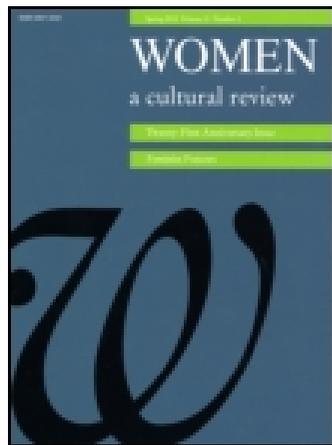


This article was downloaded by: [University Library Utrecht]

On: 23 January 2015, At: 01:39

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office:  
Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Women: A Cultural Review

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rwcr20>

### Technocrats and Tortured Bodies: Simone de Beauvoir's Les Belles Images

Christine Quinan

Published online: 08 Dec 2014.



CrossMark

[Click for updates](#)

To cite this article: Christine Quinan (2014) Technocrats and Tortured Bodies: Simone de Beauvoir's Les Belles Images , Women: A Cultural Review, 25:3, 256-269, DOI: [10.1080/09574042.2014.981380](https://doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2014.981380)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2014.981380>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

# Technocrats and Tortured Bodies: Simone de Beauvoir's *Les Belles Images*

*Abstract:* Through an analysis of Simone de Beauvoir's final novel *Les Belles Images* (1966), this article examines how a 1960s French technocratic class dealt with individual and collective traumas, particularly how they placed their faith in an undying hope in the future while simultaneously ignoring the horrors of wartime violence. The article contends that Beauvoir's novel is a story of not remembering—or, more specifically, attempting to forget—Algeria and all the conflict signified to the average French citizen, including decolonization, torture, racial difference and political tumult. Analysis rests on the novel's representation of its protagonist Laurence, who had been shaken to the core after reading a newspaper article about a (likely Algerian) woman tortured to death, ultimately causing a nervous breakdown that forever altered her interactions with her family and fellow technocrats. Gender and nationality also figure centrally in this examination of the broader role that images—not only belles images—played in the construction of French national identity at this historical moment.

*Keywords:* Algerian War, decolonization, literature, memory, postcolonialism, Simone de Beauvoir, technocracy, torture

This hypocrisy, this indifference, this country, my own self, were no longer bearable to me. All those people in the streets, in open agreement or battered into a stupid submission—they were all murderers, guilty. Myself as well. 'I'm French' ... For millions of men and women, old men and children, I was just one of the people who were torturing them, burning them, machine-gunning them, slashing their throats, starving them. (Beauvoir 1964: 384)

**I**N reflecting on her troubled relationship to the Algerian War (1954–62), Simone de Beauvoir’s epigraph from *La Force des choses* (*Force of Circumstance*) makes clear the degree to which a 1960s French public was either supportive or wilfully ignorant of what was occurring across the Mediterranean Sea in North Africa. As soldiers were being sent to quell a growing revolution and Algerian immigrants were arriving on the shores of France to work in its factories, contempt and violence in both locations were escalating to new levels. Divisions between races, classes and religions were becoming more pronounced as France mounted a fierce campaign to hold on to its dissenting province. A brutal eight-year war ensued and, in order to maintain control in the face of increasing calls for independence, the French military and police began to use brutal force, unwarranted violence and questionable interrogation techniques, with torture quickly becoming one of the war’s main instruments.

While Beauvoir became politically active in the anti-colonial struggle, she also used her fiction to paint a portrait of this historical period and its preoccupations. Written four years after the war ended, *Les Belles Images* (1966), her final—and perhaps most innovative—novel, attempts to outline how the period’s new technocratic class dealt with the individual and collective traumas of the previous two decades, particularly how they placed their faith in an undying hope in the future while simultaneously ignoring the horrors of wartime violence. The birth of new technologies and growing access to television and other forms of media played a role in the development of this gaze towards a utopian future and away from a troubled past. However, memories remained under the surface, and remembering and forgetting functioned in complex ways for this privileged class. My analysis rests on the novel’s representation of its protagonist Laurence, an advertising executive and mother of two young girls, who struggles with her memories of the war. Although the conflict may have been far from the lived realities of her insular group of family and friends, she had been shaken to the core after reading a newspaper article about a (likely Algerian) woman tortured to death, ultimately causing a nervous breakdown that forever altered her interactions with her family and fellow technocrats. While Laurence may never learn how to become effectively engaged, the situation mirrors that of Beauvoir, whose own encounter with a tortured Algerian woman solidified her commitment to the Algerian cause. Beauvoir’s involvement in the 1960 legal case of Djamila Boupacha, who was raped and tortured for 33 days, ultimately garnered significant attention from the French public after

