National College of Art and Design Faculty of Design,
Department of Visual Communications

Sex, Lies and Power: *Dangerous Liaisons* From Laclos to Frears

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is entirely my own work, and that it has not been submitted as an exercise at this, or any other College.

Signed: Karen Seery

(Karen Seery)

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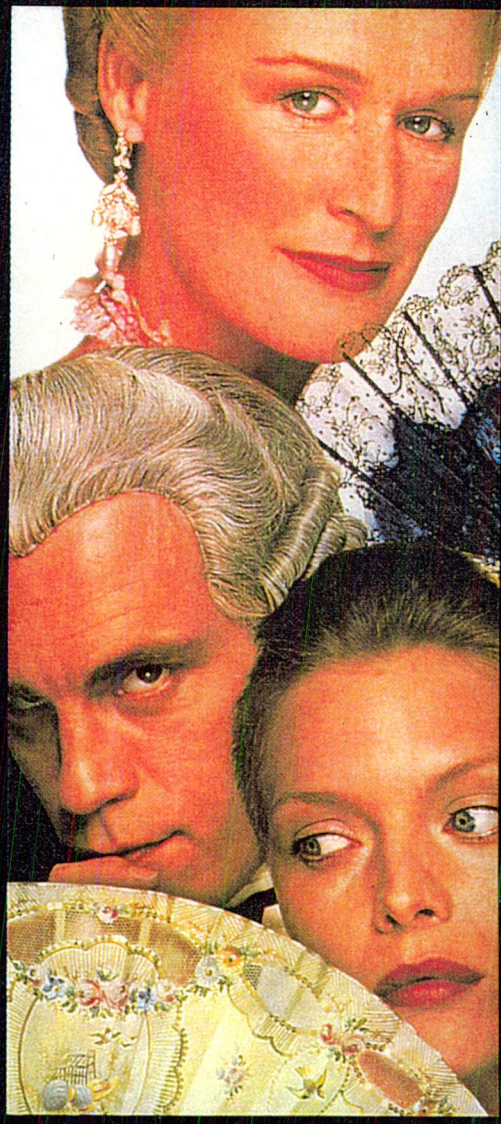

Dangerous Liaisons

INTRODUCTION

Choderlos de Laclos is reputed to have confided in Count Tilly, whilst in London after the outbreak of the French Revolution of the disillusionment he felt in "studying a profession which could lead him neither to great advancement nor to great consideration," that he resolved "to write a book which would stand out of the common way, which would make a stir and be heard of in the world after he had left it" (Aldington, 1987, p.4).

Indeed were it not for his novel *Les Liaisons dangereuses* Laclos would most certainly have been forgotten. However it will be made apparent from the reading of Chapter 1 that Laclos's motives run deeper than pure sensationalism.

There was an interesting experiment once proposed by Jean-Luc Godard. He suggested it would be fascinating to have a number of different filmmakers attempt to adapt the same story in order to view how the results varied, and how different directors shaped the material. Of course, no one took Godard too seriously, but over the years we have seen how different filmmakers have interpreted the same plotline, which is exactly the treatment Laclos's novel has received over the years.

Chapter 1 of this thesis will examine Laclos's motives and object in writing the novel, plot subsequent adaptations of it, and focus in on the Stephen Frears film adaptation *Dangerous Liaisons,* the most successful both commercially and critically to date.

Chapter 2 gives a brief background to Frears and gives an in-depth exploration of *Dangerous Liaisons* from motifs to techniques, themes and characterisation.

Chapter 3 starts with a discussion of Frears's motives and objectives in making *Dangerous Liaisons.* Its contemporary relevance in the 1980s-90s is brought to

the fore whilst linking it back to its setting of pre-revolutionary France.

In chapter 4 the author will discuss certain conclusions personal, in relation to the novel and the film which were arrived at through the course of this thesis.

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CHAPTER 1

Setting the scene

1.1 Laclos: his motivations and objectives

Many studies have been made on Choderlos de Laclos the author of *Les Liaisons dangereuses.* This chapter will give the reader a brief introduction to the man and his greatest work as a means of bringing to the fore its inspirational effects on playwrights and filmmakers alike.

April 1782 saw the publication of Laclos's epistolary novel *Les Liaisons dangereuses* meet with a chorus of disapproval. Despite public outrage and denunciation the novel was a huge success with twelve separate editions appearing that same year. Marie-Antoinette, it was rumoured, had her own personal copy.

It was undoubtedly the strong element of scandal attached to the novel which ensured its success. Another, perhaps more obvious reason for this scandal, was that "it was regarded as a roman a clef" (Stone, 1961, p.9). The freedom with which these "keys" to the novel were circulated led to many contradictions, but above all provided opportunities for malicious gossip to be spread like wild fire. In the absence of any conclusive evidence, the theory that Laclos drew his characters from life has never been satisfactorily settled.

Perhaps the most important question to be asked of the novel is, what were Laclos's motives and object in writing *Les Liaisons dangereuses* ?

Laclos, an obscure artillery officer, and a man of thwarted ambitions, started writing *Les Liaisons dangereuses* at the age of forty. Perhaps this was part of his

revenge, in an attempt to lash out at the heart of the *ancien régime* which had condemned him to a life of obscurity.

But for his novel he would have been completely forgotten.

> At first sight *Les Liaisons dangereuses* seems a perfect example of how real ambitions can be sublimated through imaginative literature...(Thody, 1991, p.3).

There is very little evidence to support the view that *Les Liaisons dangereuses* was written as an immoral book, much less to support the idea of Valmont actually being a self-portrait of Laclos himself. In view of Laclos's ideas and writings championing women's issues, and attempts to elevate their place in society, a moral reading of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* comes to light (Coward, 1995).

> The strongest support for a 'moral' reading of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* is nevertheless to be found in the text itself, and especially in the way the atmosphere changes as the plot develops. Initially, all seems gaiety and charm, and the reader easily forgets, in his admiration for the wit and intelligence of the two main characters, how cruel their behaviour really is (Thody, 1991, p.5).

1.2 The Novel

How topical is *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, and more specifically how up-to-date is the reader of the time encouraged to believe it is?

It would appear from the footnote to L189 that the letters were not released for publication until after the death of Mme de Rosemonde. This would suggest that the reader of 1782 is meant to recognise that the correspondences have dated somewhat. Events recounted in the letters could be presumed to have happened any time between 1768-1780 (Byrne, 1989).

By dating the letters pre-1782, Laclos could fend off criticism of his two main protagonists. Valmont and Merteuil were both obvious products of the Enlightenment [1], who associated **reason** with right and **emotion** with error (Coward, 1995). By saying that their debacle took place before the rise of sensibility, he was ensuring that his novel was not an insult to his contemporaries.

It is undoubtedly ironic that the novel which was out-of-date tonally and stylistically became all the more popular and successful because of that same fact, thus proving its topicality. Laclos had hit a nerve. He had been...

> honest to the point of cynicism about a great deal that was commonly concealed behind elegance, refinement, and sentiment, it is not surprising that it was found to be a viciously distorted caricature of the truth (Stone, 1961, p.10).

Although *Les Liaisons dangereuses* is is an erotic novel it is also a type of psychological love-novel because the main interest in the novel is directed towards the analysis of the characters, rather than the narrative of events. It is suggested that Laclos's characters all become unfortunate and unhappy, because they have all erred by a greater or less departure from the Rousseauesque *laws of nature*. Laclos, being a disciple of Rousseau, would have us consider his characters somewhat in this way. Even Valmont's name evokes his libertine energy ('par monts et par vaux') and highlights his contradictory tendencies to high sensibility or low sensuality. He devotes his life to the art of seduction preferring to feed his vanity through triumphs rather than enjoy true sentiment (Aldington, 1987; Byrne, 1989).

'The malice of Mme de Merteuil (the all seeing ('oeil') hammer ('martel') of the male sex) (Byrne, 1989, p.3) is equally the result of a perversion of natural sentiment through a wrong education and the marriage of convenience.

> These two libertines plan revenge, and indeed the whole plot could be described as a series of variations on this

> theme. There is Merteuil's revenge on her ex-lover Gercourt through the corruption of Cécile, a plan which is ultimately foiled since Cécile does not marry... There is Valmont's revenge on Mme de Volanges, through her daughter, for warning Tourvel against him and there is his implacable victimisation of Mme de Tourvel, whose seduction amounts to the retaliation of libertine against Virtue personified ("vertu", and the English "True Love" are approximate anagrams of her name). Finally there is the settling of accounts between the two rivals for the humiliating preference each has for another less 'worthy' partner, an outcome which appears inevitable when they run short of victims other than themselves (Byrne, 1989, p.3).

This may be a somewhat simplistic overview of plot and characters, but it suffices as an introduction, to a novel which continues to challenge. Even when the reader has found what he thinks is the correct interpretation, "*Les Liaisons dangereuses* still leaves him free to decide what bearing this reading may have on his own problems and situation" (Thody, 1991, p.55).

This is because Laclos presents us the reader, "not with a set of answers but with a variety of questions, and it is in this respect that it is most truly a book of enlightenment" (Thody, 1991, p.55).

In the liberal climate of the 1970s, Laclos's novel finally dislodged Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Heloise* as the greatest of eighteenth-century French novels. 'Classic' status was confirmed when Laclos became a prescribed author for French university students, and more significantly, Laclos passed an essential modern test: it was discovered that his book had all the necessary requirements to be transformed to other media (Coward, 1995).

1.3 The Road to Stardom: *adaptation*

The opportunities for speculation and interpretation of argument are responsible in no small way for the obvious attraction which *Les Liaisons dangereuses* has held for 20th century adaptation by playwrights and filmmakers alike.

There have been several attempts to transfer Laclos's novel to a different medium. Altogether there have been five separate attempts to adapt *Les Liaisons dangereuses* for the theatre between 1952 and 1984. In 1974 there was even an 'epistolary opera' made from Laclos's novel.

Laclos entered the cinematic frame in 1960 with Roger Vadim's screen version of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. Not unlike the novel it was challenged in the courts and denied an export license.

However it was the success of Christopher Hampton's highly acclaimed play *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1984) (the fifth and most recent theatre adaptation, upon which Stephen Frears based his film), which was in marked contrast to "the relative failure of these earlier attempts to transfer Laclos's novel to a different medium" (Thody, 1991, p.63). Milos Forman's *Valmont* (1991), though less well received than *Dangerous Liaisons*, served to maintain the momentum.

"It is rare that adaptations and continuations, like fakes and forgeries, do not show their age sooner or later" (Coward, 1995). This is certainly true of Vadim's version, *Les Liaison dangereuses* which now seems firmly rooted in its period.

