

The challenges of writing “by demand” and the effort of demystification in Simon de Beauvoir’s thought*

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Abstract

In this article, I analyze the argumentative relationship between topics from *The Second Sex*, published in 1949, and texts written “by demand” from North American editors, such as *Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita syndrome*, published in August 1959. What they have in common is the proposal of demystification, present in the theoretical writings and even in those considered auto-biographical. Always concerned with inquiring into relevant themes, Beauvoir discusses topics such as symmetry, identity and difference, both between cultures – from Europe to the Americas –, and between the sexes – in the complex relationship of the feminine, criticized based on a supposed “nature” of women, and the masculine, which is emphasized in patriarchal society. Beauvoir’s point is not to revert, through writing, the dilemmas of history, but to criticize the impact of culture on reading and writing the real, without resigning herself to arbitrariness and to impositions. I therefore inquire into the axiological tenor present in her writings “by demand”; if it could be the same that is configured in *The Second Sex*, in the effort to demystify the illusions that hover above historical reality. I seek, in the interaction between texts and life practices, to understand the analytical method that launches Beauvoir’s thought as a matrix of contemporary feminisms.

Keywords: Beauvoir, Writings by Demand, Demystification, Identity and Difference.

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Introduction

Simone de Beauvoir’s oeuvre has been received through many perspectives, giving rise to diverse analyses and interpretations over the past decades. In her writings, we find a variation of literary forms and investigation methods, with diverse, though dialogic, themes. In this article, I therefore seek to align some issues, in terms of methods and arguments, taking into consideration two essays: *Le deuxième sexe* (1949) and *Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita Syndrome* (1959).

My intent is to consider, on the one hand, the thematic-methodological framing of the essays on the *feminine* in culture, which gain feminist projections in Beauvoir’s analyses and in theories and movements that are structured around Second Wave Feminism, post-1960, both in the US and France; on the other, I am interested in identifying current interpretative possibilities of commentators of Beauvoir’s oeuvre. Finally, I intend to establish a dialog with studies, among others, of Karen Vintges (2002, 2017), Debra Bergoffen (2002, 2012) and, especially, Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir (2018), regarding philosophical and feminist issues.

My goal is, above all, to examine a possible correspondence of the “demystification effort” which, since *The Second Sex*, has appeared in Beauvoir’s intentions, in essays, practices and lived experiences, always in terms of existentialist principles. Following Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir’s view, the term “demystify” (*démystifier*) does not correspond exactly, in Beauvoir, to “disenchant”, but shows an intention to reveal the prevalence of “false idols”, as well as “deadly illusions” that hide the depth and beauty of reality (Le Bon de Beauvoir, 2018:34).

Simone de Beauvoir addressed demystification in her memoirs, especially in *Tout compte fait* (1972) - *All Said and Done* (1993). In this autobiographical writing, Beauvoir specifically mentions that “to dispel the mystifications (*dissiper les mystifications*), to tell the truth (*dire la vérité*): here is one of the goals” she pursued (Beauvoir, 1972:512). In this passage, she addresses the reception of her writings and its interpretations,

which varied according to readers' understanding; on the one hand, there are opinions that appreciate her "tendency toward happiness" (*mon goût du bonheur*), on the other, those who claim to "deplore" her "pessimism" (*déplorent mon pessimisme*) (Beauvoir, 1972:511).

What Beauvoir provides to philosophical readings is new discursive methodologies which make it possible to rethink existential obstacles. Thus, there is a certain provocation, whether interpretative or axiological, that reverberates as an existentialist impact that enters the lived experience. In the mentioned essays and the variations surrounding issues of the feminine in culture, we find a difference between the initial goal of *The Second Sex* and of the article on Brigitte Bardot, separated by a decade. The latter, from 1959, as *Le Bon de Beauvoir* points out (2018:33), is an example of her "writings by demand" (*I`écrit sur commande. Le Bon de Beauvoir*, 2018:33), that is, texts she was invited to publish by magazines and newspapers directed at a general audience.¹

A singular presentation

We must consider some points that bring both texts together and investigate if, in the forms of writing, Simone de Beauvoir strove to demystify illusions that hover above reality and give them the weight of "beautiful images" or if, in an effort to satisfy demands, these texts refrained from establishing new possibilities for criticizing culturally fabricated illusions and falsehoods.

Variations on discursive methods and topics

What seems implicit in *Le Bon de Beauvoir's* text, which introduces the writings translated and published in Brazil in 2018, is explicit in the dynamic of the textuality of many of the philosopher's works, revealing a well-defined objective: the

¹ It is worth noting that these writings first appear in English, in the magazine *Esquire*, 1959, instead of French, as originally written by the author, something that will be analyzed in the third part of the article.

concern with always being able to say something freely, provoking a certain reception and an aesthetic effect on readers from many parts of the world.

Wolfgang Iser states that “the text represents a potential effect that is realized in the reading process” (Iser, 1987:11). This seems precisely to be one of Beauvoir’s concerns. By investigating, in *Literature and Metaphysics*, an essay published in 1946 in *Les Temps Modernes*, the tenuous demarcation between fiction and philosophy, she writes “the novel takes on value and dignity only if it constitutes for the author as for the reader a living discovery” (Beauvoir, 2008:68). For Beauvoir, the interaction with the reader was always an important topic in the argumentative structure.

