

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Soft Skin 1964

Francois Truffaut

OVERVIEW

The present film illustrates the rawness, and un-necessariness of adultery. *Emphasis on adultery's lack of 'being necessary,' of its frequent arbitrariness, of in that sense its absurdity, to get this point.* We need only review the beginnings of the present film to Pierre Lachenay is a happy, busy, and respected married man. His daughter adores him, insists on accompanying him to the plane for his lecture trip; his wife is confident, sexy, smart; he is himself is at a lively cultural peak—forty years old—just making himself known as an outstanding critic and editor. He is confident, like his wife, wrapped up in a faultless black suit and immaculately coiffed. Isn't this the time to say 'he's got it all'?

Yet we are about to plunge into a disastrous denouement? Yes, the old Aristotelian formula is about to play out again. A tragedy, for we are looking into a modern (of course fallen) brand of tragedy, involves the downfall of a person of significance (man) passing from a position of acclaim and dignity into a pitiable condition. It may be a prof of French literature, not Oedipus the King, but the cards on the table are familiar and well worn.

CHARACTERS

Pierre Lachenay	Main character; essayist, editor
Nicole	Flight attendant; lover of Lachenay
Franca Lachenay	Wife of Pierre Lachenay
Dominique	Lachenay's assistant
Sabine	Lachenay's daughter
Bontemps	The bookseller
Movie theater manager in Reims	

SYNOPSIS

Pierre Lachenay is a French man of letters, forty years old and a success as an academic and editor. We first see him rushing to catch a Paris-Lisbon flight, followed out the door by his daughter and loving wife. He makes it on time, settles back, then becomes increasingly aware of the flight attendant doing her job near the front cabin. Pierre is enchanted, can't take his eyes off her; as it happens, the two of them are booked in the same hotel; Pierre makes some swift strategic moves, sets up a date with Nicole for the next day in the hotel bar. This strategy is effective for the moment, though in the long run it leads to disaster; a fervent affair between Pierre and the stewardess, the inevitable leaks that reveal the misbehavior to Pierre's wife.

STORY

The narrative itself is familiar enough, even trite, but the slightly unexplained intensity of the situation gives the film a twist of oddity—which fascinates. Why are the major players willing to make the major sacrifices they offer up, and which so clearly appear to bring unhappiness with them?

Meeting A chance meeting between Pierre and a flight attendant on a Paris-Lisbon flight is sufficient to trigger a sequence of events, which leave a marriage destroyed, a husband murdered, a wife facing murder charges. (Does the flight attendant pay a penalty? Are we left with that question unanswered, and hanging on a deeper of understanding of the lady than the film provides?) A fateful moment of dating, thanks to Pierre's need for the hunt, leads to a series of rendez-vous between the 'man of letters' and his

poly-competent normally good humored wife, and eventually to Franca's discovery of the truth of her husband's behavior.

Conference Truffaut has carefully constructed a central event, just where it is needed to open the wound of the present transgressions. Pierre has been invited to offer a discussion of a late in life film about Andre Gide, and for that has set aside several days to attend this distinguished conference in the city of Reims. Unfortunately, as fate will have it, Pierre is absent from Reims for considerable periods of time—he's making love to Nicole—and Franca's suspicions are aroused. A little probing on Franca's part reveals plenty of material for suspicion; Pierre is for one whole day unaccounted for. At the same time Nicole is looking at her own kind of pain. She is with Pierre at Reims, but unfortunately, for her, Pierre has to spend all his quality time, at Reims, keeping her in the background, so that Franca will not pick up news of her through the grapevine.

Ending The film watcher has now to watch some deadly conclusion close in on the protagonists of the film. No one can escape the action-logic which has formed on the far side of Pierre's attention to a pair of pretty legs on an airplane.

Nicole, first of all, is devastated by the short shrift she gets in Reims. By the end of suffering the various indignities, that the furtiveness of Pierre at the conference makes necessary, she has totally lost her tolerance with Pierre, and breaks up with him.

Franca is as devastated as Nicole, by Pierre's behavior. (Not much later she gives Pierre a frightful tongue lashing, which will be topped by her murdering him several days later in his favorite restaurant.)

Pierre loses everything, ending with his life. From the film's opening, Pierre has been the fashion plate of success, excellence in dressing and grooming, quiet but perfected self-confidence. Throughout the duration of his affair, he has been watching those life-perks fade away. By the end he has nowhere to hide, except the corner table in his favorite restaurant.

