

# LES LIAISONS DANGEREUSES: THE DEVIL AND THE CINEMA OF CRUELTY COME TO THE AID OF AN 18<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY LITERATURE COURSE

As ambassadors of our beloved French language and culture who do much of our work in the classroom, we are almost always constrained by instrumental concerns that are external to our commitment to our students and our curriculum. I have felt these constraints for many years as a faculty member. However, as the neophyte Department Head of Modern Languages at a small state university with majors in French and Spanish, I am dealing anew with the reality we all understand; enrollments in French, especially in upper-division courses, are not always what we would like them to be. This essay is not about seeing the enrollment picture from this new perspective, however. Rather, it is about sharing my experiences using feature films to enhance enrollments in these upper-division classes, with a particular example in mind. And although it is specific to my 18<sup>th</sup>-century literature course, I believe that one could adapt it for use either in high-school programs or in more general culture/civilization courses at the university.

In an editorial for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*,<sup>1</sup> Simon Richter, then the Chair of Germanic Languages and Literatures at the University of Pennsylvania, explains how he sought “help from the Devil in boosting course enrollments.” More specifically, by renaming his course on the legend of Faust in literature and film “The Devil’s Pact in Literature, Film, and Music,” he reveals that he was able to increase enrollments by almost 500 percent in the first year: “the new name evidently struck a chord—the Devil enjoys better name recognition among our students than Faust does” (A56). Richter continues his primer: “The banishment of Faust from the title did not mean his departure from the course. [...] merely cosmetic change is usually not enough to increase enrollments” (A56). Indeed, as Richter wisely counsels, it is by capturing students’ interest (if not their hearts and souls) through careful selection and preparation of materials that we “find the points at which our two paths—those of our students and of our disciplines—meet, where students’ questions resonate with the best our fields can offer” (A56). And for me, one of my most successful efforts at this incorporates four film versions<sup>2</sup> of Pierre Choderlos de Laclos’ *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782)<sup>3</sup> into our study of both the novel and *le siècle des lumières* of which it is a representative text.

Pedagogical preparation starts with the syllabus and the structure of the course. Breaking the period up into sections (*Précurseurs*, *l’Essor des lumières*, *Pré-*

*romantisme*, and *Décadence/Bouleversements*),<sup>4</sup> I set the stage for the viewing and the discussion of these films within the century’s larger context. And like Richter, I am willing to make a so-called “pact with the Devil” by promising, in both our materials and our discussions, a close look not just at the *décadence* of the period and its society, but also the *dissipation*, *dissimulation*, *dépravation*, and eventually, the *destruction* that make these liaisons so dangerous, so popular, and so frequently reexamined by *le septième art*. Such is a useful metaphor for the fate of the entire *Ancien Régime* both in France and beyond, and the students have little trouble picking this up.

I should mention that in my literature survey courses, I favor an in-depth examination of a few representative works to spending token amounts of time on a long “laundry list” of short readings and cursory discussions. As my syllabus will reveal,<sup>5</sup> we spend more than three weeks of class time on *Liaisons Dangereuses*, and nearly as much on Voltaire’s *Contes philosophiques* and Rousseau’s *Émile*. Nevertheless, by interspersing student presentations with briefer coverage of less iconic authors, the rhythm of the course is in constant flux and boredom is avoided. In addition, I believe that the longer time spent on *Liaisons Dangereuses* appeals to students’ ambition and, as Richter would have it, increases their investment in the course and the discipline.

It is also great fun. I begin our discussion of the novel by asking students if they have seen *Dangerous Liaisons*, the American version of the film by Steven Frears (1988). Usually, some have, and discussion ensues. Then I ask if they’ve seen *Cruel Intentions* (Roger Kumble 1999), the seemingly less substantive, contemporary film version of the story, or even the TV show based on it. Almost all of them have, but, because it is so intertextually distant from the novel and its other film versions, many or even most of the students are unaware of its relationship to Laclos’ epistolary masterpiece.