Vadim's Valmont and Merteuil belong to the international jet set, pursuing their victims in the swinging Paris and fashionable ski-resorts of 1960 (Thody, 1991). The contemporary setting in which Vadim has set the film is almost so modern that it verges on vulgarity, completely destroying the atmosphere of leisure so essential to the novel. Valmont even has a job!!!

Milos Forman's *Valmont* was the second film within twelve months based on Laclos's text. It appeared in the cinema in 1989, having been pipped at the post by the extremely successful earlier version, *Dangerous Liaisons* by

Stephen Frears.

Forman, one of the most successful directors of our time whose credits include two Academy Award winners, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Amadeus,* surprisingly enough produced a far less 'commercial' film than Frears. In the wake of the Frears success, *Valmont* flopped and did not go on video release. It is now impossible to acquire a copy. As it has never been viewed by a wide public audience it has not been subjected to the same critical analysis as Vadim's or Frears's versions making it difficult to assess how well it has aged. The over riding consensus (Kael, Maltin) is that *Dangerous Liaisons* outshines *Valmont* .

1.4 Frears and Laclos

> Laclos's modern mouthpieces must of course, be judged on their own merits, for they do not pretend to be faithful translators or guardians of sacred memory (Coward, 1995, p.xvi).

It is interesting to note that it is *Dangerous Liaisons,* which is by far the most faithful in letter and spirit of the three film attempts to re-create the novel, which has been the most successful, both commercially and critically. *Dangerous Liaisons* may be termed the most faithful adaptation to the novel, it does not slavishly follow the detail of the novel. Frears makes no secret of this. In the title sequence, the film is presented as an adaptation of an adaptation, since it is described there as "based on the play adapted from the novel."

Christopher Hampton a successful playwright, should also be credited for his skills as an adaptor **(1)** for overcoming the difficulty that presented itself through the sheer volume of letters in the novel and accepting that Valmont and Mme de Merteuil were going to have to meet face to face, and **(2)** for transferring the text of the novel into concise dialogue, thus enabling audi-

ences to understand quite complex ideas.

Laclos was fascinated by the theatre, indeed the novel is highly theatrical. Throughout the novel, Merteuil and Valmont refer to themselves as being on the great stage of the world. Laclos also favours metaphors drawn from the theatre. Merteuil plays 'roles' and wears 'masks'. Not only are situations stage-managed and roles played to the hilt, the letters are monologues which form a dialogue of sorts. The novel consequently already has a dramatic framework for the adaptation to elaborate.

One of the most fundamental and indeed inevitable differences between *Dangerous Liaisons* and *Les Liaisons dangereuses* is that Laclos makes Valmont and Mme de Merteuil meet only once, when he surprises her with Danceny (151).

> For the rest of the time, because *Les Liaisons dangereuses* is above all else a novel in letter form, their only contact is through the written word. This emphasises the essential intellectual nature of their relationship, which is one where what is said, and how it is said, is more important than what is done (Thody, 1991, p.64).

Coward argues that the written word is more effective than any conversational exchange. Replacing spontaneity with tactical considerations, allowing time to reflect, to react, and to re-group. But perhaps the film's face-to-face encounters between the characters is effective in introducing the spontaneity required to give depth of feeling to the characters and film alike, while maintaining the attentions of audiences more inclined towards *Rambo* than *Gone With The Wind*.

These face-to-face encounters in the film take the place to some extent of letters in the novel (or of telephone conversations in Vadim's version). Letters still play a significant part in the film; a letter is read in the title sequence to reveal *Dangerous Liaisons* and Valmont carries a bundle of letters on his person tied

with lace while duelling with Danceny near the end of the film. But a significant problem arises through the use of letters, in relation to comparing the plots of the film and novel. The invariably damning blow which these letters will level against Mme Merteuil must be considerably lessened due to the fact that L81, the most damning letter for Mme Merteuil (the description how she invented herself and the war she has waged against men), has been converted into an on-screen tête-à-tête.

1.5 Filleting The Novel

Because of the time constraints on films, the running time for *Dangerous Liaisons* being 120 mins, changes were made in order to simplify the plot and focus on the main characters and their interaction. *Dangerous Liaisons* did not have the temporal luxury of recent, 'prestige' period adaptation such as *Martin Chozelworth* and *Pride & Prejudice* produced by the BBC. The film has to fillet the novel, elements are inevitably sacrificed, and some amusing and interesting anecdotes are removed completely or modified.

One regrettable sacrifice at the expense of a more complete understanding of Merteuil's character was the Prévan affair.[2] Prévan's encounter with Merteuil does not feature at all in the film. Unfortunately the ironic view of society's hypocrisy in the different treatment it accords to Prévan and Merteuil is sacrificed. The Prévan affair clearly demonstrates the unfair advantage which men have in the war of the sexes (see L81) and society's toleration of the double standard: a different sexual morality and conception of honour for men and women.

Hampton also takes an "odd but effective textual liberty of substituting the Vicomtesse de M*** with Mme de Volanges , taking Valmont as her lover for the night in preference to Vressac or her husband (L 71)" (Byrne, 1989, p.134)

to great dramatic effect. This is quite a plausible lie for him to fabricate because he is incensed after finding out that Cécile's mother Mme de Volanges has been poisoning Tourvel's mind against him. Hence, by recounting the episode to Cécile he may be hoping that Cécile will lose respect for her mother, making his task easier. As it is, Cécile finds the idea funny and revels at the thought of being a successful sexual rival to her mother. This liberty adds to the wit and enjoyment of the film. The decision to have Valmont end his relationship with Tourvel face-to-face, instead of dismissing her from a distance by sending her a letter dictated by Merteuil, intensifies the drama, making it one of the most powerful scenes in the film.

One disappointing result of the time constraint is the length of time it took Valmont to seduce Tourvel. In the novel, Tourvel's seduction did not come about without considerable effort, and cajolement through persuasive letters being sent and indeed returned to Valmont in many cases. Would a woman who is presented to us as virtue personified fall so quickly and with so little effort on Valmont's part, who is widely known to be a cad as she does in *Dangerous Liaisons* ?

This discussion of changes or additions, successful or otherwise, leads us to the ending of both the play and the film, which differ from that of the novel, and in turn the play and film endings differ from each other. Because conclusions about themes, characters and motives are drawn from the endings of each, they are the subject of further analysis (Chapter 3). It is enough to say at this point that there is no court case to be lost in either the play or film, nor small-pox to afflict Merteuil after her social disgrace as in the novel.[3] The ending of the play leans more explicitly towards a political theme, with the film opting for the theatrical imagery of a mask, neatly combining elements of private treachery and public performance.

Footnotes to Chapter 1

1 The Enlightenment was the 18th century philosophy emphasising reason and individualism over tradition and romanticism (Oxford Dictionary).

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2 The fate of the three young women in Prévan's affair (see L79) and the inconsistencies in society noted by Mme de Volanges is further evidence of how heavily the cards are stacked against women in the eighteenth-century.

> The Prévan affair is an example of what Merteuil is attempting to do in her private revolt, and it is nothing less than a total reversal of the sexual norm in affairs. Women are timid, docile, sensible - very well, she will pretend to be so. She acts towards Prévan as he has decided to act towards her. He thinks he is 'having' her whereas in reality he is the real prey and she 'has' him (and 'has him on'). He thinks he is attacking. She presents all the right symptoms and deceives him into thinking that he is getting close to the prey, but she is simply luring him on. She upsets the usual table of values and reverses the terms: what is conventionally 'defeat' for the woman becomes her 'victory' (Byrne, 1989, p.135).

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3 The ending of the novel might be regarded as excessively moral. After the publication of her letters Mme de Merteuil is publicly humiliated at the Comedie Italienne (L 173), as well as suffering the loss of her lawsuit in which she loses all her money. On top of such humiliation Laclos punishes her with a violent attack of smallpox which ravishes her face, leading to the remark by an unnamed marquis, her soul is shown upon her face she takes her diamonds and flees to Holland (see L175).

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CHAPTER 2

Dangerous Liaisons in Close-Up

2.1 Background to Frears

Stephen Frears was already a skilled adaptor before *Dangerous Liaisons*, having worked in both television and film. He is modest to a fault, continually playing down his talent as a director. The idea that his films are products of chance and not his keen eye and inherent understanding of his medium is to my mind is not credible.

Perhaps he is a popular director with writers because he is faithful to their work. Yet Frears maintains his own individual tone in subtle ways throughout his work. He is an extremely intelligent filmmaker with an eye for a good script (a talent in itself, and one which he has fine tuned over the past few years). He chooses those scripts in which certain preoccupations of his arise, and enjoys making films about contemporary Britain mainly with a highly political undertone.

Indeed, Frears is best known outside of Britain film circles for *My Beautiful Laundrette, Prick Up Your Ears* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* which one might feel bare little relation to the decadent French aristocracy of Choderlos de Laclos's 1782 novel. Or do they? At first sight, Frears may appear to be an unlikely candidate to direct a costume picture. As Acheson puts it, "Stephen is used to making ghetto films." Laclos's novel is one of the most vicious and erotic intrigues ever written. "Given his love of marginal society, it may be assumed that Frears might feel at home in such a harvest of pain, perversity and sexual treachery." (Hunter, 1988, p.27)

He received a lot of criticism for not casting the original (British) cast from the R.S.C. production. But producers and director alike wanted a fresh start. They chose American actors in an effort to overcome the problem of remoteness which can accompany costume films, he wanted to make a popular film in the best sense. It is clear that Frears made this film with a view to appealing to a wide audience, *Dangerous Liaisons* was clearly intended to be seen in Kansas as well as California, and in Birmingham as well as Berlin.

2.2 The Look

Both Frears and Rousselot were less concerned with creating a period film and more interested in the story and the characters. They realised that the people who lived in France at that time, had no real concern for or awareness of the period, just as we have little or no concern for our period. It followed that during discussions about the look of the film a conscious decision was taken to try *not* to show the period. This was achieved by keeping the light off the walls and off 18th century *objets d'art* in an effort to mute the ornamentality of the surroundings (Lee, 1989).

Phillippe Rousselot (Director of Photography) added a slightly darker filter to the top of the screen which acts as a black cloud throughout. Significantly, this motif is first introduced to coincide with Valmont's agreement to Merteuil's request for the first time in the film. In setting the scene on the staircase the use of the dark filter becomes more apparent; Valmont is descending the staircase, being sent down to meet his fate. The motif is one of doom, a 'black cloud' which hangs over Valmont in this and future scenes when he enacts her commands. It illustrates the pervasive power which is available to her because she has access to all the letters being sent back and forth between the characters.

