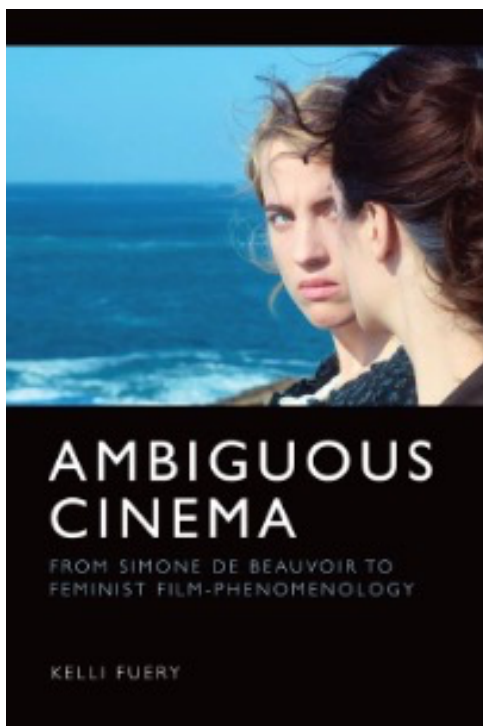


Simone de Beauvoir's Philosophy of Ambiguity: A Contribution Towards Feminist Film-phenomenology

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Written during the COVID 19 pandemic, Kelli Fuery's insightful book, *Ambiguous Cinema: From Simone de Beauvoir to Feminist Film-Phenomenology*, is the result of an immersive study of Simone Beauvoir's philosophy – as gathered from her writings in the form of diaries, essays

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and autobiographies – and the application of a number of concepts (situation, ambiguity, freedom, ethics and responsibility) to the study of film aesthetics and experience. Fuery focuses on how Beauvoir's concept of ambiguity, and its implicit ethical vision, is prompted in a selection of films by independent women filmmakers, namely, Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter* (1974), Debra Granik's *Leave No Trace* (2018), Joanna Hogg's *The Souvenir* (2019), Cheryl Dunye's experimental films or *Dunyementaries* (1990s), Claire Denis's *Let the Sunshine In* (2017), Lucrecia Martel's *Zama* (2017), Lynne Ramsay's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011) and Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019). As Fuery points out, although affective ambiguous aesthetic experience is obviously not restricted to films created by women, these works have been chosen because they foreground the ambiguity of women's situation in patriarchal social contexts. In such circumstances, she argues, not only are women lived experiences more impacted by moral, physical and political dangers, but they also face additional emotional difficulties in realizing an embodied ethical freedom.

Ambiguity is Beauvoir's philosophical innovation and the cornerstone of her phenomenology. This notion was initially enunciated by her in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* (1944), an essay that reflects on our relationships with others, and which emerged as a response to the global turmoil of the Second World War. Subsequently, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1945), Beauvoir eventually outlined an existential ethics whereby "ambiguity is a necessary, essential aspect of human existence because we do not live alone, completely separated from other human beings" (p. 49). Beauvoir's ambiguity refers to the uncertainty of human existence, the multiplicity of subjectivities, the interdependence of the self on the other, and the inability to reconcile our inner and outer worlds. It is the result of contradictory experiences, of being both a subject for oneself, and an object for others, or of contradictory perspectives within one's own ways of being. Because ambiguity relates to our dependence on others and the need for reciprocal recognition, Fuery concludes that it effectively "addresses the lived experience of disparity that exists within our ethical and political relationships with others: racism, sexism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and so on" (p. 48). A central tenet of Beauvoir's ethics is that we need to will the freedom of others as part of willing our own freedom.

According to Fuery, Beauvoir's idea of ambiguity necessarily involves 'emotional turbulence,' and for this very reason she occasionally engages

with the concepts of two prominent object relations psychoanalysts, Wilfred Bion and Donald Winnicott. Coined by Bion in 1976, ‘emotional turbulence’ refers to difficult emotional “content and sensoria of latent lived experience” demonstrative of resistance to change (p. 6). Any life event that marks a change from one state to another is emotionally turbulent, and asks that we make the choice to either tolerate or avoid the emotional turmoil; by choosing to endure the difficulty of complex emotional life, we enable our own mental growth. Fuery argues that Beauvoir’s concept of ambiguity helps us to think philosophically about film experience. In effect, in *All Said and Done* (1974) Beauvoir considered cinema a medium more capable than literature to “show us the feelings that bind people together” and thus likely to assume a crucial role in thinking through the affective aspects of lived experience (p. 230). In Beauvoir’s understanding, therefore, film and philosophy were *already* interconnected in their engagement of embodiment and empathy, within an appeal to rethink life from new ethical and political points of view (p. 3). Yet until very recently, the significance of Beauvoir’s philosophy for film phenomenology has been mostly overlooked in favor of works by men phenomenologists like Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Ambiguous cinematic experience interrelates ethics, politics and emotion in our human struggle for freedom, which necessarily entails difficult embodied experiences. Such cinematic experience emerges when a film raises ethical questions through situations that involve an interconnection of choice, recognition and reciprocity, or when it is able to appeal through its uncertainty and emotional turbulence, and chooses to think such uncertainty and turmoil, to respond to it or not, through an embodied sensory aesthetic mode. In Beauvoir own words, “There is an ethics only if there is a problem to solve” (Beauvoir 1945, 17).

