security, a happy mind, the joy of being alive."⁴¹

We might ask, reasonably, what it is we give up today for what amounts to an extreme but freely accepted domination. Marcuse is clear that it is our material needs (real and manufactured) but also freedom from fear and danger. Here is the trade-off: the "romantic pretechnical world was permeated with misery, toil, and filth, and these in turn were the background of all pleasure and joy. Still, there was a 'landscape,' a medium of libidinal experience which no longer exists."⁴²

Beauvoir has a different, but not necessarily incompatible, approach to both Freud and Marx as compared to Marcuse. She criticizes Freud in particular and psychoanalysis in general in *The Second Sex* for its sexist and deterministic approach to women's psyches, "[r]eplacing value with authority, choice with drives" and, perhaps above all, for stressing the importance of the idea of "normality" to an already existing, patriarchal, and capitalist society, which precludes the basis of future "becoming."⁴³ In *Les Belles Images*, Madame Frossard wants to adjust Catherine to the rotten society that she is questioning, to make her "normal." As Elizabeth Fallaize points out, however, Beauvoir combined criticism of the psychoanalytic method with a willingness to use its terms to explain her own motivations and life decisions.⁴⁴ In terms of Marx, Beauvoir

Paris, Georges Charpentier, 1883. See Sandra Reineke, "Pretty Pictures: Beauvoir's Feminist Critique of French Consumer Culture in *The Second Sex* and *Les Belles Images*," *Simone de Beauvoir Studies*, vol. 24, 2008, pp. 32–48.

40 *BELE*, p. 118.

41 *BELE*, p. 117.

42 Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 73.

43 *ss*, p. 60.

44 Fallaize, *Novels of Simone de Beauvoir*, p. 133; citing Francis Jeanson, *Simone de Beauvoir ou l'Entreprise de vivre*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1966, p. 253.

is sympathetic to the early work of Marx, whom she sees offering what Sonia Kruks calls an “existential” materialist theory while departing from his system in her focus on women’s particular oppression.⁴⁵ Indeed, both in *The Second Sex* and more explicitly in interviews later in her life, she insisted on seeing patriarchy as entwined with but distinct from capitalism.⁴⁶ For these reasons, then, I think Beauvoir would have found Marcuse’s more socially and historically inflected use of Freud and Marx persuasive.

Indeed, in *The Coming of Age* Beauvoir does briefly engage with Marcuse, quoting him favorably: “Marcuse observes that the consumers’ society has replaced a troubled by a clear conscience and that it condemns all feelings of guilt.”⁴⁷ Where Beauvoir would have disagreed with Marcuse, however, is in his pessimistic overdetermination: the complete undermining of true choice that he identifies in a totalitarian system. Beauvoir saw instead degrees of freedom coinciding with structural determinism, although she certainly conceded that freedom could be hugely constrained. The kind of sophisticated universe of consumerism that Laurence’s work in advertising epitomizes seamlessly blends control with the superficial practice of freedom in a way that Marcuse’s analysis vividly illuminates when he observes that free choice has shriveled to choice “between brands and gadgets.”⁴⁸ Plentiful choice is not, of course, a bad thing in itself, but in advanced technological society it leads to domination and oppression: “The range of choice open to the individual is not the decisive factor in determining the degree of human freedom, but *what* can be chosen and what *is* chosen by the individual.”⁴⁹ More goods and possessions lead to pointless activity and meaningless work—surplus repression—that waste precious psychic energy and shore up the system itself, where this energy could otherwise

45 Sonia Kruks, “Beauvoir and the Marxism Question,” in *A Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Laura Hengehold and Nancy Bauer, Hoboken, NJ, John Wiley & Sons, 2017, pp. 236–248.

