



FRANÇOIS TRUFFAUT: FOR THE LOVE OF FILMS

La Peau douce

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away the film's ending.

Truffaut's *La Peau douce* was greeted with a certain coolness at Cannes. Was it really understood? The film is about an editor of a literary review, Pierre Lachenay, who falls in love with an air hostess while attending a conference in Portugal. Back in Paris, he quarrels with his wife; then a literary gathering at Rheims offers an opportunity to take the girl to the country. For a time she is impressed, but his fretting anxiety about what people will say makes her decide to leave him, just as he makes up his mind and offers to marry her. Suggested by a news item, the story ends in tragedy: he is shot in a crowded restaurant, and the wife is revenged.

The feeling was that Truffaut had sunk back into the conventional cinema which he once lashed so unmercifully, to make a film which might bear the signature of any old Bernstein-brand playwright. *La Peau douce*, however, is a trap: there have been plenty of films about adultery, but few have ventured to take the mechanism so methodically to pieces. And Truffaut's characters can hardly be called conventional. Behind Lachenay's air of calm competence lurks indecision, weakness, diffidence (a diffidence close to that of *Tirez sur le Pianiste*, and one of the secret keys to Truffaut's world). The wife, normally presented as a resigned, mousy compendium of domestic virtues, is here alluring, voluptuous, eminently desirable, offering herself to her husband with the utmost provocation, her animal cries of pain etching in a striking portrait of a woman in love. Her final scene, after she has killed her husband, is unforgettable: amid the uproar of the restaurant she throws away the gun, sinks down, turns up the collar of her raincoat as if the chill of prison were already on her, and the terrible ghost of a smile flickers on her lips. Pierre, now, belongs to her. Equally unconventional, the other woman is not the man-eating vamp of tradition, but a young girl, a charmingly unripe peach flattered to find herself not only noticed but wanted. She talks, however, endlessly, all about her family; she isn't terribly interested in money; and she says she won't mind too much if they can't make love for a month or two.

Another accusation: 'It's a documentary about the gear-changes of the Citroen.' But the extreme fragmentation of *La Peau douce*, the ellipses, the quantity of extremely brief shots, are a sort of *pointillisme* in the direction, adding fascinating layers to the texture of the film. Truffaut is obviously an admirer of *Muriel* (the editing, the stress laid on meals, on sudden switches in light), and the influence of Resnais has deepened both the frontiers of his world and his style, taking him far beyond the eternal rapid panning of the days of *Les Quatre cents coups*. The fragmented surface is matched by breaks in rhythm, and *La Peau douce* is a subtle exercise in varying perspectives – in closeness and distance (Desailly's glasses), in hesitations and sudden rushes forward – with which Truffaut, like Resnais, addresses himself across his actors to the spectator in a quest for some enduring quality in happiness. Through his use of disconnection (light switches, camera shutters, gear-changes), Truffaut demonstrates the fragility of love; his world is one of objects and skins, of fleeting glances and fleeting contacts, as though love, in the steely world in which we live, were no more than two skins

touching in a universe where things and people are sealed away from each other in impenetrable envelopes.

There is still much of the old Truffaut in *La Peau douce*, in the quotations from Renoir, from himself, and the *Tirez*-style baroque couplets, but a new, mature Truffaut is revealed. To the qualities which we already know, his freshness, charm, delicacy and reserve, a new deliberation has been added, a sense of balance, an ability to construct his film round those key scenes in which he reveals himself most fully: the sequence in the aircraft with the hostess drawing a curtain to change her shoes; the wonderful scene of furtive glances in the lift, followed by Lachenay's exhilaration in his room, switching on all the lights one after another, then fumbling with the wrong key in the lock; the crumpled telegram; the mistress being jealous of the wife; the little girl trying on her mother's shoes; the kitten on the breakfast tray; the girl dancing, changing her jeans at a petrol station, having to be told 'Not so loud' at the restaurant, and last seen from the top of a block of unfinished flats as she disappears for ever. A snapshot in a viewfinder, the whirr of a delayed-action shutter heard over the wife's discovery of the photographs. These are some of the new departures in the film.

The weaknesses are self-evident. There is a certain lack of conviction in the background details of an intellectual who directs an avant-garde review from an attic but lives the private life of a big businessman; and rather than the final shooting *à la* Godard, I would have preferred an ending which left Lachenay abandoned by both women. But these faults are small. The film shows what Truffaut could have achieved (and will achieve) with a trio of actors as fine as Françoise Dorleac. Jean Desailly and Nelly Benedetti are excellent, but Françoise Dorleac reaches beyond mere performance. One would swear that Truffaut had talked the role over endlessly with her, injecting it piece by piece, shaping gradually until the character herself took over, inventing her own dialogue and living the film as it went along. After the glittering lightning flashes of *Jules et Jim*, Truffaut has here made, in a film about adultery, his first adult film.