Beauvoir and lawyer Gisèle Halimi embarked on a campaign to defend her. Keeping this in mind, gender and nationality will figure centrally in my analysis of the broader role that images—not only *belles images*—played in the construction of French national identity at this historical moment.

### *Technocrats of the Trente Glorieuses*

While many civilians preferred to turn a blind eye to the abuses carried out in the name of France, Beauvoir, alongside many contemporary intellectuals, experienced the war as a personal and philosophical turning point. Beauvoir's emotional and intellectual struggles about what her government was doing were occurring amidst the emergence of new theoretical paradigms that reconceptualized the role of the individual, society and history. From the fall of existentialism seemed to come the rise of structuralism, a turn that clearly dissatisfied Beauvoir. In a 1966 interview, she stated that structural approaches 'provide the bourgeois consciousness with its best alibis. It suppresses history, practice, in other words, commitment, and it suppresses man. Now there exists neither misery nor unhappiness, there are only systems' (Piatier 1966: 1; my translation). Despite Beauvoir's quick dismissal of all she deemed 'structuralist' (a term she used rather loosely and, at times, unsatisfactorily), it is nonetheless important to recognize how her ideas about this new mode of thinking shaped her later writing. Indeed, in *Les Belles Images*, she would present a caricature of her interpretation of structuralist thought. Often read as an experiment with form and with techniques developed in the *nouveau roman*, and/or as an indictment of the period's growing technocratic culture (both accurate descriptions), the presence (or, ironically, absence) of Algeria is often overlooked in studies of the novel. Despite only a fleeting mention of the word 'Algérie', I argue that the text is, in fact, about Algeria, with contemporary politics hiding just below the surface. For the members of the technocratic class who are the novel's characters, the war was everywhere and nowhere, occupying the space of the unsaid.

This bold, forward-thinking class was more likely to be drawn to the flashy images, colourful advertisements and shiny gadgets that proliferated during the *trente glorieuses*—the three decades after the Second World War marked by growth and prosperity—than to ponder the escalating violence in North Africa. The rapid modernization that was occurring throughout the metropole indeed proved to be a convenient distraction away from the harsh realities of war. This new bourgeois class of technocrats projected an image of themselves as happy nuclear families,

driving into an optimistic future where everything was improving all the time, and where pain and suffering would cease to exist in just a few short years. As Kristin Ross writes, the technocrats were

anxious to leave the crises of the après-guerre period and decolonization behind them, to consecrate their efforts on the economic renovation of their country, and to benefit from the general improvement in the standard of living that followed from it. (Ross 1995: 144)

But behind the glossy surface lay very real and very present injustices. Attempts to forget and deny the existence of social suffering and racial difference preoccupied these representatives of the future, exacting a toll on their minds and their bodies. Consequently, the future became a time of not only glowing televisions and fancy cars, but also tranquilizers and anti-depressants. In creating a false sense of security, the growing saturation of new media allowed a diversion of attention away from those *other* images that could potentially threaten sanity and stability.