46 For example, in her interview with John Gerassi, Beauvoir compared her success in a man’s world to being a “class collaborationist.” Simone de Beauvoir and John Gerassi, “*The Second Sex 25 Years Later*,” *Society*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1976, 79–85, p. 80. See also her televised interview “Why I Am a Feminist,” in which she says the structures of patriarchy still endure: “*Les hommes détiennent encore le pouvoir dans notre société. Ils l’ont gardé pendant des siècles et ils ont bien l’intention de le garder. C’est cela le patriarcat.*” (Men still hold power in our society. They have held it for centuries, and they intend to hold on to it. That is patriarchy.) “Simone de Beauvoir: Pourquoi je suis féministe,” interview by Jean-Louis Servan-Schreiber, dans *Questionnaire*, April 1975, in *Simone de Beauvoir: Two Interviews*, dir. Arlette François, Icarus Films, 2012.

47 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, trans. Patrick O’Brian, New York, W.W. Norton, 1996 [1970], p. 2. Subsequent references to this work are indicated by the abbreviation *co.*

48 Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 7.

49 *Ibid.*

be used to challenge the repressive system, identify authentic (or “true”) needs, and fight for genuine freedom. In other words, transcendence is reduced to the performative; if it is pointless work, work for work’s sake, it is indistinguishable from immanence and may indeed be worse, given that it leaves no corner of the soul unclaimed. But Laurence is not totally consumed by this system; she is acutely aware of the falsity of these needs because her day job is to create them; and beyond this, she can dimly perceive an alternative set of values and meaning—as does her daughter, more spontaneously. Even though Laurence does not know what to do with this vision, it undermines Marcuse’s dystopian tone and suggests there are at least chinks in prison walls.⁵⁰ Perhaps the greatest danger with our contemporary society is that we have forgotten we are in prison at all.

4 Feminism in a Neoliberal World: One-Dimensional Woman

Popular contemporary feminism, with its emphasis on the primacy of choice and self-construction, is not only aligned with advanced technological society but is itself constructed in large part through media, social media, advertising, and the celebrity sphere.⁵¹ In popular, post-, and/or neoliberal feminism, feminist choice and capitalist productivity align, following Marcuse’s idea of the destruction of a private inner space, with women enthusiastic participants in some of what were once considered the most patriarchal and oppressive structures.⁵² For example, in the realm of sexuality, women are willing participants in sexual objectification such that patriarchal pornographic fantasies and women’s own sexual subjectification closely coincide in an exaggerated

50 Lynn Kettler Penrod draws on Jean Baudrillard as a way of illuminating the philosophical terrain of *Les Belles Images* in a way that complements my use of Marcuse here. Penrod, “Consuming Women Consumed,” especially pp. 161–164. Indeed, Beauvoir anticipates what Baudrillard would later call “sign-value”: the purchase of objects less for their utility than for the meaning they contain. See especially Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, trans. Chris Turner, London, Sage, 1998 [1970]. See also his later theory of the simulacrum in *Simulacra and Simulation*, where he argues that consumer culture is organized as a semiotic system in which objects function primarily as signs. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1994 [1981]. Beauvoir therefore anticipated Baudrillard while deeply resonating with Marcuse’s directly contemporaneous work.

51 Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2018.

52 For this paper, although recognizing their differences, I will approach them all as one large, more or less coterminous category.

and cartoon-like (think Kardashian) version of feminine sexuality.⁵³ Similarly, in the realm of the workplace, high-profile corporate feminists like Sheryl Sandberg emphasize the profound commitment entailed in “leaning in” as a cheerful adoption of entrepreneurial selfhood.⁵⁴ Such contemporary feminism emphasizes the dual presence of career and motherhood, with the onus on the individual to bring this about, despite the lack of structural change that Beauvoir posited as necessary. Indeed, as Catherine Rottenberg has traced, the crafting of a happy “balance” between the two is the “new ideal of progressive womanhood,” and emancipated womanhood is not complete without this successful balancing of “private and public aspects of the self.”⁵⁵ In practice, the happy balance means accepting women’s lowered ambitions at work during their childbearing years, while leaving men’s shining trajectory untarnished and, at the same time, pressing for workplaces to change to recognize women’s “natural” responsibilities and wishes, which are taken as synonymous.