The action of the book has been compared by critics to a ballet or dance which has been carried over into the film. The notion of dance is most obvious in Valmont's first attempt to seduce Tourvel in her bedroom at the chateau.

The action of this scene is presented like a dance. They begin to circle one another, as Valmont tries to pursue her the camera is also turning about them. A 'waltz' would not be quite the right description to use, it's more like two people holding hands and spinning each other around at speed until one of them gets dizzy and falls, which is exactly what happens. "They're motionless for a moment. Then Valmont releases her hand and puts his arm around her. As he does so, her eyes suddenly go dead and she collapses sideways, obliging him to catch her" (Hampton, 1989, p.45).

Although music and tapestries collide to some effect in *Dangerous Liaisons* Frears was determined from the outset that funds would not be wasted trying to compete with *Barry Lyndon* and *Amadeus* for sumptuousness. So, *Dangerous Liaisons* rejected the period fashions of the 1780s in favour of those some 20 years earlier, largely because the rather grandiose, billowing wigs of the former period make filming nigh impossible at close quarters (Grant, 1989).

Because Frears homes in on the human drama, the costumes and decor do not overwhelm the screen. As a result we are given a period film with present tense immediacy which is often a rarity. Even so, *Dangerous Liaisons* is an extremely manicured film, nothing is left unaided, from nature to the characters themselves (Bergan, 1989; Rainer, 1989).

Although Frears made it clear to Acheson that the costumes should not take centre stage: "I don't want people coming out to see the embroidery" (Hunter, 1988, p.29). The costume cannot be avoided, partly because he has shot most of his film in close-up. The characters look as if they had been dressed by

Gainsborough. The costumes themselves do not exist merely superficially, they actually serve a thematic purpose, they reflect certain moods. There is evidence of a Peaches-and-Cream motif as well as a Scarlet Lady motif, (Merteuil in a splendid red gown at the opera as she way-lays Cécile). Valmont is ironically and mockingly dressed in purple, the official dress of a cardinal, after deflowering Cécile.

Perhaps the most important expression function of costumes can be seen in the opening scenes of *Dangerous Liaisons* where we are introduced to the aristocratic protagonists. The camera cuts back and forth, comparing the elaborate dressing rituals of men and women, circa 1780. The servants ready the two protagonists, dressing them for their roles like a couple of samurais getting fitted for the fight. Powder, panniers, a fresh manicure, jewels, a sword: detail by careful detail, they are dressed in rigid layers that cover the bodies they in turn plan to use for particular purposes (Kissin, 1989; West, 1989).

In this film of faces, one device used over and over again is the mirror. Hampton is dealing with vanity, both physical and psychological at its grandest. Frears and Rousselot shot several scenes in a corridor of small mirrors. Both saw the story-telling opportunities in having all the facets of Merteuil and Valmont reflected around them. Frears surrounds the pair suitably with mirrors because they especially enjoy watching both themselves and their victims as they squirm on their pins like gorgeous butterflies (Kissin, 1989).

The opening scene of the film shows Merteuil admiring and enjoy her face in the mirror. She examines herself; critically but not without satisfaction. The final scene of the film shows her in an altogether different light. Their final approving glance to the mirror is actually into the camera lens which now becomes their mirror. The viewer never sees the mirror and from this moment on is placed in a voyeuristic stance throughout the film. Their approving gaze

into the mirror also invites our approval.

Mirrors are also used very effectively in an attempt to show deceit. This is demonstrated when Mme de Merteuil tells Mme de Volanges about the dangerous liaison which has sprung up between Cécile and Danceny. Valmont is in the room listening to the conversation. Volanges is unaware of his presence. He stands on a chair to look over the screen at Merteuil to convey his displeasure at the turn of events. Valmont has to withdraw, but realises he is now visible in one of Merteuil's enormous mirrors and is obliged to dive full-length to escape detection. This close call shows how the mirror almost betrayed their devious plan.

After Valmont's seduction of Cécile, Merteuil goes to the Chateau to comfort and advise her. Merteuil walks over to the mirror, in front of which she removes her hat; and adds with a sudden melancholy, "You'll find the shame is like the pain...You only feel it once" (Hampton, 1989, p.38). The audience can recognise the truth when we see her face in the mirror. The distorted mirror emulates the faults of her malicious intelligence and unprincipled behaviour.

Again we see the mirror at work when Valmont surprises Merteuil with Danceny. The *mirror on the wall* reveals Merteuil's true reaction, which is one of horror and disgust to the event, however she may try to disguise it in what she says.

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Dangerous Liaisons calls to mind the famous line from *Sunset Boulevard*: "We had faces then." This 18th century story of love, lust, power and deceit is played out on the faces of the actors. Even Rousselot admits that there is hard-

ly a wide shot in the entire film (Lee, 1989).

There is a lot of movement in the film, the camera moves and the actors move. The direction of the light is always kept constant on the faces of the actors, emphasising the fact that it is a film of faces.

Although Laclos's text does not present any evidence that Merteuil should be played by an older woman, Make-up artists did little to disguise the fact that Close is a good deal older than Pfeiffer. But, there is no doubt that it gives an added dimension to the film that of an older woman determined not to lose her lover to the younger and more physically attractive rival of Mme de Tourvel (Michelle Pfeiffer).

Pfeiffer is touching in a very difficult role. She convinces us of the sincerity of her piousness, and yet she is never so beautiful as when, weepy, she sways to the Vicomte's seductions, her make-up wiped away from her eyes by tears as her eyes are closing.

* * * * *

Dangerous Liaisons is one of the least sumptuous and indulgent costume dramas ever filmed, which makes it very accessible. In order to focus attention on the interpersonal dramas rather than letting it wander into the world of interiors, Frears relies on the possibilities of the tight close-up. He explains that before shooting he watched *Double Indemnity* a lot and while filming he decided that "as it is a film based largely on what people say and the ironies that echo from what they say, I came to the conclusion that close-ups were the shots that worked" (Bergan, 1989, p.20).

Dangerous Liaisons is a good example of the strength of close-ups. The film is laid out in a string of single shots with just enough wide shots to set the action

and give some flavour of pre-revolutionary France.

It could be argued that instead of saving the big climactic close-up, he uses it overbearingly in every major scene. However, Frears is perfectly justified by the end result. The film is given an intensity through the use of close-ups and it takes on a very claustrophobic atmosphere. Valmont and Merteuil feel superior, invulnerable, but in the end they become trapped in their emotional isolation. The big close-up by its nature isolates the characters within themselves. By choosing close ups the director is in effect saying: this film is not about what goes on between these characters, but what goes on within them.

Valmont and Merteuil are by their very nature manipulative and seductive. Big close-ups not only isolate, but can make the viewer feel manipulated, since the director is telling us what to look at. In this story of manipulation, close-ups on actors seem not contrived by the director but rather by the characters themselves, as they stage-manage their own scenes. We are seeing what the manipulative characters would want us to see, and it works just fine (Boorstin, 1990).

Boorstin argues that there is a price to pay in the insistence of big close-ups, namely that they compartmentalise each character's emotions, making them calculated and selfishly personal. Finally when real contact is supposed to take place we don't feel it. "The director's mix captures every nuance of private feeling. But it cannot convince us of the impromptu truth of shared emotion"(Boorstin, 1990, p.99).

But, the author would have to disagree with this statement simply because the close-ups throughout the film have focused us on the faces of the characters. We are now so used to seeing their mask of deceit that it is not hard to identify true feelings slipping through when the mask is temporarily dropped.

The inner struggle between virtue and desire is what the big close-up shows best. Hampton and Frears concentrate on the power struggle that lies at the heart of their tale, using constant close-ups of the characters' faces to reveal emotions that pass unobserved by others around them. Close explains that her performance demanded an acute intensity and concentration. The only time she lets her character's real feelings appear on her face is when she knows no other character is watching her. "The audience is privy to those moments and nobody else, ...there was no other way for me to show my feelings except in certain close-ups." Close-ups gave her the link with the audience that she needed. (Morrish, 1989, p.16)

Theatre plays a prominent role in *Dangerous Liaisons.* Not only do several important and telling scenes happen in its confines but it also has a symbolic meaning. Madame de Merteuil adores the theatre, and visits it frequently, yet ironically it is at the theatre that Merteuil receives her final humiliation. She and Valmont could even be said to use their affairs as a 'stage' living only for the applause which their exploits can evoke. They are never allowed, for all the freedom which they seem to enjoy, to be witty purely on their own account, everything they do and say is premeditated, as Mme de Volanges's brief summary of Valmont's persona points out, "Monsieur le Vicomte de Valmont...is conspicuously charming,never opens his mouth without first calculating what damage he can do" (Hampton, 1989, p.4).

Their quite genuine sense of superiority has also led them to consider each other as the only audience whose applause is worth having. Theirs is a secret relationship, a covert one whose secrecy breeds an air of danger, as society would take a very dim view of their liaison. So they depend on each other to recognise the other's achievements and to receive their much desired applause and praise which they are both equally reluctant to give...

MERTEUIL: I don't think I've congratulated you on your revenge.

VALMONT: So you know.
MERTEUIL: Oh yes. And I believe from now on you'll find her door unbolted...I am grateful, of course: but that would have been almost insultingly simple. One does not applaud the tenor for clearing his throat (Hampton, 1989, p.39).

"They regard themselves as manipulators *par excellence;* their adoring victims buff their vanity to a high shine" (Rainer, 1989, p.74). Vanity and the need for applause are intertwined. Mme de Merteuil needs Valmont as a vain woman needs her looking glass and her admirers. Victories would scarcely be worth having if they were not there to recognise each other's achievements.

2.3 Epistolary Form

Laclos most probably chose the epistolary form for his novel because in his age of correspondence tales told in letter form were immensely popular. Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Heloise* and Richardson's *Clarrisa*, were both written in epistolary form. Laclos ardently admired the two great novelists, but unlike them he managed to keep most of the letters down to a reasonable length. In doing so he never allows the pace to slacken (Coward, 1995).

The epistolary technique certainly gives Laclos a platform to show his masterful handling of detail. But all the time he remains a supremely absent author. By removing himself from events, the reader is denied any opportunity of hearing Laclos's voice and consequently any way of knowing where his own loyalties lie (Coward, 1995). This all adds to the growing sense of ambiguity which the reader is already feeling, never quite certain where Laclos is coming from. Laclos leaves the doorway open to many different interpretations, very enjoyable reading and challenging analysis.

The novel is constructed with the almost faultless precision of a mathematician. The letters are organised in such a way that the reader acquires a three

dimensional view of character and incident. Their arrangement also generates drama, irony, and a generous measure of black comedy. The plot hangs on these letters and it is through them that the story itself is so ingeniously unfolded and the interest so well maintained (Coward, 1995).