Similarly, as Todd Shepard discusses, ‘decolonization’ itself became an avoidance tactic, allowing the French ‘to avoid facing the challenges that Algerian nationalism and the Algerian Revolution posed to classic conceptions of French values and history, at least temporarily. These conceptions depended on principles of universalism, the individual, progress, and the Rights of Man’ (Shepard 2006: 272). It is no coincidence, then, that in the 1950s and 1960s, glorification of a slightly more distant past wherein France emerged victorious provided an easy alternative to confronting France’s failing colonial project. Memories of the Second World War, when the French underdogs valiantly fought to fend off their Nazi occupiers, remained firmly embedded in collective consciousness. The growing class of technocrats became reliant on this idealized past to construct its post-war national identity and idyllic future. Through a celebration of strength in the face of adversity, the future-focused technocrats worked hard to erase their nation’s own occupying sins from history. The Algerian War—indeed France’s entire colonial project and tumultuous North African withdrawal—was enshrouded by a more convenient history with less fraught memories. The fact that these narratives were oftentimes comprised of fabricated memories was inconsequential, as they needed to serve a particular purpose in the construction of the nation’s future citizenry.

In the final volume of her autobiography, Beauvoir evokes this climate in describing her intentions in writing *Les Belles Images*: ‘I took up another project: discussing this technocratic society from which I try

to keep as much distance as possible but in which I nevertheless live; through newspapers, magazines, advertisements, radio, it surrounds me' (Beauvoir 1972: 172; my translation). Beauvoir also described the novel as 'a work of objective reporting. Because I don't distort, I photograph, and the text speaks for itself. You don't hear me' (Piatier 1966: 1; my translation). As both Beauvoir's words and the text's title suggest, the novel is interested in presenting a fascination with 'the image'. Indeed, the omnipresence of media in this new culture is repeatedly evoked; magazines, newspapers and televisions are everywhere, and the characters of the novel are preoccupied with all sorts of images: real, fantasized, mediated, recuperated, remembered and forgotten. As readers, we are, however, consistently reminded of both the benign and malign properties inherent to media. While technology and inventions like the television are lauded by most in the novel, media is recognized by some as a violation of private, protected space. As stated by one of the novel's characters: 'What life is sheltered nowadays, with the papers, the television and the films?' (Beauvoir 1973: 33).

The novel's new generation of *jeunes cadres*, as these young professionals were known, embodies progress and an unflinching desire to succeed in this post-war, increasingly capitalist society. Largely voiced through the character of Laurence, the text presents a group hostile to those outside their social set: 'Family: friends—a tiny closed circuit. And all these other equally inaccessible circuits. The world is always somewhere else; and there is no way of getting into it' (Beauvoir 1973: 23). In addition to Laurence, the group consists of her architect husband, Jean-Charles, who is a proud representative of the technocratic utopian perspective on the present and the future; her unnamed father, who seems to represent the antithesis to Jean-Charles's views, as he longs for the past and its uncomplicated way of life; her mother, Dominique, a successful businesswoman divorced from her father, whose single-mindedness means she stops at nothing to get what she wants; Gilbert, Dominique's now ex-partner and wealthy president of an electronics company; and Catherine, the young daughter of Laurence and Jean-Charles, whose existential questions place the group's ideological underpinnings in doubt (Quinan 2008: 189). Despite the closed system in which she lives, Laurence maintains a troubled relationship with those around her, coming to realize that the people she is close to are merely two-dimensional images living inauthentic and socially prescribed lives. But in spite of her eventual recognition of others' *mauvaise foi*, she encounters great difficulty in expressing her authentic self or even knowing what she believes: 'She had no confidence in her judgments: it was so much a question of mood and circumstance. When I come out of a

cinema I can hardly say whether I liked the film or not' (Beauvoir 1973: 80). She indecisively fluctuates between depending on the men in her life (particularly for guidance as to what to read, watch and think) and attempting to speak up on certain issues (specifically, how to raise her daughters).

Focalized through Laurence, the novel rapidly moves from first- to third-person narration and back, sometimes multiple times within a paragraph. The shifting between the two modes of narration appears erratic, creating a sense of alienation and detachment from her present.<sup>1</sup> There is no narrator present in the novel, and this third-person mode is most akin to free indirect discourse, a style Beauvoir had perfected throughout her novelistic career. As some scholars have stated, the first person often (but, I would note, not always) demonstrates an authenticity, whereas the third person displays her inauthentic social persona (Quinan 2008: 189–90). In addition to these rapid shifts in narrative voice, Beauvoir employs various other literary strategies, such as enumeration and repetition, in order to cultivate further a sense of confusion with Laurence's present reality. I will return to this question of enumeration and repetition, and explore how this technique further underscores the conflicted relationship Laurence has to both her technocratic peers and the Algerian War.