The concern with the reader

Regardless of the writing model and its source and origin, I believe that Simone de Beauvoir’s intent was always to confront the challenges of existence, without subordinating herself to her editors’ goals, showing great concern with her readers, who were references for her, as can be read in the prologues to her memoirs. In chapter 1 of *Tout compte fait (All Said and Done)*, she writes:

There is also the objection that ‘telling’ means setting the hard outlines of the written phrase in place of the fluid ambiguity of actual experience (*la fluide ambigüité du vécu*). But in fact the images called up by words are floating and imprecise; the knowledge words convey is not sharply defined. In any case, I do not intend to lead the reader through a waking dream (*de conduire le lecteur à travers un rêve éveillé*) that might bring my past back to life, but to examine my history from the standpoint of certain given concepts and notions (Beauvoir, *TCF*1972:12).

Her **methodological** trajectory stands out, as I have analyzed in other texts (Santos, 2012), with axiological bases that undergo variations over the course of writing due to new dislocations in the world around her. So it was with *The Second Sex*, which was

initially conceived simply as a history of mythology surrounding the feminine and ended up being transformed into a work of historical and cultural significance that persists through time. That work, according to M. Luisa Femenías (2012), “is not born out of Simone de Beauvoir’s feminist inclination”, but of her gradual perception that she “inhabits a foreign world”, and that it is a properly male world (Femenías, 2012:18). A world in which the place of identity and symmetry is transformed into a place of alterity.

The epistemological transition

It is important to relate Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir’s views of the Beauvoirian intention to demystify reality with the interpretation of commentators who find an ethical-political and anthropological profile in her works. Karen Vintges understands that, in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir seeks to capture the “currents that underlie her time”, discussing and integrating social developments and scientific results in a “synthesizing vision”, as a task of social philosophy. In order for the “patriarchy” (literally, “the rule of the father”) to no longer prevail, legal and economic changes must take place. However, the changes must be radical, encompassing “institutions, costs, public opinion and the entire social context” so that equality between men and women actually comes into being (Vintges, 2017:14).

A set of formulations project Beauvoir as a 20th century philosopher with a complex thought. On the one hand, there is her realism and her impetus toward demystification, which make her move across existence armed with certain “objective parameters” of human life, such as sex, birth, age, old age and death; on the other, as Françoise Rétif (1998) points out, there is “an ever-present potential of a margin of thought and autonomous action, in a *situation* which Beauvoir calls *freedom*” (Rétif, 1998:17).

Grounding Beauvoir’s concerns in ethical-anthropological bases, Debra Bergoffen considers that, among the central topics of *The Second Sex*, what stands out is the attention to human

institutions that are mistaken for natural, that persist in maintaining women’s subordination, one of which is marriage (Bergoffen, 2002). Of the agreements between men, of which women are not signatories, marriage is a set of burdens demanded of them at all times and in all societies. Patriarchal oppression is institutionally qualified as a social order which is realized through any economic system (Bergoffen, 2002). If, to Vintges, the economic-social weight is crucial in mapping the patriarchy, to Bergoffen, patriarchal institutions, especially marriage, go beyond economic limits and are emphasized as stigmas in each time, as described below.

To the commentators, the issue of freedom as the overriding principle collides with patriarchal designs and their dilemmas. Since the articles published in *Les Temps Modernes*, over the course of her writings from the 1940s to the 1970s, method and axiological bases make up the Beauvoirin epistemological framework of having to say something from somewhere, of the order of her choices and commitments to existence, with an emphasis on her critique of the Western patriarchy and its institutions, of the ways in which marriage and family were historically conceived.

The constructed feminine and the cultural dilemmas in *The Second Sex*

In the demystification process, some issues that serve as bases to *The Second Sex* gain new values over the course of theoretical reviews. From the 1960s onward, communication with feminist movements gains Beauvoir’s attention and her self-designation as a feminist is widely constituted, as can be read in her memoirs. She writes to North American feminist militants who already held *The Second Sex* to be an inspirational work in the late 1960s.

No feminist questions (*ne met en doute*) the statement that women are manufactured by civilization (*Que la femme soit fabriquée par la civilization*), not biologically determined. Where they do differ from my book is on the practical

plane: they refuse to trust in the future: they want to tackle their problems, to take their fate in hand, here and now. This is the point upon which I have changed: I think they are right (*je leur donne raison*) (Beauvoir, *TCF*1972:504).

Though Beauvoir herself did not see her 1949 essay as a militant book, her readers and commentators already emphasized the vanguard vision present in its theses and categories, which open up critical horizons to feminist propositions formulated after 1960. A dialogical universe was therefore established with the feminist movements, both for readers and interlocutors and for Beauvoir herself.

Possible readings of *The Second Sex*

We cannot disregard *The Second Sex's* impact on the practical-theoretical debates of Second Wave Feminism, as well as, in turn, on Beauvoir's understanding of her work's purpose. After all, the reviews of cultural and political inequalities regarding women were based, in the 1960s and the years that followed, on the need to understand aspects of their personal lives rooted in political and social issues, as well as on the effects caused by power structures on personal instances. In fact, quality or inequality and correlated principles that are projected as a result of a culture with sexist outlines. Carol Hanish's (2006) major slogan, "the personal is political" – initially expressed in 1969 – echoes the aspirations of women from around the world, largely, women who read *The Second Sex*, especially with regard to issues related to families and conjugal relationships.

