

Truffaut, François

(1932-1984)



1964 was a remarkable year in cinema for Lisbon. It hosted the premiere of Fernando Lopes' *Belarmino*, the first film to move out of the inner courtyard of the Portuguese comedy and show the street as a living space, where all the characters to whom *Belarmino* speaks live. But it was also in 1964 that Alain Boret and Pierre Kast filmed *Le Pas de Trois* and *Le Grain de Sable*, respectively, in the Portuguese capital. And François Truffaut his *La Peau Douce*.

Truffaut's Lisbon, however, is very different from Lopes'. It's a subjective city, always filmed through the emotional filter of Pierre Lachenay and his improbable lover who, finding themselves in neutral territory, engage in a love affair. It's a city that lives off interiors and transition spaces and ephemerality: the plane caught once, the room inhabited for a night and the restaurant which hosts a conversation, from which passion arises with a blazing and dark momentum, foretelling the tragic end of a melancholic and hurried relationship. We see little of Portugal: the Portela airport, the Avenida da Liberdade pavement, the Bica funicular, a tourist postcard of the Douro region, the Santa Justa Lift and the Algarve poster which guides the framing of the couple at the *A Quinta* restaurant. We see neither the picturesque scenery that brought Ray Milland to Portugal for his *Lisbon* (1956) or Henri Verneuil for *Les Amants du Tage* (1955), nor the fascinating white light which would, decades later, seduce Alain Tanner in *Dans la Ville Blanche* (1983) or Wim Wenders in *Lisbon Story* (1994). The search for a desolate, anonymous and banal image of the city and the use of imprecise characterising elements, such as the fact that all the inhabitants of the filmed city speak Brazilian Portuguese, are effective ways of portraying Nicole who, because of her occupation, is constantly travelling and, due to her temperament, in a permanent state of disorientation. It is, however, in this anodyne territory that desire is born, offering the Balzac expert an escape from his bourgeois, predictable life. Ironically, it was the oppressive and moralistic Portugal of 1964 that Truffaut chose to stage transgression, as if any alien space were the

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antithesis of the suffocating arena of Pierre Lachenay's Paris. Jean-André Fieschi, in his review of the film, published in the same month as the premiere in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, emphasizes the anonymity of Portugal staged by Truffaut, comparing it to the space-time disorientations in Bresson's *Pickpocket* (1959):

Chez Bresson, [...] le voyage du pickpocket se réduisait à une page de journal intime entre deux plans de gare de Lyon, contraction au profit du seul itinéraire "spirituel". Or, Truffaut filmant Lisbonne n'en montre guère plus que Bresson ne filmant rien du tout, et si Desailly se rend à Reims, c'est pour s'entendre reprocher de ne pas prendre le temps d'en goûter "le sourire". Lisbonne et Reims sont d'ailleurs des jalons essentiels du récit : si l'on y accompagne les personnages, c'est pour que le pittoresque disparaisse d'autant mieux d'avoir été un instant sollicité. La progression dramatique s'y résout donc en ouvertures et fermetures de portes - de voitures, d'ascenseurs, de chambres -, en va-et-vient, en gestes ébauchés, en une résolution analytique littérale qui constitue l'espace essentiel de la dédramatisation. (FIESCHI, 1964: 49)

André Téchiné takes this even further, arguing, in "D'une distance l'autre," that the entire film is an essay on distance. In it, he states that displacement is a product of the speed of the capitalist world, renewed by the growing technological revolution and symbolized, in *The Soft Skin*, by the flights between Paris and Lisbon and Lisbon and Paris. Pierre and Nicole's love story would thus be made up of quick, successive reboots of the relationship, dictated by the new geographical spaces anonymously occupied by the lovers:

Trajectoire se faisant et se défaisant, *La Peau Douce* nous parle de distance. [...] C'est non seulement un documentaire sur l'aviation mais sur la vitesse. Car l'abolition partielle ou plutôt apparente des distances géographiques renouvelle trop précipitamment les décors. Il faut à chaque escale recommencer une nouvelle approche, coordonner de nouvelles distances [...]. Et ce passage d'un lieu à l'autre (du Portugal à Paris via l'hôtel de la Colinière) comme de l'attente (après la conférence sur Gide) au repos (à la campagne) restitue une durée ni fragmentaire ni uniforme, mais proprement incertaine (les distances étant fausses.).