As in everything else in postfeminist life, celebrities and their easy surface glamor lead the way. An example of this comes from a newspaper article on Claudia Schiffer that I pulled from a brief scan of a celebrity-heavy newspaper during the writing of this article. (I could have selected others on almost any other day.) The article traces how Schiffer changed with motherhood: “She became less ‘competitive’, and while she knows she could still book more jobs if she wanted to, she’s content with the balance she’s achieved in her life.”⁵⁶ The article goes on to quote her directly: “I could take on a lot more runways, photoshoots and other projects [...]. But maintaining a balance that enables me to spend quality time with my family and be there when they need me is far more important to me than doing a great new campaign.”⁵⁷ Although the double shift was highlighted by Arlie Hochschild in the Anglosphere, and, before that, by Monique Haicault in the Francophone countries, as a gendered problem, relying on the “constant tension” that Beauvoir notes, in neoliberal feminism the happy achievement of the double shift becomes no longer an oppression to address but, on the contrary, an aspiration.⁵⁸

53 Nina Power, *One-Dimensional Woman*, London, Zed Books, 2009.

54 Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*, with Nell Scovell, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2013.

55 Catherine Rottenberg, “Happiness and the Liberal Imagination: How Superwoman Became Balanced,” *Feminist Studies*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2014, 144–168, pp. 147–148, 155.

56 Heidi Parker, “Supermodel Claudia Schiffer, 54, Reveals What She Gave Up to Become a Supermom to Her 3 Kids,” *Daily Mail*, December 28, 2024.

57 *Ibid.*

58 Arlie Hochschild, *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home*, with

It is this deep, affective dimension, the alignment of emotional satisfaction with societal regulation, that means that “free choice” is at once control by both patriarchal and capitalist forces working together. As Bauman discusses, in this regime individual agency extends to small things only, consumerism-facilitated identity projects mostly, and the wider structures that frame these are left untouched.⁵⁹ Turning to such vehicles as Instagram, we search for a template for successful lifestyles and identities, assembling attractive elements into a bricolage, what passes for originality. When these objects no longer suffice, we choose other accessories and images, as in the “makeover paradigm” that Rosalind Gill suggests is central to postfeminist media culture and that now covers multiple dimensions of life, including homes, gardens, diet, dating, fashion, and so on.⁶⁰

This paradigm echoes Laurence’s dizzying walk through the consumer mall at Christmas, in which what was on offer was not only a range of goods but a range of selves: happy wives, happy families, happy daughters. Laurence, then, in her life as a liberated professional woman in a consumerist regime, is a precursor of the neoliberal feminist ideal. What, then, is Beauvoir’s solution? Is resistance possible, or, as in Marcuse’s bleaker vision, is there no way out?

5 The Importance of the Unbalanced Woman

Initially, Laurence’s experience is one of alienation, a haunting distance from everyone and everything that also feels troublingly like it might denote the return of her mental illness. The initial sensation is one of being distanced from everything, set apart, enshrouded in her spiritual ennui. She is alienated both from the capitalist techno-regime in which she excels and from an authentic selfhood through the norms of her gendered socialization. Indeed, with the exception of her instruction by Mlle Houchet, she was socialized to be completely (self-)controlled. She realizes the price of this, in the poverty of her emotions, during a scene in which her father is listening to music and she admits to herself that the grand, tragic passions in the music of Claudio Monteverdi

Anne Machung, revised ed., London, Penguin Books, 2012 [1989]; Monique Haicault, “La gestion ordinaire de la vie en deux,” *Sociologie du travail*, vol. 26, no. 3, 1984, pp. 286–277.

59 Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, p. 74.