Sylvie Chaperon (2012) mentions three main aspects that support the dialogue between *The Second Sex* and feminist lineages. That of assimilation (*de l'assimilation*), specific to the 1960s; that of a first split understood as a refusal of a feminine nature (*son refus d'une nature féminine*), based on feminist approaches in the mid-1960s; and a second split caused by positions taken by women's liberation movements in the 1970s, with the participation in movements and the revision of principles

by Beauvoir herself (Chaperon, 2012). Reception and new methodological approaches take *The Second Sex* as a stage for theoretical and practical achievements of liberation and equality, in actions by women who are protagonists of their own lives and their social and political contexts.

The institutional dilemmas of marriage

The theoretical and political dimension of the reception of Beauvoir’s work, according to Michel Kail (2012) shows an articulation between the *singular and the universal*, as a relationship between issues of femininity (*fémineté*) and *humanity* (*humanité*), and which underlies the issues of women’s situation. Theses which, in a way, are consistent with Debra Bergoffen’s (2012) views in her analyses of conventional institutions and, especially, marriage as ethical and erotic dimensions experienced intersubjectively, governed, however, by the State, as well as the existential formulations that result from them. In a 2012 interview, Bergoffen indicates two relevant approaches in *The Second Sex*: a) the problem of marriage as the traditional purpose of women; b) the issue of female oppression and of the social order which is realized in any economic system in patriarchy.

In fact, reading the first chapter, *Formative Years*, of the second part of that work, *Lived Experience*, one may note a set of descriptions regarding literary aspects, both of fiction and of psychological literature, which allow Beauvoir to call into question habits in marriage, consonant historical changes and values of conjugal relationships, which she examines based on existential principles. Part of what was brought to readers in the work’s first volume with regard to myths, history, literature, roles and their meaning in the singularity and universality of relations between the sexes, is addressed in the second volume, with an emphasis on situations experienced by women as children, young women (Girls), lesbians, married women, mothers, prostitutes, *hetairai*, as well as in the situation of old age, among others.

Marriage as a conventional *ethos* in the patriarchal system

In *The Second Sex*, the theme of marriage is addressed through a lens of institutional convention. However, what Beauvoir uses as a starting point in the second volume is very emphatic:

The destiny that society traditionally offers women is marriage. Even today, most women are, were, or plan to be married, or they suffer from not being so. Marriage is the reference by which the single woman is defined, whether she is “frustrated by, disgusted at, or even indifferent to this institution” (Beauvoir, 2011:451).

Note the analysis of marriage both as a fatality and fate, as well as women’s own goal and objective, both meanings based on ethical-anthropological perspectives. Even if the “feminine condition” presents modifications in economic terms and habits and customs in conjugal relationships follow the impact of the times, involving greater mandatory reciprocity between spouses and the reception of criticisms of the alleged “natural servitude” of women, many still subject themselves to “ancient structures and values” which govern this institution (Beauvoir, 2011:452). It is worth noting the *modus operandi* of Beauvoir’s analysis, for whom the theme must always be given an ethical treatment, as Bergoffen notes (2012).

The Second sex also questions the means through which the patriarchal marriage instrumentalizes its erotic dimension, using it for political, economic, religious and cultural ends, as something that is corrupted and gains perverse features of domination. The ethical dimension becomes alienating of the meaning that intimate relations between a man and a woman could have, abolishing passion and desire, in the form of patriarchal control of female freedom. Further, “the principle of marriage” becomes obscene because “it transforms an exchange that should be founded on a spontaneous impulse into rights and duties” (Beauvoir, 2011:478)

Thus, marriage instrumentalizes bodies, projecting upon them a degrading force. The husband seems to “accomplish a duty”, while the woman “is ashamed to feel delivered to someone who exercises a right over her” (Beauvoir, 2011:478). Beauvoir touches on a delicate ethical dimension of the erotic life established in marriage. However, if the erotic reveals men and women before one another in their corporeal and finite ambiguity, what she shows is the impossibility of maintaining fixed patriarchal positions. It is not for nothing that marriage corrupts the ethos of the erotic.

Furthermore, the patriarchy protects itself from the erotic threat in the name of social order, discarding it as irrational and marginal, as if this dimension should not be taken seriously. As the only ethically legitimate way of expressing sexual desire, marriage legitimizes the perversion of the erotic, confirming a certain institutionalization of human conduct, through which patriarchal subjectivities follow the supposedly immutable laws of nature.

The critique of essentialist naturalism of human relations

Beauvoir’s critique of marriage is also an example of her disapproval of naturalist claims. She notes how Western culture was always conditioned by structures that institute insurmountable dualisms. The famous opening sentence of the second volume of *The Second sex*, “*one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman*”, leads to a complex temporalized dialogue beyond the fixed margins of deterministic biologism. However, her specific intent was to decouple individuals marked as “women” from their sexual biological conditions. She already warned of the needed investigation of the situation of the *lived body* from different analytical perspectives, as stated by Sara Heinämaa (2002), among others.