Based on extensive and solid research, Fuery’s writing is inspired, and even at times impassioned, especially when she discusses the selected works by women filmmakers in the light of Beauvoir’s philosophy of ambiguity, highlighting themes and instances of choice – such as erotic experience, reciprocal recognition, emotional turbulence and ethics of relationality – over those traditionally emphasized in feminist film theory, such as desire, representation, or identity. For instance, in chapter 2, Fuery argues that Liliana Cavani’s *The Night Porter* – a controversial film, generally misunderstood and condemned by critics, including a few feminists – discloses the negative reality of patriarchal

privilege, as well as the ambivalence and bondage of the 'female condition' within heteronormative relationships. Drawing on Beauvoir's interpretation of Sade's writing as political action (as expressed in her 1951 essay "Must We Burn Sade?"), Fuery argues that Cavani's aestheticization of violence is an act of disclosure, for it makes visible the hypocritical cruelties of privilege and the false reciprocity that exists in heterosexual relationships within patriarchal cultures.

Further on, in discussing Claire Denis's *Let the Sunshine In* (chapter 5), Fuery ponders on the importance of emotion and empathy in the director's work. By casting Juliette Binoche as a middle-aged woman who searches for love, Denis contests the usual practice of exposing love interests as the domain only of the young, and makes visible the endurance of tyranny of men over women's carnality, in terms of appeal and fertility (pp. 139-140). Disagreeing with those who classify the film as a 'romantic comedy,' Fuery argues that the film raises significant ethical questions regarding women's experiences of being in love, with a critical eye to the social scripts that sustain "the institution of romance" (p. 141).

In each and every film that she approaches in her book, Fuery unlocks a perspective about women's experience and situation in a patriarchal context, and demonstrates how cinema has the potential to engage with existential ambiguity in ethical and political terms. Generally, most of the women characters featured in the selected films suffer from indecision, bad faith, traumas, miserable events and cruel consequences, but they are not moralized for their choices or actions by the filmmakers. Instead, an ethics of ambiguity is maintained throughout, preventing any closure or unification of negative experience through a storytelling that relies more on audio-visual experience than the usual prevalence of narrative or dialogue in mainstream films. The cinematic emphasis of these films is placed on sensory elements through the implementation of aesthetic practices, such as off-screen sound, breaking the frame, attention to gesture in close-ups, and so on (p. 230). As spectators, we become focused on how these women characters negotiate being and becoming, chiefly in sensory and aesthetic terms. This is particularly Beauvoirian. In her magnum opus, *The Second Sex* (1949), the philosopher insisted that woman is not a fixed signifier but is instead being constantly negotiated and disclosed on the basis of power and behavior. An ambiguous cinematic work prompts the spectators to undertake disturbing but creative experiences; it encourages their

freedom to decide the connotations and ethical implications of the work, albeit using the materiality of the film to reach such a decision.

Throughout the book, Fuery maintains that Beauvoir's thoughts on women's ambiguous lived experience – in terms of body, situation and identity – are mirrored in the attitudes, themes and orientations of the selected films; or that, likewise, these works' capacity to foreground the affective emotional turbulence of ambiguous existence makes them share characteristics of Beauvoir's own philosophy. This is likely due, she argues, to the fact that these women filmmakers work outside dominant financing and distribution models, and are thus able to produce both critical and aesthetically innovative work that is deeply perceptive of women's living experience. Much like Beauvoir's nontraditional philosophical approach, these women directors deviate from traditional film genres and willingly assume risks in addressing the ambiguity of women's existence and its relationship to becoming.

Lastly, *Ambiguous Cinema* is not solely confined to the writings of Beauvoir, but additionally reflects upon the ways in which her philosophy may be extended and put in conversation with the works of contemporary feminist thinkers and film theorists. By exploring perspectives from pivotal authors such as Lori Jo Marso, Gail Weiss, Iris Marion Young, Sonia Kruks, Sara Heinämaa and Debra Bergoffen, the book points towards projects of feminist phenomenology that equally deal with how film experiences may be effective in political and existential terms. Further, by exploring the writings of Latina feminists Gloria Anzaldúa, María Lugones and Mariana Ortega – particularly in Chapter 6 – Fuery addresses the limitations of Beauvoir's own thinking around race and ethnicity, showing how the notion of ambiguity can be decolonized in order to enrich a discussion of embodied lived experience of racial and intermeshed identities.

In her thought-provoking book, Fuery successfully demonstrates with affective reach how the concept of ambiguity is not just an abstract philosophical concept, but also, and most importantly, an embodied way of being: it is what drives a Beauvoir-inspired contemporary existential ethics. As a woman-reader I was both struck by how Fuery makes Beauvoir's living philosophy radiate and affectively transformed by realizing how the Beauvoirian notion of ambiguity may be operationalized, so as to discern the distinctions that exist between my own ways of seeing and embodied ways of being-in-the-world. By recognizing and expressing the precarious and ambiguous reality that

structures women's freedom, the films Fuery explores in her study become exemplars of the present practices and future becomings of a feminist and existential film-phenomenology.

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