Like her narrative expression, Laurence's social position is paradoxical: she is integrated in but simultaneously alienated from her society. Yet, by virtue of her vocation as an advertising executive, Laurence is also partly complicit in the creation of technocratic values. In her professional career as a creator of images (or, more accurately, the text that accompanies images), she is acutely aware of the power of the image, and is adept at manipulating slogans and pictures to appeal to an idea of post-war safety and security: 'she knew her job. I am not selling wood panels: I am selling security, success and a touch of poetry into the bargain' (Beauvoir 1973: 20). Newspapers and magazines are everywhere throughout the novel, and, as we will learn, it is the consumption of such media that resulted in Laurence undergoing a nervous breakdown years earlier. Not only has she been duped into certain beliefs by the images she has ingested (and created), but they have, in turn, swallowed her up, transforming her into an image: *une belle image*. While she is able to locate neither the origin nor the modus operandi of the process of the production, circulation and consumption of images in which she is caught up, she successfully identifies it as a general characteristic of the modernizing society in which she lives.

1 For a more detailed analysis of narrative voice in *Les Belles Images*, see Fallaize (1988: 119–25) and Fishwick (1999).

### *Postcolonial Disorders*

Central to *Les Belles Images* is Laurence's past (and future) fragility and the existential doubt she experiences regarding her sense of self and her relationship with others. Through references to the past, we learn that she has experienced at least two psychological crises, one five years prior and another in 1962.<sup>2</sup> This former mental instability is continually evoked as a precautionary warning and as a looming threat that she may fall back into such a depressive and dangerous state. Even Laurence, in her thoughts, evokes this past breakdown, but reassures herself that she is armed and prepared to defend her body and her psyche against any sort of self-mutiny: 'I shall not relapse. Now I am quite aware of the real reasons for my breakdown and I have gone beyond them' (Beauvoir 1973: 38). She believes that awareness will save her from another crisis. Of course it will not.

While Laurence's crisis is alluded to by Jean-Charles and Dominique several times, we do not learn until well into the novel what provoked it: 'She had been trembling, quite beside herself, that day when she read the account of that woman tortured to death ... she had done her best to expel the memory, very nearly succeeding' (Beauvoir 1973: 112). Although it is not named, this story of torture is undoubtedly a direct reference to the Algerian War. Through her identification with this distant tortured woman (and subsequent statements she makes about her daughters), we sense a subtle solidarity felt by Laurence with women around her. Additionally, her sympathetic crisis may emerge from her own feelings of being 'tortured'. While she has not experienced the pain and damage of physical torture, as a white woman of a certain class, she has felt psychologically damaged by a society that has attempted to contort her into an emotionless, two-dimensional *belle image*.

In order to maintain her mental sanity and physical well-being post-crisis, Laurence has been forced (by herself and others) to detach herself from anything potentially 'harmful'. While this is not markedly different from the behaviour of her peers, who also ignore injustices, Laurence is, unlike them, conscious and even ashamed of the decision she has made to turn away from the suffering of others: 'Every day we read hideous things in the papers, and we go right on ignoring them' (Beauvoir 1973: 111–12). She is sensitive to the evasion of difference that her fellow technocrats engage in, and is not afraid to speak of this active disregard for 'hideous things'. Her husband Jean-Charles, however, feels differently. He reacts defensively to Laurence's eventual articulation of concern for others and nearly scolds her by invoking her most recent crisis: 'Oh, don't start another guilty-conscience scene, like the one you

2 The reader is left to construct the past and is often met with uncertainty about when these nervous breakdowns occurred, which is emblematic of the confusion (especially in regard to time) that the text, on the whole, evokes. Jean-Charles's statement about her 1962 breakdown is the only real temporal locator of the entire novel.