In attempting to demystify *the eternal feminine*, as she describes in an interview to Jeanson, in 1966, Beauvoir takes on the task to explore, from phenomenological bases, the process of mythification of women, emphasizing that there is nothing natural

in their condition, but rather a long and historical process of naturalization built by civilization. Her rejection of all biologism leads her to refuse precisely that hormones or mysterious instincts may define women or dictate their modes of life. What counts are the contexts and situations in which women find themselves, which enable or prohibit lived bodies to relate authentically to the world. In Beauvoir's terms, in her studies of biology, in addressing a certain *natural*/hierarchy of values, there is a mingling of a "vague naturalism" with "a still more vague ethics or aesthetics", which are pure reveries: "It is only in a human perspective that we can compare the female and the male of the human species" (Beauvoir, 2011:46). We thus see a critical project of social construction of femininity, which necessarily includes the "manufacturing of female bodies", according to Lamoureux (2002).

However, I observe that the Beauvoirian proposal does not seem to be of substituting one explanatory paradigm – naturalist or essentialist – for another – anti-naturalist and existentialist. Her epistemological demands guide her thinking toward sexualized phenomena and under the weight of history. If "nature is a convention", as Michel Kail (2002:36) proclaims, what stands out in the issues of marriage present in *The Second Sex* are complex analyses of its ethical-erotic and political-social dimensions, decoupling the theme from natural attributions and addressing them from a historical and cultural perspective.

According to Bergoffen's (2012) interpretation, the existentialist postulate that "existence precedes essence" is central to the idea that human beings are historical beings, rather than naturally disposed in the world. Being human is being non-natural, if by natural we understand being determined by an essence that structures our lives. By considering that human beings are fundamentally historical, Beauvoir argues that we are free beings in transformation and this is the singular condition of humanity, though freedom is not absolutely realized but rather is always situated, which implies an ethics of responsibilities, as is apprehended in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947). In other terms, human individuals are forced to transform the conditions that

prevent and stimulate freedom, and at each moment of life the ethical dimension is differently constituted.

Especially in *The Second sex*, Beauvoir refers to the concrete conditions of women in post-World War II Europe, who changed the very situation of marriage. As more and more women become economically independent, marriage is no longer perceived as a necessary for their survival. The new economic conditions have the potential to transform marriage from a relationship that subordinates a wife to a husband, who affirms his role as provider and protector, with absolute rights over the sexual female body and its reproductive powers, into an institution in which sexual difference is experienced in ways that incorporate the ethical nature of sexual desires. Still in the first volume of *The Second sex*, in the third part, about myths, Beauvoir comments that when woman is delivered to the male as his property, he claims that her flesh be presented in its pure facticity. Her body is grasped not as the emanation of a subjectivity but as a thing weighted in its immanence; this body must not radiate to the rest of the world, it must not promise anything but itself: its desire has to be stopped. (Beauvoir, 2011:181).

If the historical domain is also the naturalized domain of the female body taken as an object, according to Bergoffen (2012), marriage relations expose characteristics of perversion, in which patriarchal ideologies are reinforced which use the bodies of women as procreative, an object of marital dominance.

The institutional place of social-political relevance

Beauvoir calls into question this institution as a cultural custom which establishes ethical ties in relation to erotic bonds. She does not suggest that marriage is the desirable place for realizing these ethics, but shows the intersections between the ethical and the political. However, it does not seem reasonable to believe that she may be imposing her choice (of not getting married) on other women, or inciting mere refusal or institutional critique. The issue that remains is up to what point is patriarchy

imposed onto these ethical commitments and in what way bodies attuned to institutional determinations are still free bodies that desire one another. Beauvoir writes that, in terms of an “ethical life”, it “is not at all a question of establishing individual relations with a chosen husband, but rather of justifying the exercise of her feminine functions in their generality” (Beauvoir, 2011:462).

In a dialogue with Karen Vintges’ (2017) interpretations, we may read, in *The Second sex*, how the patriarchy may hold many dimensions, comparable to the image of a many-headed monster, with a legal “head”, along with “moral”, “institutional” and “social” heads, each representing practices that should be replaced by other social practices. In order to think of changes to women’s positions in this system, we must take patriarchy as a “true hydra”: when one head is cut off, many others seem to be born, in different domains. The image of society as a many-headed monster not only captures the multifaceted character of patriarchal standards, but also shows that the different “heads” of the monster may dominate in different settings, “demanding various attack strategies and new ethical commitments” (Vintges, 2017:12-13), as well as freedom practices for contemporary feminisms, through which ethical and creative life projects are identified (Vintges, 2017:15).

The ironic gaze as a method for critical argumentation

In the second part of the 1949 essay, in the section titled *Situation*, the many contexts in which “the married woman” finds herself are highlighted. Logically, the institutional moorings are explicit, but Beauvoir’s perspective seems objective: to examine the place occupied by women in the different situations, in specific roles, in the limits of the relationships in which sexuality, femininity, rights and duties come together in a complex ethical-political plane.

