Existentialist Chic: French Philosophy and Fashion, 1944-1951

French existentialism first arrived on our shores skillfully framed and contextualized by American fashion magazine editors. Later, as the published work of existentialists made its way into the book market, it was further tweaked, pruned, and packaged by editors and publishers to appeal to a wide public. Its evolution, from being a literary fad to a school of thought with important political and philosophical implications, had less to do at first with the texts themselves than with the way in which its main representatives were presented through photographs, advertising of their personalities, and a simplification of their ideas. In this talk I will chronicle the promotion of existentialism via the popular press in the postwar period and discuss the effects of this initial presentation of existentialism on its acceptance as an academic subject.