.....

treated me to in '62' (Beauvoir 1973: 112). This evocation of 1962, the only year mentioned in the entire novel, is critical. The parallels between Laurence's psychological crisis and France's own national identity crisis are evident, as is further supported by the text's only specific mention of Algeria by name: a newspaper article Laurence attempts to read, 'Crisis between Algeria and France'. The year 1962, the final year of the Algerian War, saw numerous bombings in France and Algeria, and several instances of extreme state violence. The level of national crisis grew until, finally, a drastic change was inevitable: Algeria gained independence in July of that same year.

Laurence's past emotional breakdown and the risk of its recurrence appear connected to the Algerian War (itself often termed a 'crisis'—but never a war—by government officials), while her personal instability itself becomes metonymic of the larger precariousness in the political sphere. Because the entire narrative revolves around these two crises—one individual and the other collective—I contend that *Les Belles Images* is a story of not remembering—or, more specifically, attempting to forget—Algeria and all the conflict signified to the average French citizen, including decolonization, the contradictions of *la mission civilisatrice*, torture, racial difference and political tumult. Save the title of the newspaper article that is twice repeated, Algeria is not explicitly discussed and is certainly not referred to as a 'war'. In Beauvoir's novel, Algeria can only be referred to by the year '62. This bourgeois set could not integrate memories of France's troubled colonial past, as it threatened to destabilize a French identity being built on progress.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon wrote:

A marked increase in mental disorders and the creation of conditions favorable to the development of specific morbid phenomena are not the only consequences of the colonial war in Algeria. Quite apart from the pathology of torture there flourishes ... a pathology of atmosphere, a state which leads medical practitioners to say when confronted with a case which they cannot understand: 'This'll be all cleared up when this damned war is over'. (Fanon 1963: 290)

Fanon's analysis of psychosomatic disorders proves helpful in understanding Laurence's emotional struggle. As is the case with Laurence's family's reaction to her breakdown, there exists the belief that all will soon be in the past. Laurence's response to learning of the tortured woman is, though, both a symptom of a larger individual and collective apathy to the Algerian War and a potential cure to society's ignorance, for they cannot ignore *this* domestic crisis. Regrettably, they quickly

move past the broader issue; nevertheless, colonial repercussions—individual and collective, corporeal and psychic—risk returning.

In this way, *Les Belles Images* is also a study of what happens when things—personal and/or political—are denied access to consciousness, and the effect this repression then has on the body, particularly as it intersects with gender expectations. It is the story of a tortured female body that sends Laurence into physical and psychological turmoil, causing a nervous breakdown in which she detaches herself from those around her. She also develops a conflicted relationship with her own body, alternating between bulimic and anorexic tendencies. As I will show below, the way in which memories and (unsuccessful) attempts at forgetting horrible acts done in the name of the French Empire are manifested through Laurence's body signifies how the body, as a site of memory, plays a significant role in understanding and coming to terms with a nation's colonial past and postcolonial present and future.

In *Les Belles Images*, the body defies mastery and enacts a disavowed past. For Laurence, reading about a tortured woman evokes in her anxieties over her own French identity (something felt by Beauvoir herself, as the article's epigraph demonstrates), anxieties that are, in turn, manifested through her body: she vomits up this new class and culture that have ignored the suffering of others in favour of a more joyful (albeit ignorant) present and future, where they believe that, in a mere 10 years, no one will go hungry. Laurence, on the contrary, continually struggles with the fact that injustice and unhappiness exist, wondering if she has the courage to confront social injustices. When previously faced with atrocities, she would retreat and disengage from all current events. (After her 1962 breakdown, Laurence avoided newspapers for fear of falling into a similar depressive state.) Even though she now has no desire to flee present reality, she feels it is the only possibility, for one never knows what one will find upon opening up to the world: 'She folded up the paper ... for there was no telling what you might find in it' (Beauvoir 1973: 37–8). The narrative then quickly shifts to the first person:

It's all very well for me to armour myself: I'm not as resistant as they are. 'The convulsive aspect of women', says Jean-Charles, although he's a feminist. I struggle against it: I utterly loathe being convulsive, so the best thing to do is to avoid any occasion for it. (38)

Through the phrase 'convulsive aspect of women', hysteria is clearly alluded to as some sort of inherent danger (even by those like Jean-Charles who self-identify as 'feminist'). In this way, *Les Belles Images* (like

much of Beauvoir's corpus) is very much concerned with a societal tendency to force women into certain roles. While, at first glance, there appear to be examples of 'strong' women throughout the novel, women are, nevertheless, made into *belles images*, not fully formed beings who can exist on their own. Even Dominique, who maintains a self-assured and professional demeanour, falls into a deep and vengeful depression when her partner leaves her for a much younger woman.