Over the course of this chapter, there are at least three methodological readings from Beauvoir, always in existentialist

molds, regarding the conditions of the “married woman”. First, from the perspective of *literature*, based on fictions, by Colette and others, which generally address the “cynical experiences” of newlywed young women until passing into conjugal voluptuousness (Beauvoir, 2011:469), or even in that author’s accounts of the “animal mystery of the enclosed double bed”, revealing the contrasts of the “comic and lewd side” of marriage (Beauvoir, 2011:471; those by Honoré de Balzac, in his equally cynical “science of marriage” (Beauvoir, 2011:466), in which the husband’s interest is not to be deceived, something more important than being loved; and others by many novelists and playwrights from the late 19th century, such as Stendhal, Porto-Riche, Paul Hervieu, Marcel Prévost and Martin Maurice, in their descriptions of the ambiguous situations experienced in marriage, such as, for Maurice, those of a young woman who, after a “brief incursion into the bed of an experienced lover”, returns to her husband bringing the “benefits” of her experiences (Beauvoir, 2011:469).

Second, from the perspective of the fiction that is intertwined with *philosophical memoirs*, she addresses a certain “cynicism” in Montaigne, to whom the pleasure derived from marriage should be “a restrained pleasure, serious, and mixed with some austerity”; with a somewhat “discreet and conscientious voluptuousness”, in an Aristotelian sense (Beauvoir, 2011:463), as well as in what Kierkegaard says, in his elucidation of this strange invention that is marriage (Beauvoir, 2011:468).

Third, from the psychological perspective, based especially on Wilhelm Stekel, but also on Helene Deutsch and Sigmund Freud, whose analyses focus on naive women, with no experience or sexual information, and often shaken by marital inabilities, which end up causing coldness and permanent anesthesia in them (Beauvoir, 2011:471).

But her irony is subtle, not always perceived as such, and often appearing in a picturesque manner. In the analysis of the examples taken from literature and psychology, while examining some models of women in conjugal situations, she notes how

some women “too well brought up” had not received any sexual education, ending up abruptly discovering the eroticism that disturbed them in the situation of conjugality. Three citations show this facetious strand, when she examines the cases investigated by Stekel. In the first, Beauvoir mentions how, in the 19th century, a certain Mme. Adam thought it was her duty “to marry a man who had kissed her on the mouth because she believed that was the completed form of sexual union” (Beauvoir, 2011:471). Still on Stekel, in *Conditions of Nervous Anxiety and Their Treatment*, she seeks two further examples. One, of a young married woman who, during her honeymoon, had been “deflowered by her husband”. Beauvoir notes the peculiarity of the situation, temporally defined: “she thought he was of unsound mind and did not dare say a word for fear of dealing with an insane person” (Beauvoir, 2011:471). Finally, she considers the case of a young woman who married another and lived with her for a long time “without doubting that she [was] dealing with a man” (Beauvoir, 2011:471).

These accounts may seem to have originated from a distant ethos, one with little to say to young women in the 21st century. However, leaving aside the singularity of the examples, which address the issue discussed in the introduction to the 1949 essay, the feminine alterity, we may say that women’s situation as an unequal *other* in culture still remains. The old problems of patriarchal power as still present, especially when in moments of political crisis, many women take to the streets to protest for a “no” and others for a “yes” around the emblem of virile power of those who launch themselves into power with supposedly revealing platforms. Beauvoir, in *Tout compte fait*, helps us by pointing out that “when two castes confront one another (*quand deux castes s’opposent*), in the less privileged one, there are always individuals who, due to personal reasons, align themselves with those who are privileged” (Beauvoir, 1972:501).

But if interests, love and hypocrisy are historically linked to one another, over the course of a decade, new contrasts are seen, imposing the impact of time. The text on Brigitte Bardot, from a certain interpretative perspective, offers a sequel, in the form of

refusals, vetoes, criticisms, and a new axiological basis of the ethical-erotic dimension, then revised in film scenes of the 1950s.

The impact of female liberation in the figure of BB and the public’s reception

In the essay, which Beauvoir was invited to write for the North American *Esquire: The Magazine for Men*, many points stand out, such as the concepts of emancipation and freedom, always in situations, cutting across notions of the feminine manufactured by culture, present both in *The Second Sex* and in *Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita Syndrome*.

In fact, questions regarding the feminine undergoing transformation in society and, above all, regarding the moral and sexual rules that circumscribe conventions regarding the roles women should play in different circumstances, emerge in both texts as one of the main points deserving attention. However, I am not stating that the feminine is a condition only of women, but, in the context of both works, the terms appear as equivalent, that is, the supposed feminine characteristic, or characteristic of femininity, that culturally affects women, for which they have been recognized as women, from a nearly mythical perspective, praised by literature and the norms of the “ought” (“devoir-être”).

“Feminine” is a complex term, which emerges with different connotations, as Dorothy Kaufmann notes (1986). It denotes both a certain tone of oppression under the guise of a phallogocentric discourse and the anticipation of what is recorded in the 1960s as *sexual difference*, in the readings of Cixous and Irigaray (*apud* Kaufmann, 1986). It is, however, thanks to the reading of Beauvoir proposed by Julia Kristeva that the term *feminine* gains a paradoxical projection. Beauvoir thought of the *feminine* as a subject in its condition of alterity and singularity, because she had begun “too soon” the defense of the feminine singularity, when there were still many “sexual and economic conditions that placed barriers to women’s emancipation” (Kristeva, *apud* Kaufmann, 1986:122-123).

In both essays, we may read, from different perspectives, issues related to the place occupied by women, which constitutes or mythifies them as such, as well as the impasses from the perspective of the allegedly natural or cultural dualisms, the axiological basis that provides support to the dyad “feminine and masculine” in the civilizing process. Their delimitation has made it difficult to break old paradigms, especially moral ones, that justify the patriarchy historically delineated in the West.