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(TÉCHINÉ: 1964: 50)

If travelling and displacement interested Truffaut in *La Peau Douce*, they would become even more interesting to him in his following film, *Fahrenheit 451* (1966), adapted from the homonymous Ray Bradbury novel. The project, financed by Anglo Enterprises and Vineyard Film, forced Truffaut to physically travel to Pinewood Studios in England, where he fully shot the film, whose narrative, however, was set in a fictional country with unknown geography. As in *La Peau Douce*, the exogenous setting does not aim to offer a socio-cultural portrayal, instead constructing a landscape that is *other*, exclusively diegetic and ultimately filtered by the subjectivity of the characters and, in this case, conceived with the language of science fiction. But the journey to England was also psychological and intellectual, forcing the director to work with foreign technicians and actors and, above all, in English, a language he barely mastered. The experience was painful and, from then on, except in the tour required by the geographically diverse narrative of *L'Histoire d'Adèle H.* (1975), which required trips to Barbados, The Channel Islands and Senegal, Truffaut always shot in France. However, two other different experiences would heavily mark the filmmaker's international life. The first was his participation as an actor in Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), whose epic and colossal nature Truffaut described in "En tournant pour Spielberg":

Je rentrai en France à l'automne pour commencer *L'Homme qui Aimait les Femmes* à Montpellier, mais je ne tardai pas à recevoir des nouvelles de Spielberg. Il avait besoin de moi en Inde, à Bombay, où je ne pus le rejoindre qu'en mars 1977 car il n'était pas question d'interrompre mon propre tournage. Toujours souriant, inchangé, infatigable, Spielberg organisa à toute allure une grande scène d'action avec les figurants et des villageois hindous. Alors il me dit que son film était au montage, que le puzzle s'ajustait bien mais qu'il aimerait encore tourner une scène ou deux, peut-être au Mexique, peut-être à Monument Valley, le désert popularisé par John Ford... Dans l'euphorie de ce très agréable tournage indien, je répondis que j'étais d'accord, que j'aimais décidément beaucoup l'idée que ce tournage serait sans fin. "Je me suis habitué, dis-je à Steven, à l'idée qu'il n'y aura jamais un film intitulé *Close Encounters* mais que vous êtes un type qui fait croire qu'il tourne un film et qui

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réussit à grouper beaucoup de gens autour de sa caméra pour accréditer cette immense blague. Je suis content de faire partie de cette blague et je suis prêt à vous rejoindre de temps à autre n'importe où dans le monde pour "faire semblant" de tourner un film avec vous. (TRUFFAUT, 1987: 47-48)

The second was his monumental interview with Alfred Hitchcock, which would lead to *Hitchcock/Truffaut*, still considered one of the most important works about the filmmaker who the French New Wave generation, which proudly self-identified as "hitchcocko-hawksienne," so highly praised.

Displacement and travelling were, lastly, commonly featured elements in Truffaut's approach to his relationship with orphanhood and emotional distance, which the filmmaker knew well as a result of his rebellious youth and his physical and intellectual adoption by André Bazin. Thus, even when the movement in space does not include passing through foreign landscape, it is always, in Truffaut's films, a search for a place of antithesis, of denial of the claustrophobia felt at the starting point. This is patent in the escape from the flood in *Une Histoire d'Eau* (1961), his only film co-directed with with Jean-Luc Godard, and above all, in the constant fleeing of Antoine Doinel, which started in the last scene of *Les Quatre Cents Coups* (1959) and only ended twenty years later in *L'Amour en Fuite* (1979).

However, Truffaut's travelling to Portugal is not only significant in the context of the director's work, but also crucial to the encouragement of the awakening of the New Wave in Portugal. In his article "Lettre de Lisbonne," Pierre Kast explains how the shooting of *La Peau Douce* was essential to the start of the movement led by Paulo Rocha, Fernando Lopes, Fernando Matos Silva, António-Pedro Vasconcelos and José Fonseca e Costa:

Un petit pays. Peu de salles. Peu de ressources. Une production cinématographique annuelle jusqu'alors très faible. Puis il se passe quelque chose. Un faisceau de circonstances: un film français se tourne au Portugal, avec des moyens artisanaux, un jeune homme, sorti de l'IDHEC, mêlé à cette production, décide de faire des films à d'autres jeunes gens, ses amis, avec des budgets limités. Résultat, il naît une nouvelle vague portugaise. En un an, cinq films

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terminés, entrepris, ou en cours. Le premier film de la série vient de sortir, avec un grand succès. La position du jeune producteur est consolidée. Il a l'intention, et les moyens, de continuer, l'intention de résister à la tentation d'importer, d'implanter des superproductions du type américain, sachant qu'à long terme, il en périrait. Un bilan finalement exemplaire. (KAST, 1964: 41)

In this Portuguese letter, published in issue 153 of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, the French film is, naturally, *La Peau Douce*, the “jeune homme, sorti de l'IDHEC” António da Cunha Telles, the “autres jeunes gens” the Cinema Novo generation, and the “premier film” Paulo Rocha's *Os Verdes Anos*. Contact with Truffaut during the shoot was precious for Cunha Telles and helped him to import, in an intelligent and transfiguring fashion, the aesthetics of the Nouvelle Vague, which the French auteur had founded five years earlier in Paris alongside Godard, Chabrol, Rivette, and Rohmer. Additionally, it allowed for the appropriation and adaptation of mechanisms of social and political criticism which, despite being concealed, shaped the tone of the Cinema Novo films before the Carnation Revolution, from *Belarmino* (1964) to *Perdido por Cem...* (1973).

### Travels

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### Quotations

[Video]

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