Despite Laurence's seeming preference for sanity, images (and not necessarily *belles images*) threaten to enter her consciousness:

That business of the tortures, three years ago—I made myself ill over it, or very nearly: and what did that accomplish? You're obliged to get used to the horrors of this world, there are too many of them. The cramming of geese, excision, lynching, abortions, suicides, brutally ill-treated children, death-camps, the slaughter of hostages, repression: you see it all on the cinema or on the television and you ignore it. It must inevitably vanish; it's only a question of time. (Beauvoir 1973: 25–6)<sup>3</sup>

Laurence's psychic struggle (brought on by the 'business of the tortures') is enacted in bodily reactions and linguistic struggles. The frequent enumeration functions as a search for meaning, as language cannot adequately represent 'reality'. Numerous substantives are needed to express an idea, and her authentic feelings can only be expressed through excess. Now that she has opened herself up to the outside world, she is inundated with images of suffering, as is seen in her description of French magazine *Match*'s year in review, which reads more like a list of horrors and tragedies:

The bleeding corpses of whites and of Negroes; buses overturned in ravines, twenty-five children killed; others cut in two; fires; the shattered wreckage of planes; a hundred and ten passengers killed instantly; typhoons; floods; whole countries devastated; villages in flames; race-riots; local wars; the long lines of worn-out refugees. (Beauvoir 1973: 123)

The open list here is significant (like most of the enumerations employed by Laurence, there is no 'and' at the end), suggesting that there are more disasters, destruction, ruin, wreckage still to come. These instances of enumeration, repetition and silence not only point to a failure of language, but also function as a reaction to this closed technocratic system that mistakes these actual events for glossy magazine images lacking reality.

Despite the risk of encountering a similar list of tragedies, Laurence does finally gain the courage to read the newspaper:

<sup>3</sup> This enumerative list is echoed in Beauvoir's introduction to *Djamila Boupacha*: 'In recent months, the press, even the most conservative, poured horror upon us: assassinations, lynchings, racist attacks, manhunts in the streets of Oran; in Paris, across the Seine hanged from trees in the Bois de Boulogne, dozens of bodies; broken hands; skulls cracked' (Beauvoir 1962: 1; my translation).

Nowadays she opened them without dread. No, nothing dreadful was happening anymore ... She was glad that she had overcome that kind of fear which condemned her to ignorance ... Basically all you had to do was to look at things objectively. (Beauvoir 1973: 62–3)

Despite being expressed in the third person, she knows that her fear of relapsing has condemned her to ignorance, but she is determined to overcome it. Confronting the present necessitates detachment and ‘objectivity’ for Laurence, while those around her do not seem to confront true reality—until a mere question will disrupt their closed system.

### *Unhappiness, or Confronting the Other*

Laurence’s young daughter Catherine’s existential question, ‘what about the people who aren’t happy: why are they alive?’ (21), shatters the joyful facade of familial closeness that her class attempts to project. The question itself is prompted by encounters with difference. Firstly, a poster simultaneously deploring and advertising world hunger (replete with a sad child’s face) allows Catherine to realize that not everyone is like her. This image disrupts the bourgeois comfort zone, exploding any semblance of blissful ignorance that may have previously reigned. As Laurence states: ‘The power of the image. “Two thirds of the world goes hungry”, and that child’s face, that beautiful face with its eyes too big and its mouth closed upon a terrible secret’ (25).<sup>4</sup> (The double to this image will be found later in the text when a gaunt Laurence will refuse to eat.) Secondly, Catherine’s close friendship with the poor, motherless, Jewish Brigitte is, according to her family’s collective opinion, the root of her dangerous questioning. (Brigitte is also the one who showed Catherine the poster.) Indeed, the well-intentioned girl functions as the absolute ‘other’ for this narrow-minded group unaccustomed to dealing with challenges to their arbitrary order, unconsciously reflecting back to them the fear they feel in relation to difference. Jean-Charles, for example, states: ‘Don’t take me for an anti-Semite. But it’s known that Jewish children are rather disturbingly precocious and extremely emotional’ (110). This sentiment is echoed later in the text by Laurence’s father: ‘My sister told me about an exactly parallel case’, he said. ‘In the fourth grade one of her best pupils made friends with an older child, one whose mother was a Madagascan. Her whole outlook upon the world was changed; so was her character, too’ (145–6).

