

François Truffaut's *La Peau douce*
as a cinematic transformation of
Honoré de Balzac's *La Peau de Chagrin*

The publication of this article is in process. It is part of my new project: exploring the intensive intertextuality between Truffaut's films and French literature, especially Baudelaire and Balzac.

This paper examines the intertextual relationship between François Truffaut's *The Soft Skin/The Silken Skin* (*La Peau douce*, 1964) and Honoré de Balzac's *The Fatal Skin* (*La Peau de Chagrin*, 1832).

In many of his films, Truffaut internalized Balzac's human and literary world, was influenced by it and rebelled against it. In the present study, I examine this complex dialectic approach of the filmmaker towards the writer who inspired him, as manifested in his film *The Soft Skin*.

To do so, I apply Michael Riffaterre's intertextual approach on the one hand, and Harold Bloom's theory of literary influence on the other.¹ I refer to Riffaterre's claim that when a mimetic gap—incomprehensibility—appears in a text, such a gap will be closed as soon as the reader discovers the intertext to which he is referred by this unintelligible artistic continuity. The intertextual enigma will be resolved by means of the alluded intertext.²

My treatment of Truffaut's relation to Balzac draws heavily on my (mis)understanding of Harold Bloom's theory of literary influence. According to Bloom, any strong poem, is essentially about an earlier poem (or poems).³ It is the enactment of the latecomer's anxiety lest he be imaginatively constricted by his

precursor, since "everything has already been said." The younger poet thus adopts a highly charged 'oedipal' relation to his 'father' poet.⁴ If he is strong enough, he deploys certain strategies (the 'Six Revisionary Ratios' that Bloom specifies)⁵ that enable him to 'swerve' away from the precursor at the point at which the aspirant feels he deviated from what would have been the right course. Thus the ephebe revises, rewrites, or, as Bloom usually puts it: misreads the old poem.

To live, the poet must misinterpret the father, by the crucial act of misprision, which is the re-writing of the father.⁶

The aspirant thereby gains an illusory sense of having originated the old masterpiece rather than having been influenced by it.

Poets tend to think of themselves as stars because their deepest desire is to be an influence, rather than to be influenced, but even in the strongest, whose desire is accomplished, the anxiety of having been formed by influence still persists.⁷

The psychological and rhetorical strategies enable the ephebe both to negate the influence and to maintain it emotionally through his repressed processing of it. The drama envisioned by Bloom is a veritable power struggle (a 'wrestling'). There is no correct interpretation whether by poet or critic; there is only stronger or weaker misreading.

Poetic strength comes only from a triumphant wrestling with the greatest of the dead.⁸

One should note that in the case of Truffaut—critic turned film-maker—his relation to Balzac is not a relation to a dead film-maker—as Bloom’s theory of influence would seem to require—but to a dead writer. Jefferson Kline already adapted Bloom’s concepts to explore the intertextual relationship between French New Wave films and literature, though he restricted himself only to film adaptations.⁹ Moreover, as we shall see, much of Truffaut’s cinematic reaction to Balzac’s *The Fatal Skin* is fully conscious, although this in no way excludes there being repressed features that are not explicitly dealt with in the present study.

In his film *The Soft Skin*, Truffaut observes marriage and examines two sets of relationships: one of a married couple, the other outside and in the shadow of the conjugal bond. Pierre Lachenay (Jean Desailly), the film’s main character, is married to Franca (Nelly Benedetti) and the father of Sabine (Sabine Haudepin). He owns a publishing house and specializes in the works of the French master Honoré de Balzac. He often travels throughout Europe, taking part in conferences and lecturing on literature, film and especially Balzac.

In one of his trips, he spends a passionate night with Nicole (Françoise Dorléac), a stewardess on his flight to Lisbon. Their encounter becomes a full-blown affair that persists when the two are back in Paris. Eventually Pierre oscillates between his family and Nicole, mostly trying—in vain—to overcome various obstacles in consummating his affair with Nicole. His relationship with his wife has shriveled down to routine, alienation and fights, whereas his love life with Nicole is exists mainly in fantasy.

