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films

by Andrew Sarris

Francois Truffaut's "THE SOFT SKIN" (at the Paris) has been widely criticized for its wildly melodramatic denouement. The spectacle of a wronged wife mowing down her errant husband with a shotgun may be rationalized as the truth of the tabloids, but, as Max Beerbohm observed in "Savanarola Brown," truth is much too lurid for the logic of fiction. Besides, Truffaut, unlike Godard, is not now and has never been a spinner of paradoxes about realism. If one asks Godard why, he is likely to answer why not. Truffaut is more directly and dramatically involved in the meaning of his material. In fact, Monsieur Francois has served up little shreds of himself in the little mischief-makers of "Les Mistons" (1957), in the delinquently juvenile Jean-Pierre Leaud of "The 400 Blows" (1959), later the coyly masochistic adolescent of "Love at Twenty" (1963), in the destructively timid Charles Aznavour of "Shoot the Piano Player" (1960), in the sweetly passive Oscar Werner of "Jules and Jim" (1961), and now in the clumsily adulterous Jean Dessailly of "The Soft Skin." One has only to glance at the shyly flickering smile on the director's face to recognize the pattern of all his protagonists. No conquering Casanovas they. A succession of nice girls must lead these paragons of humility and sensitivity by the hand to the promised land of tender caresses. By lacking force, Truffaut's heroes—especially Dessailly—evade responsibility. The director is then free to pass off the unbearable nastiness of "The Soft Skin" as the consequence of objective observation.

Priggish Ethos

Unfortunately, Truffaut's treatment of adultery is so priggish it makes Doris Day's ethos seem as libidinous as Mae West's. Jean Dessailly, an industrialized intellectual allegedly on the make for airline stewardess Francoise Dorleac, arranges assignations in Paris hotels and countryside motels with all the insouciance of a debauchee in Dubuque—not today's depraved wife-swapping Dubuque, of course, but the wholesome Dubuque the New Yorker imagined 30 years ago. Perhaps in seeing too many American movies, Truffaut has soaked up Production Code Puri-

tanism with all its retributive mechanisms as a universal fact of life. Certainly one does not have to be a libertine to recognize the director's intolerance toward compulsive sexuality. Renoir's dictum that everyone has his reasons, a dictum that Truffaut has always professed to follow, is abandoned here on more than one occasion. The director's attitude toward two-legged wolves who accost women on the street is so one-sidedly staged as a cynically predatory act that I can't help detecting a touch of masculine envy in Truffaut's magisterial choler.

The plot of "The Soft Skin" is a maze of coincidences and contrivances from the first fateful plane trip to the last fatal phone call. Three lives swing wildly on split-second hinges of fate. If Dessailly had not caught his plane to Lisbon, he would never have met Francoise Dorleac, and if he had not found himself in the same elevator with the stewardess, he would never have had the courage to pick her up, and if he had not been delayed in calling his wife by someone in the phone booth, he would still be alive today. This kind of third-rate-life-is-fate dramatic construction can be fun in an unpretentious movie, but Truffaut is nothing if not deliberate in his use of cliches. Life, he argues quite solemnly, is just one long bad movie, and life's pleasures are merely fleeting moments in an unpleasantly complicated scenario. This vision of the world is both too limited and too perverted for any serious film, much less for any possibility of humor and charm. Aside from the joylessness of Truffaut's outline of existence, the very texture of experience in "The Soft Skin" is coarse and ugly. The director even demystifies Francoise Dorleac's lovely legs through a feathery fetishism with stockings, possibly intended to convey the idea that urban love is not a realm of classical nudity, but of furtive peek-a-boo.

Another Period

Truffaut's technique has never been so precise in its camera placements and so fragmented in its editing. He seems to have moved within this one film from his Renoir-Vigo period to his Resnais-Hitchcock period. A vaguely defined lyrical humanism has been replaced by a chillingly mechanical analysis of human behavior. If Truffaut fails dismally in bringing off the switch, it is because his style merely disguis-

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es the banality of his ideas without transforming them into emotional attitudes. Truffaut, the most lovable and least intellectual of the major nouvelle vague directors, can coast no longer on sheer charm.



Francois Truffaut's 'La peau douce (The Soft Skin)' is a matter-of-fact study of adultery, with Nelly Benedetti and Jean Dessailly