The characters are repeatedly confronted with problematic relationships with misery and otherness, but, in contrast to her peers, Laurence displays an excess of empathetic feelings and an inability to be blind to

<sup>4</sup> This is echoed in Beauvoir’s memoirs: ‘I now know the truth of the human condition: two-thirds of humanity goes hungry’ (Beauvoir 1963: 503; my translation) .

.....

difference—a quality that has, as we have seen, previously resulted in a breakdown. Except for Catherine, most others turn away from all things different than the non-threatening bourgeois familiarity to which they are accustomed. Despite their seeming awareness of current events (as demonstrated by their ability to ‘healthily’ digest the news), they fail to identify with ‘real’ events. While they would like to deny otherness, or at least be blind to it, when it begins to invade their closed world, they react.

Similarly, France’s contemporary war of decolonization is always just under the surface for these technocrats. In the novel’s only explicit mention of Algeria, Laurence falls upon the newspaper article entitled ‘Crisis between Algeria and France’. Still maintaining the strength to read it despite the horrors she might encounter, she is immediately interrupted by the arrival of her sister, Marthe, who has come to express her intense concern over the lack of religion in their household and the effect it must be having on Catherine. Quickly dismissing Marthe’s anxiety,<sup>5</sup> Laurence returns to the newspaper article following her departure. But she cannot concentrate on the Algerian crisis; Marthe’s concerns have actually reactivated fears of Catherine’s crisis, as she also begins to doubt her level of closeness with her daughter. The text then abruptly shifts back to the article, effectively occluding the familial concerns that were beginning to invade her consciousness. In this return to the international conflict, Laurence substitutes a public crisis with a private one. Finally ready to confront the outside world, she is now not able to deal with the problems at home. This tension between the internal and the external is at the heart of the novel, and is symptomatic of this society’s constant need to look elsewhere. The article also functions as a reminder of the historical reality of this period, while the repetition of the word ‘crisis’ recalls Laurence’s own breakdown, resulting from the political circumstances of the time. (It could, in fact, be argued that this mention of Algeria has automnesiac effects on Laurence, as she will again fall into crisis late in the novel.)

The theme of ‘crisis’ is clearly significant in *Les Belles Images*, the word being used eight times throughout the novel. In discussing Laurence’s personal breakdown, crisis is evoked as a ‘feminine’ issue: ‘Her nervous breakdown of five years back had been explained to her; quantities of young wives went through a crisis of that kind’ (17). One of Beauvoir’s intentions in writing this novel was to evoke the discourse of a particular group at a particular historical moment. As the latter quotation demonstrates, this discourse also worked to mould bodies and create and reinforce gender stereotypes, particularly the notion that

5 Like most of her set, Laurence is very distrustful of religion. As Deirdre Bair notes: ‘The only way to describe what, if anything, the characters believe in is to call it conspicuous consumption’ (Bair 1990: 524).

women are emotional and unstable, which, in turn, shapes who they are and who they might become.