60 Rosalind Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2007, 147–166, p. 156.

and Ludwig van Beethoven are ones that she does not recognize in herself. The emotions with which she is familiar, by contrast, consist of “boredom—above all, boredom.”⁶¹ This is particularly interesting because, after Marcuse, it is also part of the taming and repressing of emotions *through* artistic expression that had once served as critiques of the foundations of society. As part of the expansive dimension of the old pretechnological libidinal landscape, which emerged from the omnipresence of death and danger as well as joy, such emotions, where they are faintly conjured, are instead looped back into supporting society in what Marcuse calls the “culture industry.” Think of Beethoven being used to sell cars and burgers or muffle potentially awkward social encounters with strangers in elevators. Don Draper, protagonist of AMC’s *Mad Men*, a show about the advertising industry in 1960s Manhattan, famously said: “Advertising is based on one thing: happiness. And you know what happiness is? Happiness is the smell of a new car. It’s freedom from fear.”⁶²

Importantly, Laurence’s awareness of this affective gap between what she is and what she might be is the first step to her critical and ethical awakening; and when anger does come, it is directed at saving her daughter from being turned into a woman like her. Given that her protest manifests in nausea and vomiting, this is not a rational decision, but an embodied one; it is her body that rebels against the system. As Beauvoir notes: “[A] woman’s body—and specifically the girl’s—is a ‘hysterical’ body in the sense that there is, so to speak, no distance between psychic life and its physiological realisation.”⁶³ This allows for the body to express authentic feelings that the rational self cannot. When her father admits to her that he would never have sent Laurence to a psychologist as a child—but then again, he wouldn’t have needed to because “[y]ou were so well balanced”—she understands that Catherine’s refusal of normality is her chance to be free.⁶⁴ This is why the scene with the dancing child in Greece on their holiday is so important. As Fallaize puts it: “The sight of the enraptured child pushes Laurence into the sudden realisation that Catherine is still on the side of music and feeling.”⁶⁵

Laurence is in some ways the heroine of her own horror movie. She has been possessed by demonic forces, but now she is expelling that which seeks

61 *BELLE*, p. 30.

62 *Mad Men*, season 1, episode 1, “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes,” written by Matthew Weiner, dir. by Alan Taylor, Lionsgate TV, 2007, aired June 8, 2008, on AMC.

63 *SS*, p. 356.

64 *BELLE*, p. 134.

65 Fallaize, *Novels of Simone de Beauvoir*, p. 134.

to control her. It is not the case that where Friedan advocated for individual balance, Beauvoir advocated for the opposite per se. Indeed, she argued that women must organize to try to change the system. Where this was impossible or if one's freedom to act was particularly limited, unbalance was the refusal of last resort. This is what she means when, in her brief discussion of Marcuse's idea of a consumer society with its unruffled conscience, she declares, "[b]ut its peace of mind has to be disturbed."⁶⁶ This is what Laurence and the other unbalanced protagonists of her novels—such as Paula in *The Mandarins*, and the unnamed woman, as well as Monique, in *The Woman Destroyed*—and key figures in her memoirs, notably Zaza, achieve.⁶⁷ Although this "cracking" is a recurrent motif in Beauvoir's work, however, so are its potential dangers and consequences. For example, in *The Inseparables*, it is Andrée, another unbalanced young woman, who cracks when she cannot find her way out of the prison of the successful feminine life expected of her, which in this case is shaped by the *haute bourgeoisie* of the early twentieth century in an earlier regime of control.⁶⁸ For much of *The Inseparables*, this spirited, soulful, and intelligent young woman—who is, unfortunately, dutifully close to a mother who disciplines her ruthlessly in requisite feminine propriety—is balanced on a dual track, mediating between rebellion and conformity, each track claiming half of her soul. Yet her declarations of freedom—swinging high on the childhood swing in her holiday home so that she seems as likely to fall as to fly, pondering whether to throw herself off a roof in protest at her forbidden love affair, swimming in the freezing river in her underwear during a landed family's social event—quickly turn into acts of direct self-harm as the tracks begin to separate further and further. For example, she hacks at her foot with an axe to escape yet another onerous social duty and buys herself some sweet, fleeting freedom. Plagued with headaches, fevers, and exhaustion from the stress of the conflict, her body finally turns on itself with a vengeance, and she dies from encephalitis, which interestingly is one of those immune system disorders in which the body's defense system attacks itself, in this case the brain. Symbolically, like depression, it suggests a reading in which this illness is anger that cannot be expressed, turned inward against the self.