A true test of a novelist's power must lie in the creation of characters. Laclos's rendering of the characters is so vivid that they became real people to us. Indeed his characters exist only through the medium in which they express themselves and by artificially varying the style of letter for each character he gives them their own distinctive voices.

It is little wonder that Frears asked Hampton to restore the novel's essential (and deeply voyeuristic) narrative device of telling the story through the exchange of letters, which he accomplished with voice-overs.

In the same way that Valmont and Mme de Merteuil can satisfy their vanity only by exchanging letters, the plot works itself out only because the characters write to one another. It has already been observed that it is because Valmont discovers Mme de Volange's letters to Tourvel, that he decides to seduce Cécile, and because he then intercepts Mme de Tourvel's letters that he knows the time is ripe for his final attack. It is also because Tourvel gives Valmont permission to write to her, that we can see how he puts into practice his intention of gradually forcing her from one position to another, ...

> **VALMONT**: You see, I have no intention of breaking down her prejudices. I want her to believe in God and virtue and the sanctity of marriage and still not be able to stop herself. I want the excitement of watching her betray everything that's most important to her. Surely you understand that. I thought betrayal was your favourite word (Hampton, 1989, p.8).

...until she is almost compelled to surrender merely because of the sense of obligation which he has managed to impose on her.

However, it is also the use of the epistolary form in the film which creates problems for viewers with a knowledge of Laclos text. In the novel Valmont uses Merteuil's 'dictated letter' to break with Tourvel (Chapter 2). The damning effect of this letter has been somewhat diminished in *Dangerous Liaisons* because a mere suggestion by Merteuil takes its place.

It is also because Merteuil has 'written' so much about herself that she is so irretrievably ruined, for without the letters that he has so carefully retained, Valmont would have been able to prove little against her. Through the absence of Merteuil's written conception of herself his evidence is less damning but damning all the same. The proof that Valmont must also procure for Merteuil of his seduction of Tourvel must be written.

The Marquise de Merteuil and Valmont always do in fact write their letters for themselves in the sense that they always have some ulterior motive, and are interested in other people's preferences only in so far as these provide an opening for flattery. Laclos never forgets that the same letter can take on a very different meaning according to the person reading it and context in which it is read (Thody,1991).

However, no such attempt is made to translate the multiple viewpoint of the letter novel into visual terms on screen. It is probably just as well, since the average film-goer will surely find that a continual effort of concentration is needed in order to follow the details of the plot, without having to suffer the added complication of a fragmented view (Byrne, 1989).

Hence, the epistolary form of the novel fulfils Valmont's and Merteuil's need to communicate with one another and deliberately prolongs their contest for supremacy. In the novel...

Valmont meets Mme de Merteuil only once, when he sur-

> prises her with Danceny, and this meeting immediately produces the quarrel which ends the book. It thereby shows, in retrospect, how important their physical separation has been on a deeper, symbolic level, and how right Laclos is to keep them apart until then (Thody, 1991, p.22).

In the film they have met face-to-face several times up until the point of surprising her with Danceny. It was surely difficult for the film to prolong the contest yet bringing them face to face, whilst at the same time avoid bringing their relationship to crisis point and having it settled one way or the other. Nevertheless, the scene has the same effect, it serves to underline Valmont's anger at her after having been pushed aside and made to look foolish by such an unworthy rival, and sparking the declaration of war by the two old advisories.

One of the final and most striking images we are left with in *Dangerous Liaisons* is Valmont lying in the snow dying. Blood is running from his side staining the snow around his body; the camera pulls up. Valmont is now centre frame, his red blood stands out against an expanse of white snow. Is this image actually a letter: the snow paper, his blood the seal, melting away to reveal the secrets kept inside?

This scene is also responsible for the main departure the film takes from both the play and the novel: Valmont handing over his letters from Merteuil in an effort to ultimately defeat her: *The Pen is Mightier Than The Sword!!!*

2.4 Characterisation

The details of the novel fit together with "an economy and elegance which bear witness to his prowess in mathematics and strategy, ... this economy is particularly noticeable in the complete absence of superfluous characters" (Thody, 1991, p.18). It is not surprising then that *Dangerous Liaisons* has a fast

pace. Laclos's novel is certainly concise and fast moving but nevertheless spans almost 500 pages. Realistically it had to be pared down because of the confines of film. In doing so Frears gets to the very essence of the novel...the relationship between Valmont and Merteuil.

This section focuses on the two central protagonists Valmont and Merteuil, both in relation to others, and then in turn will examine their complex relationship.

2.5 Valmont

The character of the Vicomte de Valmont played by John Malkovich, is written as Merteuil's perfect masculine counterpart, her other self perhaps. Valmont accomplishes brazenly everything that Merteuil must hide. His reputation for amorous intrigue actually enhances his social acceptability.

Valmont fulfils his libertine mission, "he transforms the ingenue into a high class sex toy, and he seduces Tourvel through techniques lost to an age when honesty between lovers is de rigueur. But along the way he falls in love with Tourvel, and thus into the deadliest of Merteuil's bad graces"(Hunter, 1988, p.29).

He adopts a kind of 'double-speak' where words ironically suggest the exact opposite of their normal, 'honest' meanings. His use of punning along with the film's use of the 'Insert Device' provides some of the most humorous scenes in the film whilst managing entirely cinematically to underline hypocrisy. An obvious example is when Valmont and Cécile are in bed.

VALMONT: . . . You asked me if Monsieur de Bastide would be pleased with your abilities; and the answer is education is never a waste. Now, I think we might begin with one or two Latin terms (Hampton, 1989, p.42).

He plants a kiss on her stomach and travels down her body. There is a cut to the chapel where the Cure is intoning mass. Valmont arrives, late. He sits, yawning and winking at Cécile. The cut is obvious enough, with Valmont's morality being neatly juxtaposed in a near profane manner with his attending mass.

The letter Valmont writes to Mme de Tourvel while he is actually in bed with Emilie is a masterpiece of sustained ambiguity. Valmont uses Emilie's back as his desk.

VALMONT: "My dear Madame de Tourvel...I have just come..."
Don't move, I said... "to my desk, in the middle of a stormy night during; which I have been...tossed...

The scene cuts to Tourvel reading the letter in the gardens.

VALMONT: (Voice Over)...from exaltation to exhaustion and back again; yet despite these torments, I guarantee that at this moment I am far happier than you..."(Hampton, 1989, p.24).

A teardrop falls on to paper as she reads, smudging the ink.

The Valmont/Tourvel relationship brings to light some interesting facets of their characters. Once she becomes Valmont's mistress, Tourvel ceases to be overshadowed by Merteuil and triumphantly asserts her own values and personality (Thody, 1991, p.34).

In the powerful and quite lengthy scene in which Valmont finally and successfully seduces Tourvel, we see her final struggle and ultimate failure to uphold her values, virtuous as they have been.

VALMONT: Why should you be so upset by the idea of making me happy?
(*Gradually she stops crying, looking up at him.*)
TOURVEL: Yes. You're right. I can't live either unless I make you happy. So I promise. No more refusals and no more regrets (Hampton, 1989, p.54).

This is perhaps the most intensely moving and passionate scene in the film.

The scene also demonstrates "that she has the ability, so lacking in Valmont himself, to adopt new values when experience has proved to her that they are good." The happiness which she now feels outweighs her religious scruples, she gives up all her beliefs for the happiness she enjoys through making Valmont happy. Valmont comes close to experiencing the quality of the happiness which Tourvel enjoys, but lacks the ability to make it permanent for either of them (Thody, 1991, p.34).

The actual seduction scene during which Valmont gives a virtuoso performance pulling out all the emotional stops, is also a superb example of the use of irony (Byrne, 1989). In his desperation he will say or do anything to persuade her. The irony is that Valmont actually believes that he says these things as a means to an end: seduction. All too late, whilst lying bleeding to death in the snow, he comes to realise that he meant every word of that, his most passionate speech. He was overcome by his libertine ways, and could not favour emotion over reason letting his vanity make his decision for him.

Merteuil brings him to heel in a moment by the suggestion

> that people might laugh if he gives up what is now only his pose as a libertine...His reluctance to risk a few smiles, is very different from Tourvel's total disregard for the much graver social consequences for her change of heart (Thody, 1991, p. 34).

Valmont seems aware of the necessity to re-establish self-mastery whenever his feelings run away with him, and indeed, however much he may regret it, he ruthlessly jettisons Mme de Tourvel as much to prove to himself that he is not 'in love' as to try to show affection for Merteuil (Byrne, 1989).

Valmont may comment shrewdly on other peoples behaviour, but he quite fails to understand the woman he loves. Even after he has broken with Tourvel, he still misguidedly thinks that she will take him back.

VALMONT: You kept telling me my reputation was in danger, but I think this may well turn out to be my most famous exploit, I believe it sets a new standard. Only one thing could possibly bring me greater glory
MERTEUIL: What's that?
VALMONT: To win her back
MERTEUIL: You think you could?
VALMONT: I don't see why not

But Merteuil lets him know in no uncertain terms

MERTEUIL:I'll tell you why not: because when one woman strikes at the heart of another, she seldom misses; and the wound is invariably fatal (Hampton, 1989, p.68).

It is also ironic that Tourvel should find love and happiness with a man who pretended to believe in neither and is killed by a woman equally incapable of loving (Thody, 1991).

Tourvel believes she is morally immune to temptation and will convert Valmont, the notorious rake. Valmont believes that owing to his vast experience as a rake, he is immune to emotion and will seduce Tourvel. Ironically the two characters are unfaithful to their moral principles because each falls victim to love (Byrne, 1989).

There is nothing in the text of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* to dispute the idea that Valmont deliberately allowed Danceny to kill him, in order both to escape from the world and to expiate his crimes. After his discovery that the attempt to combine passionate love and heartless seduction can lead only to death and misery, he feels that he has nothing left to live for.

It is also ironic that the immediate cause of Mme de Tourvel's death is the news that Valmont has been killed in the duel with Danceny. The viewer knows this is a result of his affair with another woman (Cécile). Moreover Valmont used the threat of suicide as a bluff in the seduction of Tourvel, yet he seems to actually commit suicide for having abandoned her.

2.6 Merteuil

"Close's frosty elegance tinged with just the slightest hint of passion concealed beneath the surface of her constant, enigmatic smile brings to mind Baudelaire's judgement that *Les Liaisons dangereuses* burns in the way ice does" (West, 1989, p.55).

Unusually for the time, Merteuil manages to secure a considerable measure of personal freedom by remaining a widow. She uses it to engage in a war against the whole of the male sex, for the unjust disadvantages which, in her view, a predominantly masculine society imposes upon women. Merteuil's intelligent understanding of men leads her to "attack male superiority in the one field where masculine pretensions are both vulnerable and unjustified: that of sexual activity" (Thody, 1991, p.11).