Also related to the gendering of crisis are intergenerational relationships, a recurrent theme in Beauvoir's body of work. *Les Belles Images* is concerned with how parents shape their children's future, while also asking the question of whether there is an escape from the role each individual has been put into by his or her elders. (The response of Beauvoir's existential philosophy to this question would, of course, be a resounding 'yes'.) But the text is not just preoccupied with what is passed from parent to child, but specifically what is transferred from *mother* to *daughter*. So, given the novel's leitmotif of 'crisis', it is unsurprising that this same word would be used to describe Laurence's daughter's interrogations into unhappiness and poverty. In relating Catherine's teacher's comments on the situation to Jean-Charles, Laurence states: 'Girls often go through a crisis at that age... it's the coming of puberty. There's no need to worry too much', to which Jean-Charles responds: 'It looks like a pretty serious crisis to me' (108). These statements reiterate the idea that 'crisis' is a feminine problem—after all, many girls experience this. (Clearly, for some, like Laurence, the 'problem' does not end at puberty.) But the statements also invoke the forces exercised on women of the period to act in a way that would conform to societal expectations.

If, earlier in her life, it was a story of torture in Algeria that provoked her own personal breakdown, in the course of the novel it will be the collisions of interior and exterior, private and public, domestic and international that spark Laurence's next breakdown. This new crisis forces us to pose several critical questions, particularly around the generational aspect with which the novel is concerned. Laurence's and Catherine's reflections demonstrate a hesitant interest in exploring what is behind the glossy facade of post-Second World War life, but how will the young girl's generation negotiate the consequences of the devastating (de)colonial present and postcolonial future? Will they, too, turn away from harsh realities or will they acknowledge the wilful ignorance and collective crimes of their predecessors? Will they embrace difference? These questions will go unanswered, and the novel ends on an ambiguous note. Looking in the mirror, Laurence sees herself looking back, yet she has not fully embraced a first-person narration: 'As far as I'm concerned the game's over, she thought, looking at her reflection—rather white and haggard. But the children will have their chance. What chance? She did not even know' (154). While neither Laurence nor her daughter has the tools or the language to effectively critique the ignorant attitudes of their

class, independently and together they contest this blinkered outlook, even as they are at a loss to what consequences it may have.

Indeed, Beauvoir herself posed many of the same questions as those above, also asking: What is our role as citizens of a colonizing nation? Are we responsible for brutal acts committed by our government? Can turning away from external crises ever do anything but provoke interior ones? In examining Laurence and her insular group—symbolic of a white, educated, middle-class French public and their relationships to difference—Beauvoir was invested in exposing the responsibility we all bear in these times. She used her novelistic writing to reach those of the burgeoning post-war class of technocrats who were previously able to ignore the realities of the Algerian War. *Les Belles Images* demonstrates how any attempt to comprehend the horrors around Algeria was veiled by a more facile glorification of the past, obscuring a psychically challenged present that continues to hold subcutaneous memories of a conflict unresolved.

### *Works Cited*

- Bair, Deirdre (1990), *Simone de Beauvoir: A Biography*, New York: Summit Books.
- Beauvoir, Simone de (1963), *La Forces des Choses*, Paris: Gallimard.
- Beauvoir, Simone de (1962), *Djamila Boupacha*, Paris: Gallimard.
- Beauvoir, Simone de (1964), *Force of Circumstance*, trans. from the French by R. Howard, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.
- Beauvoir, Simone de (1972), *Tout compte fait*, Paris: Gallimard.
- Beauvoir, Simone de (1973), *Les Belles Images*, trans. from the French by Patrick O'Brian, London: Fontana/Collins.
- Fallaize, Elizabeth (1988), *The Novels of Simone de Beauvoir*, London: Routledge.
- Fanon, Frantz (1963), *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York: Grove Press.
- Fishwick, S. (1999), 'The Elusive 'Je': Language and Female Subjectivity in Simone de Beauvoir's *Les Belles Images*', *Modern and Contemporary France* 7:4, pp. 471–84.
- Piatier, Jacqueline (1966), *Simone de Beauvoir présente Les Belles Images*, Paris: Le Monde.
- Quinan, Christine (2008), "'La littérature apparaît quand quelque chose dans la vie se dérègle': Simone de Beauvoir's Search for Universal Meaning through Writing the Self", *Romance Studies* 26:2, pp. 181–92.
- Ross, Kristin (1995), *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Shepard, Todd (2006), *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.