Pierre engineers a special trip to lecture at a conference, and has Nicole join him in hopes of reviving their impossible reunion. However at the conference he is forced to conceal Nicole from his hosts, becomes hostage of the agenda at hand and

deprived any intimacy. After a series of mishaps in which Nicole is humiliated and rejected, Pierre slips away from the conference and the couple spend two intimate days together. Back in Paris, Franca has looked for him at the conference and evidently realized that he had left two days earlier. Pierre claims he needed to be alone. Franca decides to leave him but hopes he will insist on staying together. Pierre breaks the marriage and intends to purchase a flat for himself and Nicole, but she is not ready for a commitment. Contrary to conventional expectations whereby Pierre's relationship with Nicole would founder upon his inability to break loose from his marriage, here it is the lover who rejects the new order of things. Truffaut illuminates a new angle in the traditional romantic triangle—one never before dealt with in cinema. The Pierre-Nicole love-story does not materialize because of Nicole's understanding that it will repeat Pierre's relationship with Franca, and certainly not for any obstacle of Franca's doing. Indeed, once more the marriage is the obstacle to extra-marital relations, but not for the lack of ability to break it up. It is rather the fact that the man does not know how to keep the marriage intact. The obstacle is internal, bears the stamp of Pierre's personality, and by no means a result of external circumstance.

Truffaut uses a tragic pattern wherein destiny cannot but manifest itself. In the world he constructs, the characters' destiny is intrinsic and does not depend on their choices. Just as Pierre is left alone and considers his return home, Franca discovers photographs of him and Nicole. Stunned, hurt and humiliated by his betrayal and deceit, she leaves their daughter, Sabine, with a friend and, armed with a rifle, arrives at the café where Pierre is sitting. As he makes futile attempts to reach her on the phone, she throws the incriminating photographs on his table and shoots him. She sits on the floor and waits for the police, in plain sight of the stunned café guests.

Innovative elements in the plot of the film are unique for the time of its making, 1964. It deals with marital life as a dreary routine, erosive and alienating, without any moralistic attempt to subject it to the bourgeois codes that ruled Hollywood melodramas until the 1960's. At the same time, the film subverts the romantic aura of extra-marital affairs common in films that dared stray from self-righteous, bourgeois morality. This novelty of Truffaut, unprecedented on the film screen, affected many filmmakers in the sixties and seventies. Furthermore, Truffaut precisely delineates sharply contrasting mental states and rapidly shifting, polarized behavior patterns. On the one hand, there is the ease with which Franca and Pierre dismantle their marriage, without the moral inhibitions dictated by normative social codes and regardless of the consequences in their daughter's life, and on the other hand, Franca's extreme reaction upon discovering her husband's betrayal. These extreme mental fluctuations are expressed cinematically in the mixing of genres typical of this film, a style that began to consolidate after Truffaut's second full-length feature, *Shoot the Piano Player (Tirez sur le Pianiste)*.

The Soft Skin moves with natural ease between melodrama, psychological drama, film noir and a thriller. Film noir is manifested in several aspects: the lighting in the film; certain behavior patterns of women as 'femmes fatales', especially towards the film's end – Nicole's rejection of Pierre; Franca in her reaction to Pierre's betrayal, her style of dress and her conduct on the way to murdering Pierre. At the beginning of the film, Truffaut chose to use the expressive tools of a thriller: the rapid pace of events; close-ups of parts of objects; speedy car-ride to the airport escaping the police, although the context is not one of a fugitive from the law but rather someone in a hurry to catch a flight. The romantic triangle conflict is based on melodramatic

patterns, although Truffaut's treatment—especially the full dismantling of the marriage as well as the portrayal of the characters—is more typical of psychological drama. Truffaut's playing with the different genres expresses a simultaneous existence of conflicting emotions in his characters. Thus he creates an unexpected constellation that represents everyday truth and human complexity that had not received cinematic expression in such contexts until 1964.

The title of the film is puzzling. Why does Truffaut attribute such importance to the softness of the skin in the film's romantic relationship? Helen Scott must have asked herself similar questions when, in her letter to Truffaut, she inquired about the meaning of the film's title. In his answer to her in January 1964, Truffaut wrote that the title has no special meaning:

La Peau douce? The title has no special meaning. It has a slightly sensual connotation, but it isn't a double entendre. On the other hand, the contrary French expression 'la peau dure' does have a double meaning. To have a hard skin means being able to withstand life's misfortunes.¹⁰

Contradicting his pronounced explanation to Scott, Truffaut gives his film's title significant weight by filming the opening titles as a series of close-ups of hands caressing each other. In these close-up shots no one is recognizable, but Truffaut thus supplies information vital to the film's exposition. The camera follows two pairs of hands: a woman's and a man's. One of the man's fingers bears a wedding ring, highlighting its absence from the woman's hand. As early as the film's opening titles we are clearly viewing a film about love affair between a married man and a single woman. The caressing hands emphasize the delicacy and sensuality of this scene in contrast with the film's tragic ending. The light falling on the hands accentuates their

texture and directs the spectator's attention to the soft skin of the hands, underscoring the film's title, *The Soft Skin*, over a close-up view of delicate skin. Since this title has no mimetic explanation in the film itself, the solution lies in Riffaterre's assumption that gaps in mimesis require resolution in intertext and demand an intertextual reading.¹¹