Catharsis. The Aristotelian formula for a successful tragedy—we noted that *The Soft Skin* was a bourgeois version of such—includes the notion that the 'great man's downfall' brings with it a compensatory catharsis. We draw in our breaths, at the end of the present film, with awe at the fragility of the human condition. There is a sense of purification in this awe.

THEMES

Love. Love is a central theme in many of Truffaut's films. In its guise as sexuality, it brings out the desire, failings, sometimes heroism of the individual. To the Hellenistic Greeks, love in its triple form—noetic, erotic, spiritual—offered a complete description of the higher human faculties. With the historical evolution of middle-class marriage, in which personal conjugal responsibilities constitute a daily challenge (and promise) to the householder, there is a heavy obligation for disciplining love, putting it to use as part of the human *armoire*. Here is where the beast of temptation most showily threatens the happiness system of the middle class. In *The Soft Skin* Truffaut looks adultery in the eye, openly anatomizes it, and leaves us to brood over the harms it can do, and the recklessness with which it can take over lives. It wreaks its havoc, in the present film, on 'someone who should know better,' a highly educated, thus obviously disciplined, academic and writer.

Desire. What pushes Pierre over the edge of desire, on his flight to Lisbon, is a particular sight. The flight attendant, Nicole, has gone beyond the cockpit curtain to put on her streetwear for landing. At the base of the curtain, barely visible, we see her panties drop to the floor. We feel the electricity inside our perception of Phillippe. He is wired, throughout the film, to any signals of her sexual presence.

Carelessness. For all his cool, Phillippe begins to lose control of the many risk factors surrounding his adultery. By pursuing the speaking commitment in Reims, he accepts the fatal challenge of the adulterer,

having to hide the beloved. A no win situation. If the beloved is seen, the adulterer has had it. If the beloved is kept out of sight, he or she will be enraged.

Jealousy. Jealousy may be too weak a term, for the growing rage in the heart of Franca, whom we have so far known as an exuberant and talented mom. Her husband plays an inscrutable and canny hand, and in his academic world seems to well regarded. It has taken Franca a long time to understand the complexity of her man or her situation.

Violence. The ultimate crash comes out of the barrel of a pistol. Franca kills what was a short time before the security of her life. The false semblance of stability has been shattered.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

PIERRE The main character is Pierre, for only he attains enough dignity to earn our identification with him. He is an 'homme de lettres' 'a man of letters,' in French parlance. In French culture this term indicates a writer, perhaps an editor, perhaps a scholar, in any case a person intimately involved with the finer culture of literature. Pierre comports himself with according seriousness, conscious of the weight of his opinion and knowledge—but short of stuffiness. At his best, as we see from the start, he is a loving and effective family man.

Vanity In his smug, contemporary fashion, Pierre keeps his cool, throughout the quietly incendiary times of his short affair. He is ruled by desire, and gives himself no time for self-examination. Never does he let down his perfected appearance, his semblance of having things fully under control. His vanity, however, becomes just what his female prey despise.

Erotic. From the seduction and leg stroking scenes, in which we see Pierre involved, we must suppose that he is sexually driven, as well as intellectual. Remember the elaborate excuses and semi-comical explanations he employed in Lisbon, to secure his first date with Nicole? He had barely met her at that point.

Fragile. For all his intelligence Pierre finds himself, in discussions with Franca after the adultery has been brought into the open, without plans or recourse. He is unable to 'explain himself,' for he is really 'without excuse.' He no longer believes in himself.

Unrealistic. In the end, though once again remaining an intellectual man of letters, Pierre does not anticipate the gravity of his situation. His wife and family have had their support system removed, and no forgiveness seems relevant, among such wired, inter-responsible middle-class achievers. It is what murder is made of.

Parallels. Graham Greene's novel, *The End of The Affair* (1951), is both parallel to and contrary to Truffaut's film. Set during the Blitz in London, Greene's novel focuses on a writer who falls overwhelmingly in love with the wife of a senior British Civil Servant. At a certain point the lady's Catholicism makes her promise God that she will no longer yield to her love for Bendrix, the writer. Impelled by her example, Bendrix finds his own way back to God, and to an 'end to the affair.' Pierre lives out his desire from within a different framework, passionate and intrusive, but without any apparent scruples. So far as we can tell Franca too lives without scruples, for she, like her husband, appears to plunge without reflection into what will doubtless mean the end of her life and that of her husband, not to mention the consequences for children. Whereas nothing inhibits the workings of desire, in Pierre, nothing enhances such workings in Bendrix, once he has been touched by his lover's example.