It is "self-assertive" feminism which is, in a way, her tragic flaw. She would neither make the following remark nor behave as she does if she were not constantly striving to compete with everyone she encounters (Thody, 1991). She wins nearly all of her verbal exchanges with Valmont. An example would be when he complacently tells Merteuil of the Comtesse de Beaulieu's offer:

VALMONT: The Comtesse has promised me extensive use of her gardens. It seems her husband's fingers are not as green as they once were.
MERTEUIL: Maybe not. But from what I hear, all his friends are gardeners (Hampton, 1989, pg.28).

Neatly and effectively, she pricks the bubble of his self-esteem. Later she picks up on his self-pitying phrase 'beyond my control' and uses it against him and Tourvel.

It is in the unintentional self-portrait which Merteuil offers of herself that we see her true identity reveal itself and insights into her own personal rational

can be found.

VALMONT: I often wonder how you managed to invent yourself.
MERTEUIL: I had no choice, did I? I'm a woman. Women are obliged to be far more skillful than men. You can ruin our reputations and our life with a few well chosen words...I've succeeded, because I've always known I was born to dominate your sex and avenge my own...When I came into society, I was fifteen. I already knew that the role I was condemned to, namely to keep quiet and do what I was told...I practiced detachment...**I became a virtuoso of deceit**. It wasn't pleasure I was after, it was knowledge...in the end, I distilled everything down to one wonderfully simple principle: **win or die**.
VALMONT: So you're infallible, are you?
MERTEUIL: When I want a man, I have him; when he wants to tell, he finds he can't. That's the whole story.
VALMONT: And was that our story?
(MERTEUIL *pauses before answering: the air is becoming increasingly charged with eroticism.*)
MERTEUIL: I wanted you before we'd even met. My self esteem demanded it. Then, when you began to pursue me, I wanted you so badly. It's the only time I've ever been controlled by my desire (Hampton, 1989, p.25-6).

This is perhaps the most important section in the film as a form of explanation for her motivation and actions. In her own words she was born to dominate the male sex and avenge her own. But as Valmont sits, listening admiringly to her own conception of herself he does so without realising that he is included in the domination and she will eventually avenge him for the wrongs she feels he has done her.

How can she avenge her own sex if she becomes a pseudo-man herself? She appears to reject passive feminism and shows little solidarity with her own sex. In the wake of an ever increasing number of female as well as male victims we can really appreciate the extent to which her feminism has turned sour.

Like Cécile, she too came into society at the age of fifteen. Cécile may have ignored her mothers advice, "I've advised her to watch and learn and be quiet except when spoken to,"(Hampton, 1989, p.3) but that is exactly what Merteuil

did, and how she reached the pinnacle upon which she now sits.

She also tells us that when she wants a man she has him; when he wants to tell he finds he can't. Is this perhaps an indirect reference on Hampton's part to the Prévan affair. Prévan found himself out-manouvered by Merteuil as it is she who takes the initiative and is the dominant partner in all her relationships. In the novel Laclos uses the Prévan affair to illustrate one of the main psychological themes; the rivalry between Merteuil and Valmont. Its marked absence in *Dangerous Liaisons* is therefore highly significant, as we do not see Merteuil achieving as many conquests as Valmont; instead we see her living through his success, perhaps even enviously.

By the last part of the speech, Hampton would have us believe that Merteuil's vanity, reputation even, demanded Valmont as a conquest. In fact she says it was the only time she was controlled by her desire. This is, by her libertine standards, a reckless action and a mistake. It seems that she recognises her foolish error and is now engaging in single combat.

She takes Valmont's own words "beyond my control"and uses them as the seed to plant in his head, as the perfect way to break with Tourvel. As well as determining Tourvel's fate she also unknowingly determines her own fate. It is her own plan that returns to plague and trap her, its inventor. She ultimately brings about her own downfall. Had she not been so effective in killing the love between Valmont and Tourvel, he would not have been so determined to pay her back for pushing him aside in favour of Danceny.

Merteuil is for all the world a kind of female Attila the Hun, leaving ruin and destruction behind her. Emotionally, she cannot sustain any relationship. This is made evident by the fact that she and Valmont first came together when they had both been abandoned by former lovers, she by Bastide who in turn

ran off with his mistress. It is consequently not an accident that both should be seeking to avenge themselves for this earlier humiliation. In their continual search for new conquests, each is illustrating the idea that all Don Juan's, female as well as male, are victims of emotional if not sexual impotence (Thody, 1991).

For her to be abandoned, as she had been by Bastide before the film even begins, is the supreme humiliation, equalled only by the possibility, which she recognises before he does, that Valmont is so attracted to Mme de Tourvel that he may well end up by preferring her to the Marquise. It is because Mme de Merteuil is so interested in knowledge and power that the writing and receiving of letters is so important to her. In this respect as in others, she is an acute case of what D.H. Lawrence called "sex in the head" (Thody, 1991, p.65).

As Philip Thody points out the psychological novelty of the film is Mme de Merteuil. She is a member of the traditionally weaker sex, yet she manoeuvres Danceny as she wishes, designs at times to help Valmont out of his difficulties, and is always ready to advise him, providing some interesting variations on conventional themes (Thody, 1991, p.49).

2.7 Valmont and Merteuil

The Vicomte and the Marquise form a perversely fascinating couple who used to be lovers, indeed their attraction for each other is not yet dead. Their present relationship balances precariously on mutual admiration for each other's ability to carry out libertine intrigues, and the necessity both have to receive praise for their exploits that cannot be had from members of their own sex (West, 1989). This section will attempt to summarise the most prominent interpretations of Valmont's and Merteuil's relationship. In turn the author will present what they believe to be the most plausible interpretation, borrowing at

times from some of the previously outlined theories.

It has been suggested by critics (Byrne, 1989) that Valmont and Merteuil display obvious homosexual tendencies.This is however a little far-fetched. There is very little evidence of Valmont displaying homosexual tendencies in the novel and there are none to be found in the film. Merteuil is so free from conventional moral restraints that her own sexual identity is veiled with far more ambiguity. Unlike Valmont, there is evidence to be procured from the novel that she may be considering Cécile as a possible sexual partner. But this is never really fully addressed in *Dangerous Liaisons*. Any possible references intimated at in the film are so obscure that realistically at this point, the whole notion of homosexual tendencies must be discounted.

Her real concern is to do some preliminary pimping for Cécile, enlisting Valmont's help in her revenge on Bastide. Cécile's convent education has left her ignorant of the ways of the world, making her easy pickings for Merteuil and Valmont. This is contrasted to by the more perverse education which Valmont impresses upon his young pupil. As Valmont points out when first asked to undertake the task of deflowering her:

> **VALMONT**: Really, I can't...It's too easy... She's seen nothing, she knows nothing, she's bound to be curious, she'd be on her back before you'd unwrapped the first bunch of flowers.Any one of a dozen men could manage it. I have my reputation to think of (Hampton, 1989, p.7).

It is also possible that Merteuil's attraction to Cécile is due to the fact that she sees so much of herself in Cécile. As revealed in her self-portrait to Valmont, she too entered society at the age of fifteen and knows full well how Cécile feels. She knows how vulnerable Cécile is and takes the opportunity to harness all of these qualities to mould her, as she is in fact a young Merteuil.

There will always be disagreement about the motivations for the actions of

Valmont and Merteuil, the depth of their feelings, and how far it is possible, (indeed whether the attempt is even worthwhile) to disentangle these from the play-acting in which they indulge.

Valmont and Merteuil's constant quest for power is a symptom of their inability to find emotional satisfaction within any ordinary relationship, and the reason for this failure is particularly evident in the case of the Marquise de Merteuil. Every man she meets is an opportunity for her to show how much cleverer she is, and every woman a potential victim. Bastide may have chosen Cécile for an advantageous marriage, but after his affair with Mme de Merteuil ended with him abandoning her, perhaps he felt that "it would be quite pleasant to have a wife who was not so obviously his superior" (Thody, 1991, p.63).

Many different interpretations have been formed about Valmont and Merteuil's relationship. The novel's ambiguity provides the scope for these interpretations but it also means that we cannot avoid making a certain amount of guesses and assumptions. *Dangerous Liaisons* tries to do justice to all the ambiguities of the novel. The film being a visual medium means that the characters' feelings and their own stories are there to be seen on their faces. Hence, to some degree, *Dangerous Liaisons* must adopt a stance on their relationship both involuntary, through the faces of the actors, and also voluntary, in order to carry its audience through the film. In an attempt to attract more than just the boy from Kansas, Frears and Hampton must keep some ambiguity intact.

Patrick W. Byrne puts forward several different arguments and interpretations some successfully and others less so. Laclos is to be commended that the material in the novel could sustain 51 pages of interpretations on their relationship! Obviously it would be impossible to examine all of his theories. But it must be said that after reading Byrne's numerous theories, instead of clarify-

ing the relationship the sheer volume of interpretations leads the author to further confusion.

The interpretation he lends the most weight to is that Merteuil does not simply overcome her secret passion for Valmont, but instead, she exploits Valmont's delusion that she harbours such a passion for him (Byrne, 1989).

Byrne does not deny that a separation pact was formed between the two in order for them to part on such good terms. However, in his interpretation, he suggests that the re-directing of Valmont's attentions to the seduction of Cécile, indicates to him that Merteuil is less interested in revenge on Bastide,and

> (a)she has already had a change of heart and really wants him back to replace Belleroche.
> (b)she is more concerned in preventing him from getting involved in a long-term emotional entanglement with Tourvel.

Valmont also shows a hint of envy over Belleroche who he deems to be completely unworthy.

This argument relies excessively on Valmont's chauvinistic pride, believing that Merteuil is in love with him and will accept him back as a lover at any time. Merteuil hints that she is prepared to sacrifice Belleroche if he succeeds in his plans with Tourvel. Her competitive dismissal of Tourvel comes after Valmont has insisted on Tourvel's charms and on his emotional rejuvenation (Byrne, 1989).

VALMONT: I shan't have a moment's peace until it's over, you know. I love her, I hate her, my life's a misery.
(MERTEUIL, ***not best pleased by this, pretends to suppress a yawn.***). . .
MERTEUIL: Yes, I think you may omit the details of the seduction, they're never very enlivening: just describe the event itself.
VALMONT: It was...unprecedented.
MERTEUIL: Really?
VALMONT: It had a kind of charm **I don't think I've ever experienced before**.
(Merteuil's facing away from him now, so he's unable to see - or discern from her voice, which remains icy - that for her, ***every word is like a dagger.****)*

> Once she'd surrendered, she behaved with perfect candour. total mutual delirium. Which for **the first time ever with me outlasted the pleasure itself**. She was astonishing. So much so that I ended by falling on my knees and pledging her eternal love (Hampton, 1989, p.54).