66 *CO*, p. 2.

67 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Mandarins*, trans. Leonard M. Friedman, London, Collins, 1960 [1954]; *The Woman Destroyed*, trans. Patrick O'Brian, London, Collins, 1969 [1967]; *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, trans. James Kirkup, London, Andre Deutsch, 1959 [1958].

68 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Inseparables*, trans. Lauren Elkin, London, Vintage Classics, 2021 [2020].

Returning to *Les Belles Images*, although Laurence's body also eludes her control in itself rejecting the conventional world, the middle-class world of success, ultimately it is her care for her daughter that gives her sufficient resilience to survive. With that, she has become a truly good mother, in Beauvoir's sense of refusing to transmit the schooling in femininity and which she sees, and portrays at least in her fiction, as rare. While Beauvoir saw unbalance as an authentic act of resistance of last resort, the persistence of these unbalanced women up to the present day and into the future indicates that technological progress will not in itself end gendered inequality and possibly, indeed, will do the contrary.

Here's where the 2022 movie *Don't Worry Darling* hints that the contemporary woman might also need to crack before she can become free.⁶⁹ In many ways this film appears like a dystopian version of *Les Belles Images* set in a near future that remarkably resembles the 1950s. Alice (a contemporary Laurence) and Jack (Jean-Charles) live in a beautiful mid-century modern house straight out of *Elle Decoration*, with Jack going off to a mysterious work place every day with the other men and Alice enjoying an enviable life of socializing, shopping, and relaxing by the pool with the other wives, interrupted only by bouts of housework that she undertakes with an enthusiasm for perfection. But Alice is haunted by a feeling of distance and alienation from this life. This is substantiated when a neighbor, Margaret, has what the authorities call a mental breakdown and one afternoon kills herself in front of a horrified Alice. Soon after, Alice's own body rebels: rejecting this glossy but empty lifestyle, she almost suffocates herself by wrapping cling film over her face while preparing lunch; she almost drowns herself in the bath when preparing to go out to a fancy event at Jack's work; she wonders whether, unable to control these impulses, she is going mad. Eventually, and after a number of "clashes" with the mysterious "system" as personified in Jack's boss, the repressed memory explodes to the surface, and she realizes that this perfect tangerine-and-blue-skied paradise is a simulation; her body in actuality lies anesthetized in a cramped and ugly apartment. This is, moreover, the work of her husband who, unemployed and ashamed at being unable to "look after" Alice, who is a hospital doctor, has drugged her and trapped her in this computer program where he can be the man who goes out to work and leaves his wife in a bubble of 1950s consumerist domesticity, a return for him of a rightful gender order. Only Alice's becoming what the virtual reality "doctor" calls "sick" and in need of psychiatric treatment gives her the chance to awaken and recognize her true situation.

69 *Don't Worry Darling*, dir. Olivia Wilde, Warner Bros, 2022.

This movie reminds us to stay alert in confusing times, to query progress even if it is wrapped up in astonishingly appealing technological sophistication, to trust our emotions and our intuitions, to question what we have been programmed to desire and value, to be wary of nostalgia, including around traditional gendered roles, and to search for the chinks. The end of *Don't Worry Darling*, just like that of *Les Belles Images*, does not offer any solutions: the unbalanced woman figure offers protest and warning but cannot in itself provide an answer. When Alice wakes up in the "real" world of her grubby apartment and responsibility-laden life, she has not woken into a perfect life, but as she tells Jack, it is "my life," and an ability to choose, however constrained, as Beauvoir emphasized, is the basis for any ethical freedom. This is Marcuse's older libidinal economy that combined struggle with a searing ability to feel; it is also a world that is a million miles away from the "wages for housework" idea that Friedan advocated and that would potentially have fit into the simulacrum.⁷⁰ Similarly, where Laurence will be in a year's time after the close of the novel's action is not something we, as readers, can possibly predict.