In our case, the meaning of the film's title lies in an intensive intertextuality that recruits Balzac in order to close the mimetic gaps that appear in the text. In this film, the explicit and implicit allusions to the writer who left a profound mark upon Truffaut's work exceed those made in any of his other films. Pierre, a Balzac expert after all, meets Nicole at the lecture he gives in Lisbon, marking the publication of his own book, *Balzac and Money*. This is also the title of his lecture at the conference. Furthermore, at their first encounter, he goes to great lengths to tell her about Balzac's biography and his illicit relations with Mme de Berny, as she gives in to Honoré's mother's matchmaking efforts to one of her daughters. This film's close link to Balzac is elucidated in depth with the realization that the title *La Peau douce* is not the opposite of *la peau dure* as Truffaut mentioned in his letter. It is the inverse of the French term *la peau de chagrin* meaning shagreen skin: rough animal's skin—as opposed to the soft human one. But most importantly, it is the title of Balzac's story of 1832, in English: *The Fatal Skin*.

This allusion throws new and surprising light on the Truffaut film. In Balzac's story, the protagonist is lonely, poor and desperate – on the verge of committing suicide, and prevented from so doing when an old man gives him a talisman made of rough shagreen skin that grants him his wishes. Each wish fulfilled makes the talisman shrinking further, and as it disappears, the man dies. This is actually a variation of the old story of Faust who sold his soul to the devil for ultimate

happiness. The man's fulfilled wishes shorten his life – such is the price paid for every delight and wish made true. The young man's wishes (thus named in Balzac's story) are the 'essence of life': wild partying drinking, money, and most of all – the love of women. The inscription on the talisman which the young man finds at an antique shop reads as follows:

If thou hast me, thou wilt have everything.
Thy life, however, will be my possession.
God has so decreed. Wish what thou wilt,
All thy wishes shall be fulfilled.
But count thy wishes as thy life,
For it is measured thereby.
With every wish of thine
I shall grow shorter
Even as thy days.
Wilt have me?
Take me. God will
Help thee!
So be it.¹²

In light of the allusion to Balzac, clearly Pierre and Nicole's illicit affair is the uttered wish, Pierre's obsessive need. In fact, here is a dramatic anticipation of the tragic ending. Pierre's wish fulfillment leads to his death: so far the similarity to Balzac. From here on, Truffaut misreads the meaning just as he misreads the title. In the Balzac story, the talisman and the source of gratification are distinct from one another. The shagreen skin is a separate entity that shrinks mystically with every additional wish fulfilled for its holder. In Truffaut's misreading, the skin is not rough,

it is soft. Hence there is no separate talisman-wish; they are one and the same. The woman's soft skin is both the wish and the talisman that fulfills it and later leads to perdition.

As in his earlier films, here too the woman plays a dual role—she embodies the talisman that solves the problem, but also the tragedy, and perhaps even the devil with whom the pact is made. She is the source of both power and weakness. She is both soft skin and rough hide. Winning the woman leads to losing her. In the Balzac story, wish fulfillment shrivels the shagreen whereas in Truffaut's film, Pierre wants only the skin. The talisman gives only of itself, thereby is consumed. In terms of the film's title and the Balzac story, every touch by Pierre makes the skin lose more of its softness and become rougher. This misreading intensifies the tragic paradox: it is impossible to have the wish fulfilled even for the shortest while, since its fulfillment hurts the object of the wish and does not appear as a gift paid for eventually, as was the case in *The Fatal Skin*. These differences are indeed evident in the plot of *The Soft Skin* as opposed to the plot of *The Fatal Skin*. This reading elucidates, for example, Pierre's and Nicole's incapacity to enjoy each other's company while traveling to a distant provincial town, or the fact that just as Pierre leaves home and offers to buy a house for himself and Nicole, she severs her ties with him. Unlike Balzac's young man, Pierre is unaware of his condition. He is restless and seeks thrills and love that he ends up never fulfilling. The closer he draws to Nicole, the further he finds himself. After distancing himself from Nicole and finally parting, he is murdered by his wife, without ever having intended to commit suicide. Balzac's protagonist gave up his life and just then found a way to fulfill his wishes and live again. Unfortunately, when he bought his shagreen skin he accepted the severe condition

denying him retreat from his initial choice, but rather putting off the consequences until the shagreen skin disappears.