The text on Brigitte Bardot develops value perspectives already initiated in *The Second Sex*, which were then read based on the persuasive tone of BB’s charms, that is, regarding the feminine in a new process of moral, ethical and erotic revision. The question “how much is the feminine body worth?” becomes a dialogic question between the two essays.

Textual considerations

Beauvoir’s analysis of Brigitte Bardot initially began as an article she was invited to write, whose first publication, in English, dates back to 1959. Other English-language editions would follow, starting in 1960. However, only in 1979 did the publisher Gallimard collect the writings originally published abroad and bring them together in a French edition titled *Les écrits de Simone de Beauvoir: La vie – L’écriture*. In this collection, the article on Bardot can be found in the pages 363-376. The French and English editions are not, however, identical, and the differences are commented in the 2018 Brazilian translation (Santos, 2018), with variations intended for reception by the French and American audiences.

I will address this text based on a few reading levels, beginning by its textuality, so the rigor of its materiality is not left out of consideration. In her writing by demand, Beauvoir’s writing is a primordial given, answering the legitimacy of her intentions and her method of thought. This has been the object of investigation by many researchers, especially Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir (2018), who states that Beauvoir, through a

communicable language, inscribed herself “in the historical urgency” (*dans l’immédiateté historique*) (Le Bon de Beauvoir, 2018:33).

A second level of reading is historical-conceptual. In this sense, it is important to note the cultural framework of a male magazine, *Esquire: The Magazine for Men*, in the late 1950s. The volume in which Beauvoir’s text was published divides its contents between articles, personalities, fiction, supplement, travels, essays, wearables, among others. *Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita syndrome* is in the very first section, that of articles, in pages 32-38 of the August 1959 edition.

Initially, it seems to be a simple text with comparative topics on the French actress, published in an American magazine for men, next to two other articles in the same section, the first on Babe Ruth – American baseball player – and the second on the liquor industry. However, Beauvoir’s construction and presentation of Brigitte Bardot, in her films from the 1950s, does not allow us to view the text as a mere object of male delight or consumption, as are the ones dedicated to sports or alcohol. We cannot prejudge that the magazine’s reader is interested in both baseball and liquor, finding, between texts devoted to these topics, the unusual reading on the cinematographic acting of the actress BB, as she was then known.

An issue that merits examination is why was the essay on BB there and what purpose did it serve both to the magazine, due to its recipients, and for Beauvoir, who takes on the challenge of the invitation and writes about the actress’ acting, especially in films such as *And God created woman*, already released in November 1956, addressing human complexity amid the unusual conjugal relations of two young people, or *Love is my Profession*, released in 1958.

The aesthetic effects

Beauvoir’s writing has a broad reach, something that Reception Aesthetics, in the proposals of Hans-Robert Jauss and

Wolfgang Iser's, among others, would term "aesthetic enjoyment", pointing to a third level of reading, that of hermeneutics, with profound nuances in terms of reception and communication with readers. In fact, we may appreciate the text with regard to the effects it produces. Beauvoir writes by demand, with a task entrusted to her by the magazine's editors so that their readers would have access to a current topic of their time, which gives rise to analogous experiences of two different cultures, the French and the American – two distinct audiences, the conservative European and the American that turns to the future, to the market of techniques and money gains. In writings by demand, the cultural contrasts between the French and the North American are registered and the possibilities of aesthetic enjoyment differ. It seems to me that that is precisely Beauvoir's intention, of comparing the cultures under the pretext of Brigitte Bardot's performance, investigating how the feminine that is bodily inscribed in the actress' gestures reproduces cultural objections, under different forms, in both cultures.

Analogies in the writing's reception

Although it was published in an American magazine, what Beauvoir seems to have in mind is to show the difficulties of the French audience in dealing with the feminine that bursts in the disconcerting practices that are registered in the movies in which Brigitte Bardot stars, likewise revealing that, despite cultural changes, Americans also reject forms of feminine autonomy, refusing the real woman, who is perceived by them as "an antagonist, a praying mantis, a tyrant" precisely because she does not lend herself to "idealistic sublimations" (Beauvoir, 1962:32-33).

Beauvoir thus questions what countenance of femininity exposed in BB, which embarrasses and seduces. The starting point of her analysis is the reception, by the French, of a television program in which BB appears, considering the conditions of communication with different audiences, surrounded by a certain irony, precisely to demonstrate her critical thought:

On New Year’s Eve, Brigitte Bardot appeared on French television. She was got up as usual – blue jeans, sweater and a shock of tousled hair. Lounging on a sofa, she plucked at a guitar. “That’s not hard”, said the women. “I could do just as well. She’s not even pretty”. (...) The men couldn’t keep from devouring her with their eyes, but they too snickered. (...) Once again, I could observe that Brigitte Bardot was disliked in her own country (Beauvoir, 1962:5).

Following a diagnosis of values, especially moral ones, that fill with hostility readers and spectators who do not easily receive the changes of the times, especially in Europe in the 1950s, Beauvoir weaves a refined analysis of habits and customs in which the feminine is a central theme in the figure of BB. Her approach is relevant, and must be taken into consideration, because it follows, with a certain similitude, her usual argumentative strategy, close to what is registered in many of her essays and, especially, to the method used in *The Second Sex*.