Both *Les Belles Images* and *Don't Worry Darling* point to a means by which women can equip themselves with authenticity and agency: through the power of friendship with other women. Laurence watches Catherine's intimacy with Brigitte and recognizes its transformative effect, while regretting the absence of this in her own life: "I should have liked to sit in the dark with a little girl of my own age, giggling and whispering," she says regretfully.⁷¹ Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex* that friendships are "precious for [women] [...]. [T]hey join together to create a kind of counter-universe whose values outweigh male values; when they meet, they find the strength to shake off their chains."⁷² Sylvie's friendship with Andrée is similarly important in *The Inseparables*, and when the latter cracks, she transforms Sylvie's notion of what she is fighting against and gives her resolve for what she is fighting for. Similarly, Alice can only free herself from the simulation with the help of the other wives trapped in the

70 In her 1975 dialogue with Beauvoir, Friedan suggested that housewives should receive a minimum wage, a pragmatic proposal distinct from, and probably unaware of, the contemporaneous Wages for Housework movement launched in Italy by Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James in 1972. Some relevant references include: Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, Bristol, Falling Wall Press, 1972; Silvia Federici, *Wages Against Housework*, Bristol, Falling Wall Press, 1975.

71 *BELE*, p. 47.

72 *SS*, pp. 598–599.

program with her. We might truly say that it is this engagement that may, for women, lie at the base of a moral revolution in women's sensibilities and a rejection of neoliberal feminist values.

The story Beauvoir presents in *Les Belles Images* helps us to take stock of where we are currently with the feminist project. Today, as we have seen, the ideal woman is a successful wife, mother, and executive rolled into one, the embodiment of one-dimensional woman; and all the tensions that erupted in the 1950s and early 1960s, sending furious ripples across the polished surface of the long 1950s cultural milieu, giving violent birth to second-wave feminism, have apparently been resolved. They have been resolved because the private space that gives rise to such a gap has itself been “invaded and whittled down” to (almost) nothing.⁷³ Ideal women today are both feminine and corporate high-flyers, caregivers and dazzlingly ambitious; in this impossible ideal, they accept gendered differences, meaning that the second shift is, in a sense, a fact of life. In the West today we are told that what we have is the result of progress, and if we look back to our own past—at the 1950s woman who has to look perfectly coiffed and not behave out of line—or across to other cultures—at the Iranian student who takes off her clothes and walks around campus in her knickers and bra in protest at the burka police—it is hard not to accept that what we have now is the best possible version of freedom we could have.⁷⁴ Still, our freedom and our unfreedom are pleated together like origami, liberties and prohibitions entangled at the deepest level. If our “choice” amounts to buying things and reproducing a particular lifestyle, aping the celebrities in doing so, and if our “balance,” mark of aspirational femininity, somehow still locks us into the traditional gender patterns, then it amounts to far less than earlier generations of feminists would have hoped. It is, we could say, certainly more in the lineage of Friedan than Beauvoir.

As feminists, we have for some decades been drifting down an odd path, and if this path—increasingly paved by the inventions out of Silicon Valley, heirs of Jean-Charles and his friends, shaped by retrofuturistic patriarchal visions of the good life—is not to lead us back to a future eerily like the world of our mothers and grandmothers, then we may need to pause, admit we may be lost, and

73 Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 10.

74 In November 2024, Iranian student Ahoo Daryaei was briefly detained by authorities after removing most of her clothes at the Science and Research Branch of Islamic Azad University in Tehran. Daryaei's act was widely seen as a protest against Iran's strict mandatory hijab and dress code laws. See Akhtar Makooi, “Iran Student Strips in Protest over Strict Hijab Dress Code,” *Telegraph*, November 3, 2024.

begin the hard work of retracing our steps. For that, we may need to affirm our lineage with Beauvoir, not with Friedan. *Les Belles Images* asks us, Do we have the courage for that? Can we display the determination that Laurence mustered, and that Beauvoir advocated later, in her interviews, to *refuse*? Some sixty years after Beauvoir wrote her novel, those questions are both unanswered and perhaps more urgent than ever.

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