Gilles Jacob, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1964

LA PEAU DOUCE

Director: François Truffaut

©: Les Films du Carrosse, SEDIF, Simar Films

Original Screenplay by: F. Truffaut, Jean-Louis Richard

Director of Photography: Raoul Coutard

Editor: Claudine Bouché

Laboratory: Franay L.T.C. St.-Cloud

Music: Georges Delerue

Music Publisher: Editions Musicales Hortensia

Sound Recording: Studio Marignan

uncredited

Production Company: Produções Cunha Telles

Producers: François Truffaut, António da Cunha Telles

Production Manager: Marcel Berbert

Assistant Directors: Jean-François Adam, Jean-Pierre Léaud,

Claude Othnin-Girard

Continuity: Suzanne Schiffman

Camera Operators: Georges Liron, Denis Mornet

Assistant Camera: Claude Beausoleil

Still Photographer: Raymond Cauchetier

Assistant Editor: Lila Biro

Properties: Jean-Claude Dolbert

Costumes: Renée Rouzot

Make-up Artist: Nicole Félix

Cast

Jean Desailly (*Pierre Lachenay*)

Françoise Dorléac (*Nicole Chomette*)

Nelly Benedetti (*Franca Lachenay*)

Daniel Ceccaldi (*Clément*)

Laurence Badie (*Ingrid*)

Sabine Haudepin (*Sabine*)

Philippe Dumant (*cinema manager*)

Dominique Lacarrière (*Pierre's secretary*)

Paule Emanuèle (*Odile*)

Jean Lanier (*Michel*)

Maurice Garrel (*bookseller*)

Pierre Risch (*canon*)

uncredited

François Truffaut (*voice of petrol station attendant*)

Oliva Poli (*Mme Bontemps*)

Gérard Poirot (*Franck, co-pilot*)

Maximilienne Harlaut (*Mme Leloix*)

Georges de Givray (*Nicole's father*)

Catherine-Isabelle Duport (*young girl*)

Thérèse Renouard (*cashier*)

Jean-Louis Richard (*man in street*)

France/Portugal 1964©

113 mins

FRANÇOIS TRUFFAUT: FOR THE LOVE OF FILMS

Jules et Jim (Jules and Jim)

From Fri 4 Feb

Philosophical Screens: Jules et Jim

Thu 10 Feb 20:20

The Representation of Women in Truffaut's Films

Fri 18 Feb 18:20

THE LITERARY TRUFFAUT

Anne and Muriel (Les Deux Anglaises et le continent)

Sat 5 Feb 12:20; Thu 17 Feb 17:50 (+ intro by actor Kika Markham); Tue 22 Feb 20:25

Fahrenheit 451

Sat 5 Feb 20:45; Sun 13 Feb 12:40; Sun 27 Feb 18:40

The Story of Adèle H (L'Histoire d'Adèle H)

Wed 9 Feb 20:55; Sat 12 Feb 20:45; Sat 19 Feb 18:20

The Green Room (La Chambre verte)

Thu 10 Feb 18:20; Tue 15 Feb 20:40; Wed 23 Feb 20:40

THE HITCHCOCK TRUFFAUT

Shoot the Pianist (Tirez sur le pianiste)

Tue 1 Feb 20:50; Fri 11 Feb 18:30; Sat 26 Feb 13:20

The Bride Wore Black (La Mariée était en noir)

Fri 4 Feb 20:45; Sun 13 Feb 18:00; Sun 27 Feb 12:10

Finally Sunday! (Vivement dimanche!)

Sat 5 Feb 17:50; Sat 12 Feb 12:30; Sun 27 Feb 15:00

Mississippi Mermaid (La Sirène du Mississippi)

Sun 6 Feb 12:40; Fri 18 Feb 20:35; Fri 25 Feb 18:00

La Peau douce (Silken Skin)

Sun 6 Feb 18:20; Sat 12 Feb 17:20; Sat 26 Feb 15:30

The Woman Next Door (La Femme d'à côté)

Tue 8 Feb 20:30; Mon 21 Feb 18:10; Thu 24 Feb 20:30

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A selection of 10 Truffaut films will be available on BFI Player Subscription from January, and a selection of Truffaut films will screen around the UK

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Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email prognotes@bfi.org.uk

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