Interpretative methods

Beauvoir’s methodological criterion is to testify what her fellow citizens think and claim in certain phases of the history of thought and customs, or even the different forms of thinking present in the historical trajectory, always in analogous molds; she likewise intends to simultaneously establish an examination, on critical bases, of the situation under investigation. Thus, it is not always a simple feat to recognize, at first glance, the demarcation between what she has to consider, on the one hand, regarding foreign, culturally-forged forms of thinking and, on the other, her own interpretative and valuative approaches.

In the specific case of the essay on BB, her descriptive parameters, endowed with a certain “dialectic realism”, as Sonia Kruks terms it (*apud* Rétiff, 1999), often leads her readers to a mistaken evaluation of her thought, assuming something as belonging to the philosopher when, in fact, it is a topic she criticizes. We can therefore verify how the references to BB are

paradoxically disposed. Simone de Beauvoir identifies her thusly: BB is “is the new idol of American youth” (Beauvoir, 1962:5), however, she is also disagreeable to the French; she is the reinvention of the “eternal female” by director Roger Vadim, who establishes “a new type of eroticism” (Beauvoir, 1962:8), seducing and shocking her audience, both with her androgynous ambiguity and her negligent femininity (Beauvoir, 1962:5); she demonstrates a “traditional” side “of femininity” (Beauvoir, 1962:20) inscribed in culture, as “the naivete painted by Vadim”, the instinctive side that follows her impulses, is beaten by her young husband and feels re-established in her natural forces, in her “cliche-ridden characters” (Beauvoir, 1962:22), however, her form of acting makes it so the films “do not lapse into triviality” (Beauvoir, 1962:22).

Her aesthetic appreciations do not address dualities or dichotomies, but the condition of ambiguity that inhabits the human singularity, in a combination of impacts and seductions. One cannot lose sight of the fact that, though the work was published under other forms in the 1960s – both by the London publishers Deutsch, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, in 1960, and The English Library, in 1962, and by New York publishers Reynal, 1960, and Arno Press, in 1972 – the first edition was in an American men’s magazine. We can therefore ask, what is the author’s expectation of reception or aesthetic effect? Can the ambiguity in the many editions have some meaning in her author conception?

Beauvoir provides her readers with a perception of what Americans know and think, over what they criticize and reproach the French. Expressed in this reorganization of the reference fields is the text’s communicative intent, which gains new meanings in representative terms. In each reading, in each publication, new hermeneutic fields are opened, finally arriving at our own historical moment.

In fact, according to Wolfgang Iser, interpretation only works if the aesthetic effect, though caused by the text, also demands from readers the activity of representing and perceiving, so that they are led to a differentiation of attitudes. A text cannot be

understood as pre-existing, finished and done, except as a reformulation of the already-manifest reality. It is in this way that “something comes into the world that was not properly in it” (Iser, 1987:12). This is precisely the impact caused by the films starring Brigitte Bardot at the time, producing unusual reactions in her audience

BB’s wiles

Beauvoir focuses on her readers’ reactions in the face of the textual and aesthetic provocations that the cinema produces. After all, why would these American readers-interlocutors be interested in an article on a French actress whose films are viewed as highly exotic, especially in her country of origin? In a subtle and analogous fashion, Beauvoir compares BB to the actresses of her time, such as Marlene Dietrich, the vamp with “sultry eyes” (Beauvoir, 1962:28) who leads men to a “fatal trap”; Bardot shows only cynicism, with a “disarming candour” (Beauvoir, 1962:28); Katharine Hepburn, especially in *The African Queen*, already aged and showing a situation of exhaustion, but still arousing desire in a specific situation; in turn, BB “desituates” sexuality, she exposes her nakedness to the sun only as “an anonymous body”, as in *And God created woman* (Beauvoir, 1962:40), in an indifferent combination, but with very particular and provocative norms, without ever appealing to the spectator’s complicity.

In Beauvoir’s interpretation, BB’s attitudes shock the French audience in their conventional moralism. The director, Roger Vadim, singularly creates a figure outside the established norms of the feminine adjusted to traditional standards, without even proposing a “convincing story” (Beauvoir, 1962:40), while the characters are “treated allusively” (Beauvoir, 1962:44). Beauvoir investigates how Bardot enacts a feminine that inhabits an absent world, only with a concentrated sensuality, with a certain aggressiveness in her femininity, which incites derision and excitement in her audience. However, Beauvoir understands this to be not only a aesthetic-cinematographic direction project, but

what Bardot truly shows as her own style, which makes the spectator a “voyeur in spite of himself” (Beauvoir, 1962:46).

In Beauvoir’s view, the actress seems to capture, the spectator, but her films provoke “furious protests”, because they are taken as veritable attacks on the social order. Brigitte does not need to pretend to seduce, she “never compromises with what seems to her to be obviously true” and her genuineness is highly contagious (Beauvoir, 1962:50). Her characters bring a subversive meaning to cinema, in a mix of purity and seduction. Certainly, a profile of the feminine beyond the possibilities of her time, going beyond the limits of imposition and being grounded in new axiological bases.