The world conjured up by Balzac contains a theoretical kind of happiness attainable in measured doses and at a heavy price, whereas in the world Truffaut constructs, this is unrealistic romanticism. Pierre's world lacks even single moments of happiness. Prior to his lecture, while speaking to journalists Pierre also alludes to the shattering of the romantic myth as represented by Balzac. They wonder why he calls his lecture "Balzac and Money" rather than "Balzac and Love". Pierre answers them, coyly humorous: "I adore Balzac and I don't despise money."¹³ In his way Truffaut links an abstract romantic concept such as love to a concrete, substantial concept such as money. Love is not a vague idea divorced from concrete reality. Such misreading is a true expression of the modern spirit of the movement of which Truffaut was a prominent forger. He blurs the divide between ends and means, between the creative process and its final product.

Understanding the importance of *The Fatal Skin* in Truffaut's world is all the more acute in light of his use of it in two other films: at the end of *The Mississippi Mermaid* (*La Sirène du Mississippi*, 1969), Louis (Jean-Paul Belmondo) discovers the book in an abandoned shack and pounces on it as if it were some long-lost treasure. The book appears again in his film *Fahrenheit 451*: this time, towards the end of the film, when the Firemen reach the home of Montag (Oskar Werner), the Fireman turned underground reader who hides books. They uncover a huge stock of books and burn them. One of the prominent books here is Balzac's *The Fatal Skin*. Namely, besides the special role this book plays in the film *The Soft Skin*, it is the only book by Balzac that Truffaut prominently introduces in two of his other films.¹⁴

Truffaut also uses Balzac to rephrase his – and his New Wave peers’ – *Politique des Auteurs*. When Pierre tells Nicole about Balzac, he says the following:

Balzac thinks he can write a book a month. Not thin books, common nowadays, but rather volumes of thirty chapters, writing a chapter a day.

He realizes that publishers pay poorly, spreading installments over a year, a year and a half. He decides to become a publisher himself. He buys a publishing house. But things don’t go well for Balzac and his partners desert him. So he decides to do everything by himself: casting his own set-up-type, setting it up himself and even making his own paper.¹⁵

This version of Balzac’s venture into the publishing business is Truffaut’s interpretation, and differs, for example, from that of Henri Troyat as introduced in his biography of Balzac:

While La Fontaine and Molière thus made Balzac’s fortune, he composed, with fresh mind, undying novels the publication of which serious editors would battle over”
[Pendant que La Fontaine et Molière feront ainsi la fortune de Balzac, il composera, à tête reposée, des romans impérissables, dont les éditeurs sérieux se disputeront l’honneur de la publication]¹⁶

Troyat’s description of Balzac’s decision to be a publisher is opposed to that of Truffaut. The fact that Troyat’s description seems more realistic and credible does raise the question: why did Truffaut choose such a strange depiction of reality? Well, apparently Truffaut uses the life story of Balzac, with whom he fully identifies, to say something about himself as a filmmaker.

The assumption about Balzac having created his own paper and set-up-type, as irrelevant as that is to his writing, echoes the New Wave critics turned film-directors and their commitment to the ideology and practice of total film-making throughout the process, breaking loose of studios, producers and financiers. In fact, Truffaut uses Balzac to define himself as a cinematic auteur. This interpretation is reinforced even by his choice of Pierre's family name—Lachenay—like Robert Lachenay, Truffaut's childhood friend who became a film critic and the producer of his film *Les Mistons*. Pierre's affinity to Balzac in the film and the connection between his name and Truffaut's autobiography tighten the links between Truffaut and Balzac. Finally, Jefferson Kline, who uses Bloom's theory to examine the adaptations of books by the French New Wave filmmakers, notes that Claude Chabrol was greatly influenced by Balzac in his early films *Le Beau Serge* (1958) and *Les Cousins* (1958), but emphasizes:

But Chabrol always rejected (or at least claimed to reject) adapting Balzac to the screen.¹⁷

Further along he quotes Chabrol in this context:

One can't transpose Balzac's time. I broke my back trying to transpose *La Peau de Chagrin* to a modern setting, but I couldn't find a way. Anyhow, I would rather take an undeveloped idea – not something so completely developed and filled out... As they are already perfect as literature, I don't know how one could impose images on them.¹⁸

One might conclude from the above that Truffaut misreads Balzac and is fully aware of that, but in this case his denied Bloomian struggle is with Claude Chabrol, his way of defying Chabrol's words quoted above: here is Truffaut, coping successfully with Balzac's *The Fatal Skin*, a challenge that Chabrol did not even attempt as much as he longed to do so. This may be regarded as a variation of the 'Bloomian wrestling', not an inter-generational one but rather a struggle between two 'brothers' who set out together and at some point parted ways, and their seniority dispute remains unresolved.

