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## As a Man Grows Older

The Soft Skin. In U.S. cinemate circles, the triangle is considered square. Among French moviemakers, on the contrary, it is respected as a fundamental unit of the social structure. Year after year, with relentless Gallic rationality, the finest French directors elaborate ever more complex problems of emotional trigonometry. In *The Soft Skin*, however, Director François Truffaut (*The 400 Blows*, *Jules and Jim*) describes a given triangle with perfect simplicity, perfect elegance. If only he had let it go at that.

At the apex stands a middle-aged intellectual (Jean Desailly). A middle-aged schoolboy, from the look of him. He has the bookish pallor and the sedentary sag, the big bright eyes and the soft little mouth of a clever child who knows plenty about Balzac but not much about life. About women he knows nothing—not even what his own wife (Nelly Benedetti) is really like. About himself he knows only that all work and no play has made Jacques a rather dull boy.

Then all at once he is famous. All at once he has the lucre and the leisure to make up for what he has missed. All at once his eye begins to rove.

On a trip to Lisbon it sees something he likes: a pretty airline stewardess (Françoise Dorléac) who seems to like him too. They spend a night together in Lisbon, and back in Paris they meet again. By chance his wife gets wind of the affair. They quarrel bitterly. He walks out. The experience leaves him shaken and confused, but as an intellectual he knows how to reason his feelings away. "I am a free man now," he nervously assures himself. "Free to take the woman I really want." Proudly he asks the stewardess to marry him. Gently she replies: thanks, but no thanks. And walks out.

The camera turns to the hero's face. It looks blank, a civilized blank. As

though, perhaps, he had suddenly seen someone coming toward him, someone he loathed and had always avoided but now would be forced to confront: an aging, suety and slightly repulsive intellectual. Himself.

The frame has a quality of finality. It says everything worth saying about the character and the situation. Unfortunately, Director Truffaut finds something more to say, something more appropriate to a flick about *flics* than a study of sensibilities. In the last reel the rejected wife, smiling the smile of the eternal feminine, takes down her trusty shotgun and BAM!

There goes the whole shooting match? Not really. Even when Truffaut does something wrong he does it well. He is a master cinemamechanic whose skill increases with every picture. His cutting is a study in narrative acceleration, and his camera never vaingloriously catches at effects, as it sometimes did in *Jules and Jim*. As for the players, Dorléac and Benedetti impeccably represent types. But Desailly profoundly illumines an individual, a boy who plays the love game for fun and discovers too late that women play for keeps.



DORLÉAC & DESAILLY IN "SKIN"  
Gallic triangle.