Since they are ex-lovers and rival libertines they will obviously enjoy playing on their respective weakness. But was Valmont trying to provoke a jealous reaction from Merteuil? If this is so, he must now believe that he has succeeded as she reacted, barely suppressing her indignation, perhaps a woman spurned? (Byrne, 1989) In actual fact Valmont has been duped by Merteuil. Byrne would have us believe that:

> "Merteuil's sentimental memories of their past liaison often seen as evidence of her abiding love for the Vicomte - are in fact part of a series of moves" (which include something akin to feigned jealousy) "to force him to sacrifice Tourvel for her without there being any intention on her part to reciprocate by sacrificing Danceny," (Byrne, 1989, p.81) who has taken Belleroche's place.

Valmont has brought his pursuit of Mme de Tourvel to a successful conclusion and in accordance with her promise, his reward from Merteuil now falls due. Valmont and Merteuil are now each involved in a triangular relationship with, respectively, Valmont and Danceny, and Merteuil and Tourvel. This unstable state of affairs will inevitably be simplified with one partner in each triangle being removed. Indeed the scene is set for Valmont and Merteuil to eliminate each other (Byrne, 1989).

The sacrifice of Belleroche and Danceny on the one side would equal and counter-balance the sacrifice of Cécile and Tourvel on the other. But, she knows that her decision not to relinquish Danceny will be more humiliation than Valmont can bear, and why should this bother her if after all she does not love him. Without true sacrifices on both sides, a mutual accommodation between the old lovers is impossible.

> A fight to the finish with her rival is inevitable...the scene is set for the declaration...of war...which is the natural culmination of their libertine competition which Valmont has seen as a way of preserving their friendship inviolate (Byrne, 1989, p.81).

For all of this to be believed unquestioningly, Merteuil must be as Laclos described her "un coueur incapable d'amour."[1] and Valmont must not have loved Merteuil either.

However, a close examination of *Dangerous Liaisons* reveals an altogether different slant on their relationship. One must imagine that Merteuil did love Valmont very much and still does to some extent, and that Valmont does have feelings for Merteuil, however deep they run.

If there was a separation pact drafted to allow them to part on good terms could it have been that

1) They mutually agreed on separation before their emotions took themselves over as their love for each other was a humiliation to them both.
2) Much to their disgust they had both recently been abandoned and decided to part amicably to avoid the humiliation of being abandoned for a second time .
3) She uses it as a means of retaining some control over him while allowing him to 'wander'.

Whichever one of these theories is closest to the truth doesn't really matter because they still feel something for each other, even if it is simply respect for a kindred spirit. For all intents and purposes, Merteuil appears to have conquered sentiment and encourages Valmont in his quest for Tourvel. They both believe each other to be true libertines, sexual realists with no time for sentimentality and with no buried emotional weaknesses. This is why Valmont recounts his conquests to her in such detail, and why she is so surprised that his feelings for Tourvel run so deep. No doubt, she was also surprised herself that this could have such an effect on her. Valmont obviously judged her to be indifferent to his designs on Tourvel, but she is really concealing the irritation

of a woman who is forcing herself to co-operate in his seduction of Tourvel, purely to get the whole episode over with. For only then can she hold her old lover to the terms of the agreement and only then will Valmont return to her arms.

By this time Valmont is well and truly in love with Tourvel, although he does not realise it himself. Merteuil recognises this, thus supporting the view that her loss of caution at the end might be perhaps attributed to genuine despair at having lost the one man who could have made her happy. Merteuil does everything she can to draw Valmont away from Tourvel. Merteuil's behaviour may mean either that she is more jealous of Valmont than she dare admit even to herself, or that she is actually in love with him herself, and prepared to use every means to keep him away from a person whom she has already identified as her only really *dangerous* rival. She has also tried making him jealous of Belleroche, and she is now using the reference to the happiness which she and Valmont once enjoyed together as an additional bait. Philip Thody suggests that:

> ...once he has swallowed it and sacrificed Mme de Tourvel ...her behaviour at this point in the novel, when she might have a fair chance of taking Valmont back - on the rebound as it were (from Tourvel) - if this is indeed what she wanted, suggests that she has never really loved him, and is, in fact, quite incapable of experiencing happiness through love (Thody, 1991, p.33).

But perhaps there is another explanation of her treatment of Valmont other than her inability to love or express love. Valmont's abandonment of Tourvel is immediately ineffective, although he believes he has sacrificed Tourvel in an effort to prove his love for Merteuil, in the next breath he throws doubt on the proof by the suggestion of winning her back as if it were merely another libertine project:

VALMONT: You kept telling me my reputation was in danger, but I think this may well turn out to be my most famous exploit, I believe it sets a new

standard. Only one thing could possibly bring me greater glory.
MERTEUIL: What's that?
VALMONT: To win her back.
MERTEUIL: You think you could?
VALMONT: **I don't see why not** (Hampton, 1989, p.68).

In Merteuil's eyes, if Valmont broke with Tourvel through a vain concern with reputation and with his own vanity, he cannot have surrendered Tourvel out of any self-sacrificing love for her. In this instance "love and self-love seem necessarily to exclude each other" (Byrne, 1989, p.119).

No matter how carefully he presents the idea of a reconciliation we must conclude from it that he cannot truly be in love with Merteuil even though he appears to have sacrificed Tourvel for her. Therefore he must have sacrificed Tourvel to his vanity and now deeply regrets doing so:

VALMONT: She's ill, you know. I've made her ill. For your sake (Hampton, 1989, p.69).

Merteuil sees that he's distraught by his loss and knowing that he will never love her in the same way he loves Tourvel, (perhaps he never has) her jealousy turns into anger and determination. Anger for having been abandoned for the second time, spiritually and emotionally if not physically, and a determination to prove her greater sexually manipulative skills.

After a brief lapse into emotional squalor, she returns to her old libertine ways and declares war. Valmont falls victim to Merteuil because he is emotionally , intellectually and physically pre-occupied trying to seduce Tourvel and therefore lacks her single mindedness.

Ironically, in the end these masters of self-control were undone by "their inability to master common human feelings of hurt pride and vanity which turn their rivalry into a battle for superiority where neither side will win" (Byrne, 1989, p.36).

2.8 The Ending

Laclos wrote a moralising novel. It would have been impossible for him to give it a happy ending. A reformed Valmont married to a divorced Tourvel is almost inconceivable. The introduction of an idyllically happy marriage at the end of the novel would have completely spoiled the unity of tone which is so important in a classical tragedy.

The definition of "the level of tragedy" is perhaps that "vice is punished, but virtue is not rewarded" (Thody, 1991, p.39).

The hubris which Valmont and Merteuil show in trying to exercise total control over human emotions is punished, they are struck down because they tried to go too far in asserting individual power.

Tourvel is punished for having believed that relationships are based upon trust and affection and she is ruthlessly punished for having relied for one moment upon emotion. Most tragic of all, perhaps, is the sense of waste. Valmont is of noble birth, intelligent, courageous, and enterprising. However negative her attitude may finally appear, Merteuil has a brilliant mind, a resourceful and independent character, and a philosophy of life which she has freely adopted and for which she is prepared to assume full responsibility. Tourvel has beauty of mind and body, and an immense capacity for love. Yet all these qualities come to nothing, and there is no possible consolation for their loss.

The fundamental difference between the three media is seen through the three different endings. Laclos implies the ultimate key to Merteuil's behaviour is simply that she is amoral and inhumanly and unnaturally bad. She does not cry even after a disfiguring bout with smallpox and loss of her estate, she merely takes her diamonds and escapes to Holland. She is depicted as a per-

petrator of transgressions against a society, who is punished, but manages to slip away. This ending could be described as somewhat heavy-handed and over moralising.

In Hampton's play he does try to portray the events in a tragic tone, but it maintains a course where Merteuil is victorious over Valmont. It also has a more overtly political ending.

The film differs from both of these endings. Hampton's screenplay offers a more humane treatment. While not denying the Marquise's responsibility for her destructive deeds, it presents her character as being firmly grounded in very human foibles. She becomes a tragic victim of her own making.

While the novel and the play can only hint at the reasons for Valmont's failure to defeat Danceny (perhaps fatigue or poor swordsmanship), the film makes it clear that he wanted to die ; that having broken off his relationship with Mme de Tourvel, he didn't want to live without her. This interpretation is allowed for, given the fact that during the duel, 'Inserts' give us access to Valmont's mind where he recalls the happier times with Tourvel. The omission of Laclos's unnecessarily moralising ending from the film emphasises the fact that it is Merteuil's own actions which cause most damage to herself, as well as to other people. It is she rather than Valmont who deals the death blow to Mme de Tourvel (Thody, 1991).

> But she hurts herself almost as much as she does her rival, and as the audience leaves the theatre it cannot help reflecting that it is self-inflicted wounds which are the hardest to bear. The Marquise remains alive to ponder her deeds...and the fact...that a little more self-control on her part might have avoided the whole final catastrophe. All she needed to do was to accept the fact, when Valmont makes Danceny leave her for Cécile, that she had lost this round; but that vengeance, when it comes, is a dish best eaten cold (Thody, 1991, p.63).

Merteuil has over played her hand, the mask has slipped. In the heat of the moment just how far calculation has been abandoned is a question each viewer must answer for themselves.

Like the novel, the film casts Merteuil into ruin. Like the play, the film's structure is also circular. But because it began in front of the mirror, it must end in front of the mirror. The combination of the elements results in the fact that all is lost for the Marquise; she goes about taking off her make-up. Cleverly in *Dangerous Liaisons* she has just returned from the theatre, an arena of make-up and performance. With the acting over, the play finished, the game complete, she is nothing. As a consequence of Danceny's circulation of the letters, she has just been ejected from public life

> The end scene underlines the idea that all pretence, like all the make-up, has been taken off, and that Madame de Merteuil is now to be seen in her true colours (Thody, 1991, p. 62).

As she sits in the final scene removing her make-up or mask she sheds a tear. "Perhaps she cries at the realisation of her ultimate inability to control her own and other people's lives exactly as she wishes" (Thody, 1991, p.53). The tear could also be the realisation that she has killed the only man she might have loved as a direct result of her own misdirected vanity.