Notes

¹I've already applied this approach in examination of the intertextual relationship between Balzac's *The Human Comedy* (*La Comédie Humaine*) and Truffaut's Antoine Doinel's films in the article titled: *The Human Comedy of Antoine Doinel: From Honoré de Balzac to François Truffaut*, (Preminger, 2004, p. 173-193); as well as in examination of the intertextual relationship between Truffaut's films: *Tirez sur le Pianiste* (1960), *Jules et Jim* (1961) and Hitchcock's film *Vertigo* (1958), in the article titled: *François Truffaut Rewrites Alfred Hitchcock: A Pygmalion Trilogy*, Preminger, A., 2007.

²*Compulsory reader response: the intertextual drive* in Plett, 1991, p. 56-57

³Bloom, 1975, p. 18

⁴Bloom, 1973, p. 11

⁵Bloom, 1973, p. 14-16

⁶Bloom, 1975, p. 19

⁷Bloom, 1975, p. 12-13

⁸Bloom, 1975, p. 9

⁹Kline, 1992, p. 1-6, p. 9, p. 114

¹⁰Truffaut, 1990, p. 232

¹¹*Compulsory reader response: the intertextual drive* in Plett, 1991, p. 56-57

¹²Balzac, 1963, p. 35-36

¹³Truffaut, 1964, 0:08:30

¹⁴In *The 400 Blows* (*Les Quatre Cents Coups*, 1959), Antoine Doinel reads *Quest of the Absolute* (*La Recherche de L' Absolu*, 1834); and in *Stolen Kisses* (*Baisers Volés*), he reads *The Lily of the Valley* (*Le Lys dans la Vallée*, 1835), the meaning of which has been reviewed in depth in my article *The Human Comedy of Antoine Doinel: From Honoré de Balzac to François Truffaut*, (Preminger, 2004. p. 173-193)

¹⁵Truffaut, 1964, 0:17:22:-0:17:44

¹⁶Troyat, 1995, p. 111

¹⁷Kline, 1992, p. 114

¹⁸Ibid, ibid

Bibliography

Balzac, H., 1993 (1834), *La Recherche de L'Absolu*, Paris: GF-Flammarion.

Balzac, H., 1963 (1832), , Translated from French by: Atwood H. Townsend, The New American Library of World Literature, Inc. New York.

Balzac, H., 1955 (1835), *Le Lys dans la Vallée*, Paris: Garnier Frères.

Bloom, H., 1975, *A Map of Misreading*, London; Oxford University Press, Inc.

Bloom, H., 1973, *The Anxiety of Influence*, London; Oxford University Press, Inc.

Kline, T. J., 1992, *Screening the Text: Intertextuality in New Wave French Cinema*, Baltimore; London: The Johns Hopkins UP.

Plett, H. F., 1991, *Intertextuality*, Berlin; New York: de Gruyter & Co.

Preminger, A., 2004, *The Human Comedy of Antoine Doinel: From Honoré de Balzac to François Truffaut*, *The European Legacy: Journal of the International Society for the Study of European Ideas*: (ISSEI), Vol. 9, No. 2, p.173-193.

Preminger, A., 2007, *François Truffaut Rewrites Alfred Hitchcock: A Pygmalion Trilogy*, *Literature/Film quarterly (LFQ)*, July, Vol. 35:3.

Riffaterre, M., 1990, *Compulsory reader response: the intertextual drive*, In: *Intertextuality*, Ch. 3, p. 56-78.

Troyat, H., 1995, *Balzac*, Paris: Flammarion.

Truffaut, F., 1990, *Letters*, Edited by Jacob, J. & De Givaray, C., Translated from French by: Gilbert Adair, London: Faber & Faber.

Filmography

Chabrol, C.

Le Beau Serge, 1958

Les Cousines, 1958

Truffaut, F.

Les Mistons, 1957

Les Quatre Cents Coups (The 400 Blows), 1959

Tirez sur le Pianiste (Shoot the Piano Player), 1960

La Peau douce, (The Soft Skin/The Silken Skin), 1964

Fahrenheit 451, 1966

Baisers Volés, (Stolen Kisses), 1968

La Sirène du Mississippi (Mississippi Mermaid), 1969

Professor Aner Preminger

7 Neve Shaanan St. Jerusalem 93708, Israel

Email: anerp@zahav.net.il