In the film *And God Created Woman*, the scene of the wedding dinner merits investigation in comparison with the previously analyzed aspects. In Beauvoir’s description, Juliette immediately goes to bed with her young husband. In the middle of the banquet, she suddenly turns up in a bathrobe and, without bothering to smile or even look at the bewildered guests, she picks out from under their very noses a lobster, a chicken, fruit and bottles of wine. Disdainfully and tranquilly she goes off with the loaded tray. She cares not a rap for other people’s opinion. B.B. does not try to scandalize. She has no demands to make (...) She follows her inclinations. She eats when she is hungry and makes love with the same unceremonious simplicity. Desire and pleasure seem to her more convincing than precepts and conventions. (...) She does as she pleases, and that is what is disturbing (Beauvoir, 1962:24).

In *The Second Sex*, considering the matrimonial experiences described by Stekel, Beauvoir alludes to modes of sexual satisfaction, such as the frequent use of erotic fantasies, the creation of “gross transpositions and inversions”, as “scenarios played out between the two partners” who “risk destroying the limits between appearance and reality.” In the extreme limits of the marriages analyzed by Stekel, “real vices appear”. And vice takes on “an organized and cold aspect, a somber aspect that makes it the saddest of possible choices” (Beauvoir, 2011:480).

In the film starring BB, the alleged coldness with which the implied sexual relation of the newlyweds is portrayed becomes ironically reinvented, due to the embarrassment it causes in the audience. After all, as Beauvoir writes, “moral lapses can be corrected, but how could B.B. be cured of that dazzling virtue—genuineness?” (Beauvoir, 1962:24).

The antagonisms of seduction

The contrasts are then expressed: on the one hand, the French spectators manifest, in their reception of the films, in the critiques and forms of reaction, what they expect of a woman in the late 1950s, facing, however, an absolutely free character in her clothes, with no make up or jewelry, in scenes of total incitement. Americans, in turn, despite not sharing the French’s taste “for licentiousness” and though they have a tendency to display a certain respect for women, with a certain “sexual equality” being recognized in the US, also show a “certain antipathy to the ‘real woman’” (Beauvoir, 1962:32). In France, writes Beauvoir, men seem to prefer the “servility” of women to the “haughty shamelessness” of Bardot (Beauvoir, 1962:34), since she is disconcerting to the extent that she discourages familiarity and also does not lend herself to idealistic sublimations.

In the discovered aesthetic effect, Beauvoir subtly presents the feminine that no longer disguises its freedom of expression. Nothing seems more realist and with the impact of demystification as the place of an authentic, original feminine countenance, independent and with demands of gender symmetry, in the pages of a men’s magazine. Not an object of consumption, but a subject who is the protagonist of her freedom, which is not conditioned to the male universe.

Later editions of the text show its vitality, despite the changes that seem to take place in BB’s films over the years. Beauvoir’s expectation is that Brigitte will not change to the point of injuring an innovative proposal. To injure a revolutionary, free figure who made it possible for the myth of the “eternal female” to

be unveiled in cinema screens. BB is the feminine revolution itself, which even breaks with paradigms of good and evil established in patriarchal society. After all, as Laura Piccioni states, in Beauvoir's text, BB highlights characteristics such as "eroticism and sexuality in symmetry with her partners" (Piccioni, 2012:225), without depending on them or showing the need for recognition of rights, without turning to an attachment to morality standards. She seems to break with the taboos of bourgeois morality and is represented as the figure of the "emancipated feminine" (Piccioni, 2012:225), free of concerns regarding either male or social recognition.

In Beauvoir's description, what is shown is an ethos of the erotic which is not tied to formalities of regulation. After all, in her disregard of norms of modesty expected of a young, newlywed woman, for example, Bardot disconsiders the moral delimitations according to which the feminine moved at the time. On the other hand Beauvoir notices that the French audience expects a certain moral rehabilitation of her, that she get married, have children, return to the traditional ethos of a morality she disrupted and innovated. Certainly, what the audience yearns for, in the 1950s, is that BB's innovative feminine, liberated from the chains of the moralist cynicism of her time, does not remain in revolutionary garb, nor that it open new social or sexual spaces, remaining under patriarchal reins.

Conclusion

Simone de Beauvoir, in her process of demystifying the sacred place reserved to women in the civilizing process criticizes arbitrary formulations and certain interventions into the world and into dominant social structures, giving rise in the readers to representation and perception activities that lead them to their own interpretative attitudes. The text is the reference, but it must be an open text, with gaps to be filled in by the exercise of reading. This is the reading pact that Beauvoir proposes, an "appeal to freedom" which is presented in the thickness and ambiguous

wealth of a world, as she proposes, in 1956, in *Literature and Metaphysics*.

In the inaugural, critical and even paradoxical form of her writings – since she both continues the philosophical tradition and simultaneously seems to break from it – with her method of following and contesting, re-addressing and commenting, Beauvoir presents a unique way of doing philosophy and of making philosophy a dialogic practice of life. Both in *The Second Sex* and in *Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita syndrome*, the dialogue with the ambiguity of existence supports thematic correlations, with the link with contemporary feminism constituting a continuous movement of Beauvoirian hermeneutic.

We cannot forget that Beauvoir led feminism to the condition of a philosophical and anthropological subject, which garnered her immense criticism, but, certainly, also provoked great adherence of her readers during at least seventy years after the publication of her first essay on sex, gender and culture, under the ironic title of a “second sex”.

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