The make-up has acted as a mask throughout the entire film. Ironically, in a scene approaching the film's climax Merteuil declares that "Vanity and happiness are incompatible" (Hampton, 1989, p.68). Too, true, as now she is in tears, slowly obliterating herself from the story, rubbing her face out, wiping herself away. We can still taste the bitterness in the film's atmosphere as we register the loss of self in the Marquise's banked fury (West, 1989). Close's battered, bitter but still unbowed visage almost facing out of the camera as the screen fades to black is a piece of superb screen acting (Grant, 1989). "Ultimately we

are left with the ironic awareness that society may sacrifice its scapegoats, but will no doubt go on actively tolerating a social system based on double standards for men and women" (Byrne, 1989, p.29).

Footnotes to Chapter 2

[1] ... "Laclos himself described Merteuil to Mme Riccoboni in Letter IV of his correspondence with her about Les Liaisons dangereuses as 'un coueur incapable d'amour' (Byrne, 1989, p.13).

* * * * *

CHAPTER 3

Dangerous Liaisons Contextualized

This chapter will contextualize the Stephen Frears film *Dangerous Liaisons.* It will show how Frears draws on Laclos's period setting of aristocratic, pre-revolutionary France in order to highlight the contemporaneous qualities of *Dangerous Liaisons.*

3.1 The man and motives behind *Dangerous Liaisons*

By Laclos's disclaimer at the beginning of his novel he is not suggesting that his work does not ring true and that characters like these do not exist in his day and age. Instead he hopes by his disclaimer to escape criticism that his book is depraved and sets a bad example. By antiphrasis he addresses his contemporary reader: 'Look around, look into your own hearts and you will see that people nowadays in this corrupt century do have the same tendencies as Valmont and Merteuil; this picture is close to the truth' (Byrne, 1989). Byrne is suggesting that this is what Laclos wanted the reader to take from his novel. On a socio-political level Frears could also have had the same intention with *Dangerous Liaisons.*

There are a number of striking similarities and parallels between Laclos's motives and objective in writing *Les Liaisons dangereuses* and Frears's in the making of *Dangerous Liaisons.*

Frears forges a compromise with Laclos's literary work. He remains faithful to Laclos's broad intentions while clearly adding his own vision to the work. This is aided by the fact that Frears, like Laclos, was producing a moralising tale. Both men were rebelling, Laclos against the *ancien régime* which had sti-

fled his career and destroyed society at large. Frears made films concerning Britain's racially torn ghettoes, expressing his left-wing, anti-Thatcher politics. Even at their most radical, their rebellions were not anarchic, as Frears and Laclos never actually separated themselves from mainstream popularity.

In the 1980s, says Frears, "audience figures were getting lower and lower. Films were more and more like fringe theatre, for a specialised audience." Not by coincidence, "people like me started to get intrigued by the market place." The idea of enclosed art no longer gave him pleasure. The whole joy for Frears lay in communicating with a wider audience (Hunter, 1988, p.30).

In films such as My *Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), *Prick Up Your Ears* (1987) and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987) Frears puts his intentions in front of the camera for all to see. These films also chart Frears's increasing disillusionment with the Thatcher administration. They are often analysed as a trilogy, *Dangerous Liaisons* is left out of the equation. The most probable explanations for this exclusion include its American origins along with its obvious differences to the trilogy in terms of genre, effect on audiences and topicality. It is most unfortunate that *Dangerous Liaisons* is not analysed hand in hand with these three films, because to my mind it is the perfect complement being such an obvious political allegory.

In order to understand the social disintegration with which Frears concerned himself, we must briefly examine Thatcher's agenda for the eighties. Thatcher called for a return to Victorian values, (not unlike John Major's "Back to Basics") in her attempt to put the 'Great' back into Britain. Ironically, just as quickly as Thatcher lamented for 'lost virtue', her administration actually accelerated the loss of virtue and moral decline. Her agenda could be summed up as one in which the individual owed responsibility to self, family, firm, community and God, in that order. Economic and moral regeneration would

go hand in hand. The way forward lay with eager and enterprising individuals (yuppies).

Frears highlighted this entrepreneurialism in the Pakistani middle classes of *My Beautiful Laundrette*. *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* show forcefully how instead of creating a new economic order to benefit all, Thatcher had devastated communities. Both films were provocatively written by Hanif Kureishi at a time of political despair, and were designed to provoke audiences. They were an accurate and ironic analysis of Britain under Thatcher. The two films were radical, even refreshing for their time. Kureishi's scripts had made extraordinary connections that no one had ever written about before and Frears tried to realise them as vividly as possible.

3.2 Thatcherism Exposed

Viewing again, in 1996, *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, might lead one to believe that, in their enthusiasm Frears and Kureishi shoved their ideology in the viewer's face, quite unlike the Frears/Hampton collaboration which also has a political undercurrent. Frears's treatment of *Dangerous Liaisons* seems to be far more carefully thought out. The end result is a subtle, intelligent piece which serves as an unwitting prelude to the fall of Thatcherism.

Conservative policies of the 1980s were killing British cinema. This was one reason for Frears's acceptance of an American film. But, perhaps he also found such direct conflict with the establishment in films like *My Beautiful Laundrette* , *Prick Up Your Ears* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* to be exhausting. If this is the case *Dangerous Liaisons* would have been a welcome change whilst producing new challenges. Frears certainly rose to the challenges which *Dangerous Liaisons* offered him as a director. Frears draws from the American tradition in

which it is made, undoubtedly responsible in part for its success. He operates those mechanisms of magic and escapism which that tradition promises, to at once seduce his audience, while at the same time managing to use his material intelligently.

The $14million budget for the adaptation was simply enormous in comparison with his previous budgets. In England, where leftist criticism regards success as synonymous with sellout, he was found guilty-of wanting to draw a paying public.

One Lorimar executive said that Frears was picked for *Dangerous Liaisons* because "he knows how to work within a budget." It is ironic that Frears was part of a group of filmmakers making films opposing Thatcher's government, yet in practice, in terms of thrift and industry, he's the Mrs. Thatcher of British film! (Hunter, 1988)

Dangerous Liaisons would still be an excellent film even if it had no contemporary, political and social relevance at all, and held together solely by the complexity of its plot and characterisations. But clearly it does explore a range of socio-political topics. In light of Hampton's politically motivated stage adaptation of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* it would appear that Frears and Hampton came together in a meeting of minds for the production of *Dangerous Liaisons.* Although Frears and Hampton play down the notion of consciously making a political allegory, they both regarded what Thatcher had done in England since 1978 as a social disaster. They also see "the selfishness of people in power" as a burning current theme (Hunter, 1988, p.30).

3.3 The Contemporary Feeling

Frears' and Hampton's deliberate attempt to mute the film's 18th century sur-

roundings is surely a clue to their intentions to emphasise its contemporary relevance and focus the audience's attentions on the characters and plot. Indeed Hampton had this idea to the fore while writing the script: "I made a lot of false starts until I found the style, which was the most difficult thing to do." Hampton tried writing dialogues in 18th-century English, then in "blunt modern language," before he "got the notion to use 18th century syntax-long complicated sentences, with a lot of subordinated clauses-with modern language" (Hunter, 1988).

Much of the success for the film's contemporary feel results from the performances of Malkovich and Close. Instead of catering to expectation and adopting the stiff, period mannerisms one has come to associate with historical costume dramas, they play their roles somewhere between the formal and the modern with the help of Hampton's sharp dialogue. As a result, the film can be more easily connected to present-day sexual morals, politics, and thirst for power. In Malkovich's characterisation of Valmont his style is almost too contemporary. He definitely appears to be more 1980 than 1780 with his familiar touch. It is argued that "a Vicomte of his time just wouldn't dash up the staircase after a seduction- yelling like a school boy. He would contain himself in the same way she does-as part of the pleasure of the power play called seduction" (Kissin, 1989, p.233). But perhaps this Vicomte wouldn't contain himself when such huge rivalry exists between them , simply to flout his victory under her nose.

Now, almost half way through the nineties, we are in a perfect position to review *Dangerous Liaisons'* contemporary values, both of the 1980s and 90s. *Dangerous Liaisons* deals with deceit, lust, avarice, narcissism and general wickedness which was as fascinating for the 1980s as was Laclos's own disintegrating 1760s for the 1780s. "And there's a sting in the tale that seems apt to both decades as well; dandies as well as virgins meet their comeuppance,

women of manipulative but admirable ill-repute are finally bankrupted, booed from society's stage or even stricken with the curse of smallpox. Guillotine or AIDS; disease or bankruptcy. *Plus ça change*" (Grant, 1989, p.22).

Hampton believes strongly that only through its period flavour does the contemporaneity of the script emphasises itself. I would tend to agree with him when one views Vadim's failed attempt to bring Laclos into the 20th century. There was certainly nothing subtle in his use of modern dress. The period look reminds the viewer who is familiar with history, that the impending doom of the French Revolution is just around the corner for these aristocrats. It also mirrors the on going change in the Conservative party of the 80s which was to go through its own revolution in the form of over throwing Thatcher from her seat of power. Why else would Hampton decide to situate *Dangerous Liaisons* in the middle of the 1780s, as it is not justified by the text of Laclos's novel (the letters being dated pre-1782). There is no basis for Merteuil's hyperbolic teasing of Valmont over his delay in bedding the Presidente (Tourvel) with the words "The century is drawing to its close"(Hampton, 1989, p.39). Despite an accurate display of wigs and corsetry, lovingly dwelt upon in the opening scenes, we get the feeling that some things have not changed, history is repeating itself.

3.4 Sex, lies and power-play

Although partly a film about lust, it is far more a film about ambition and manipulation, where the particular aim is seduction and agency of that aim is seduction. Hampton believes that the subject matter holds a particular fascination today (in the 1980s): "Recently both in England and America, institutionalised selfishness has been encouraged so that the characters' behaviour seems to strike a chord. People recognise the greed- not for money since the characters are unbelievably wealthy- but for power " (Hacker, 1991, p.162-3). This

view is supported with the success of films such as *Wall Street* (1988).
Just as Laclos did, Frears uses the promiscuity of the French aristocracy in the 18th century to make a number of social and psychological observations.
In Laclos's world the sexual act has become nothing more than a weapon. But a society where an excess of leisure is filled by sexual activity will not remain a fulfilment in itself. Instead it becomes infected with the aggression and lust for power which normally find their outlet in other social activities (Thody, 1991).

The one issue that most concerns Frears in *Dangerous Liaisons* is the politics of power, whether it be the sexual and psychological domination of one person by another or, by political extension, of one class or country over another. Frears uses the characters of Valmont and Merteuil which Laclos has given him to highlight and explode myths and beliefs of his time. In the French aristocratic setting the implication of self-serving deceit and the quest for power become even more apparent.

Valmont and Merteuil are mono-maniacs, sexual entrepreneurs concerned only with the power which their sexual attractiveness gives them over people. Through their relationship Frears places competitive power-play at the centre of human affairs on both a social and personal level. Tragedy befalls all of the characters as they have all to a greater or lesser extent put their own needs and desires above others: "Vice is punished but virtue is not rewarded" (Thody, 1991). This also explodes Thatcher's theory that what is good for the individual is good for all.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the closing scene of *Dangerous Liaisons* . Bearing in mind that *Dangerous Liaisons* was released a year before Thatcher was voted out of leadership of the Conservative party, the similarities between Mme de Merteuil's and Margret Thatcher's expulsion from public life are uncanny. Both women followed a policy of self-advancement. Each shed a

tear as they left the grand stage, the game up, but each lived to fight another day.

3.5 The Big Picture

In Merteuil's case those around her suffered humiliation, ruination, even death. Thatcher on the other hand brought an entire nation to its knees. This view of a society ripe for revolution is fully justified in the novel through tone, plot and characters. While it is true that Laclos does not try to offer a comprehensive social vision like some authors of his time (Balzac, Proust), it would be wrong to say that *Les Liaisons dangereuses* has no value as a portrait of French society in the closing years of the *ancien regime*. It is a realistic description of society from a politically committed point of view, whose implications extend far beyond the France of Louis XVI (Thody 1991). Only one specific reference is made to the social defects of pre-revolutionary France (the very general tendency of the law courts to favour a pretty woman over an unfashionable orphan (L.134) but Hampton and Frears clearly make up for this. There is a brief but telling glimpse of the poverty and injustice of French rural society in *Dangerous Liaisons.* It takes the form of Valmont saving a Monsieur de Armand from eviction. The village has been chosen carefully, it. . .

> . . .consists of half-a-dozen wattle and drab huts disposed around a muddy clearing, where pigs graze and barefoot children wander. The poverty is stark and absolute as that of a village in India. A small crowd is gathered around one of the huts (Hampton, 1989, p.14).

Valmont saves Monsieur de Armand from the bailiff and the crowd gathers around him. We only see Valmont from the waist down as the crowd kneels before him grasping at his hands and clothing. This scene is similar to a scene in the epic *Ben Hur* where Jesus walks by Ben Hur and is seen only from the waist down. Perhaps Frears did the same to show Valmont yet again in rivalry with God. However as soon as Valmont leaves the village and is on his own

with Azolan (his valet) we see him again in his deceitful light.

VALMONT: Fifty-six livres to save an entire family from ruin, that seems like genuine bargain.
AZOLAN: These days, my lord, you can find half a dozen like that, any village in the country (Hampton, 1989, p.15).

Azolan's comments show how widely spread the poverty is. Monsieur de Armand is "a man of not more than fifty, who looks ancient, gnarled and battered by work, his hair long, thick and white" (Hampton, 1989, p.15). Could he not also represent, from a 1980s perspective, the growing number of homeless people living in cardboard cities and sleeping rough in doorways.

Perhaps Thatcher's agenda should have been re-written: "Vote Tory and wreak havoc on society...only the select few who share my vision shall profit and thrive!!!"

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CHAPTER 4

Conclusions

4.1 The Author's Personal Findings

Cinema originates in one medium and is finalised in another. What began as the written word is transformed to an audio-visual format. *Dangerous Liaisons*, as has been explored throughout this thesis, is an example of a narrative which originated as a literary work, and was adapted to both the theatre and cinema. Having examined the journey from literary work to the visualisation of the written word it is worthwhile to revisit the source. For the viewer it enriches and adds to the fulfilment of the cinematic experience. For the filmmaker revisiting the classics can enhance their craft, reaching fruition in the production of subtle work. Quite often what is true of a hundred or so years ago will have a contemporary relevance: *Plus ça change . . .*

4.2 The Novel

"If the aim of art is always to hide art, then the visible excellence of Laclos's technique might at first appear a defect." However, on closer examination the deliberate shadow of obscurity that Laclos leaves hanging over *Les Liaisons dangereuses* calls to mind "Sartre's insistence on the need for the author to respect his readers' freedom" (Thody, 1991, p.26/28). In the true style of a mathematician's novel, Laclos has totally eliminated the "apparent irrelevancies which make up the stuff of ordinary life." In doing so he has pared down the experience to its absolute essentials (Thody, 1991, p.44).

Les Liaisons dangereuses is unique as a novel in the difference between the initial impact which it makes and final impression which it leaves. What seems at

first sight to be a witty endorsement of Valmont's and Merteuil's immoral behaviour, in actual fact emerges as a tale of a deeper and more savage morality (Thody, 1991).

It is partly this ambiguity which makes *Les Liaisons dangereuses* into a realistic novel which shows vice to be at one and at the same time both very attractive and very harmful (Thody, 1991).

Les Liaisons dangereuses is certainly not a book which recommends what it describes, its philosophy being *do not do as I do, but as I say*. It is a deliberate attack on the futility of sexual immorality, which shows how a society purely concerned with maintaining appearances is quite prepared to put up with sexual hypocrites who thrive on double standards, provided they are not unmasked. In this society where hypocrisy, double standards, and duplicity are rife we are shown the equal and opposite dangers of governing one's life by pure emotion or not so pure intellect and the destructive effects of passion and pride (Byrne, 1989).

In the end Valmont's and Merteuil's superior intelligence has been overcome by passion. Emotion has defeated reason. The overall impression left by the book is much more that of tragedy than of optimistic social commitment.

4.3 The Film

Laclos's novel of sexual intrigue, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, has certainly exercised a fatal attraction over filmmakers over the years, and no doubt will continue to do so. Its contemporary relevance and appeal is best summarised in the character of Mme de Rosemonde. Rosemonde's character could have very easily remained fairly superfluous, on the edge of the plot. But Frears, like Laclos, uses the character of Mme de Rosemonde to represent official morality, while underlining its inadequacy in a different and possibly more significant

way (Thody, 1991). In her attempts to comfort Tourvel after Valmont's first serious attempt to seduce her, Mme de Rosemonde gives us a telling insight into her moral stance. "My dear girl. None of this is any surprise to me. The only thing which might surprise one is how little the world changes" (Hampton, 1989, p.46-7). It is obvious that what is relevant and of interest in the 1780s is also true of the 1980s, 90s and beyond. "The battleground might change but the battle remains the same" (Mathews, 1989, p.17).

In choosing to concentrate exclusively upon one group of people with one set of preoccupations, the film like the novel is capable of presenting the whole range of human experience (Thody, 1991). As the chief protagonists become locked in doomed struggle, we become voyeurs participating in the cerebral pleasure of watching these two sparring partners tear each other apart. As Frears says "people love to watch other people behaving badly- especially if they're rich..." (Morrish, 1989, p.17). A final and deadly battle is the only logical outcome of their rivalry. Both Valmont and Mme de Merteuil must be punished for the underhanded manipulation of each other and all those around them, as has been witnessed throughout. However, it is easier to arrive at a 'moral' interpretation after we have left the cinema than while we are actually viewing it. For all their wickedness, Valmont and Merteuil fascinate the viewer by their wit, charm and intelligence (Thody, 1991).

Perhaps it is because Valmont and Merteuil are endowed with such human foibles that it is so difficult for us to condemn them while we are actually viewing the film. They appeal to that aspect of our own personality which we feel we ought to suppress, "the part which encourages us to see ourselves as totally in control of those situations where we normally depend most heavily on what other people think and feel." We leave the cinema with a "heightened recognition of why we ought to suppress this tendency, and an intense awareness of the harm we might do both to ourselves and to other people if we

could always do what we wanted in our sexual and emotional life" (Thody, 1991, p.13). But whether it is possible to ever succeed in altogether abolishing this tendency in human nature is questionable. What appears to be a cynical tale about frivolous people reveals itself as a serious treatment of some fundamental problems in human, sexual and social behaviour.

Dangerous Liaisons is also an extremely well made, witty, and vulgar attack on the dangerously self-righteous morality of society and in particular Frears's native land.As many historians note, Thatcher's revitalised England valorized capitalistic enterprise and produced a greedier, more intolerant society. Ironically Thatcher was undone by the intolerance of her own party in the wake of waning popularity. The sinner falling into his or her own trap is apt for Thatcher, but not a new idea! (Ecclesiastes, x, 8) (Thody, 1991).

Frears has created a legacy: a formidable body of work, most impressive being Dangerous *Liaisons*, which exposes the enormous shortcoming of an economic system that continues to ravage England, and boldly challenged Thatcher's era of nation building (Barber, 1993).

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APPENDIX

Dangerous Liaisons: Film Synopsis

The Marquise de Merteuil, notorious as a libertine in Parisian aristocratic circles just prior to the French Revolution, enlists the aid of her male counterpart, the Vicomte de Valmont, in seeking revenge against her current lover. Valmont, however, refuses to oblige by seducing Cecile de Volanges, the virgin innocent to marry whom the Marquise's lover is deserting her: the task is too easy, he has his reputation to think of, and his sights are on breaching the impregnable virtue of Madame de Tourvel, a devout but beautiful pillar of the haute bourgeoisie. With the Marquise much impressed by his cynicism, Valmont suggests infidelity with him as an alternative revenge. The Marquise consents, provided he first produced written evidence of his success with Madame de Tourvel.

While Valmont proceeds to disarm Madame de Tourvel with his masquerade as a penitent sinner, the Marquise contrives to put temptation in Cecile's way in the shape of a handsome young music teacher, Danceny. Frustrated when Danceny falls chastely in love with Cecile, the Marquise contrives to have Cecile parted from Danceny and sent to stay with Valmont's aunt-where she will be easy prey for Valmont, now thirsting for revenge after discovering that Madame de Tourvel's resistance is being stiffened by letters of warning from Cecile's mothers.

On the pretence of furthering a clandestine correspondence with Danceny, Valmont seduces Cecile, who proves an eager pupil. With Madame de Tourvel now helplessly in love with and ready to submit, Valmont spares her. Taunted with weakness by the Marquise when he reports this surprising development, valmont returns to accuse Madame de Tourvel of treating him with contempt after his restraint. She yields; he reports triumph to the Marquise; but the Marquise, desperately wanting Valmont herself but despising this lapse of heart over mind, declares their agreement void because he is clearly in love with Madame de Tourvel. Valmont, struck by this, deliberately breaks with Madame de Tourvel when he returns to secure the letter which will force the

Marquise to honour their bargain. Already enervated, Madame de Tourvel falls ill and dies. Challenged to a duel by Danceny at the Marquise's instigation because Cecile has suffered a miscarriage, Valmont is wounded, refuses the doctor's attention, and dies. Boldly putting an appearance at her box at the Opera, the Marquise finds herself the target of society's opprobrium.

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