With the students’ interest now piqued, the door is open for our initial discussion of that masterpiece, and once the customary historical and literary context has been briefly addressed, that discussion focuses primarily on *épistolarité*. This is the element that not only sets *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* apart from most of what they normally read in survey courses, but is also what gives it such presence in and relevance to their everyday lives. The general idea of *épistolarité*

is already somewhat familiar to them, because we have already read selections from Montesquieu’s *Lettres Persanes*. However, I have found that a short discussion of several points prepares them for what is to follow.

First, the substance of the novel is transmitted by letters, but the action is not only *in* these letters; it is often *about* them. Much of the story is about communications that are lost, stolen, intercepted, interrupted, collected, returned, accompanied by objects, sent to one person but read by someone else, written for one person but sent to another and left open to be read, sealed and sent by a third, etc. To help illustrate this, I ask students to pull out their cell phones and send a brief SMS (text message) to a friend and later, tell them why they did so. What will be more interesting, I ask them, the message itself or the context under which it was sent? “What? Your French professor told you to send me that message in class? How come?” The message’s method of transmission thus becomes the essence of the story; something this wireless generation certainly understands better than anyone.

Other points merit mention as well; the element of *voyeurisme* that is usually absent from other novels (and even largely from these films), the degree to which *Liaisons Dangereuses* amounts to a psychological portrait of human behavior, the *vraisemblance* made possible by the fact that each letter must be motivated, written, and read by the characters, and that in reading them as well, students are sharing directly in the characters’ experiences.

It is now time to send them off with an assignment to view *Valmont* (Milos Forman 1989), which I place on reserve in the language lab. They combine the viewing with a reading of the novel’s “*Avertissement de l’éditeur*” and “*Préface du rédacteur*,” which, in only a few pages, offer the fascinating metatextual apparatus that contextualizes the letters as well as the author’s motivation to write the novel. More importantly, they also offer a stern warning against just the kind of corruption and seduction our students can see daily on their TVs, iPods, and computers. They will enjoy plenty of them in *Valmont*, and although we spend the next several class periods working on the novel, we only have time to read a selection of about 50 of its most important letters. Therefore, I find that the Forman film, which concentrates most effectively on the psychological aspect of the story, provides a good framework upon which the students can build their understanding of the letters we

do read.<sup>6</sup>

Certain ones must be covered because they are central to the plot. Examples include #36, Valmont's seductive "attack" on Madame de Tourvel; #41, her rejection of it; and #165, the recounting of her eventual, tragic death. #162 and #173, respectively, reveal the downfall of Valmont and Merteuil. Other letters are essential to the development of the characters, in particular the encyclopedic #81 that offers an autobiography of Merteuil.

Still others are key to understanding the concept of *épistolarité*, and these seem to interest the students most. Letter #16, in which Cécile recounts: "j'allai prendre ma harpe [et] je trouvai dans les cordes une lettre pliée, et point cachetée, et qui était de lui" (45), is a good example because the students recognize a similar moment in the Forman film. They may also recognize #47 and #48, in which they witness the dramatic irony of Valmont composing another plea to Tourvel upon *courtisane* Émilie's nude back, calling that surface "la table même sur laquelle je vous écris, consacrée pour la première fois à cet usage (104) and assuring his prey that "dans ce moment, je suis plus heureux que vous" (103). This is not like the Forman film at all, for there it is Cécile who, taking dictation from Valmont in a letter to Danceny, is seduced by the former in a bizarre corruption of that conquest, which is recounted in letter #96. Rather, it is the Frears version that presents a faithful reproduction of this comical irony.

This kind of comparative analysis really hooks the students, because again, it is what ties the novel and the society it portrays to their own experiences. To intensify this effect, after finishing our readings we view Roger Vadim's 1960 version of the film, "updated" to take place in the France of that period and interestingly backgrounded with the 1950s bebop jazz culture imported from the U.S. If time permits, we spend two class periods on it, but even if this is not possible, by now students have reached a level of understanding that goes far beyond what they get out of a mere reading of the novel or viewing of one film. Indeed, Vadim's film, with its modernized time and place, invites them to consider questions such as: Why are Valmont and "Juliette" married, and how does this affect the dynamics of the story? What replaces handwritten letters as the modes of communication between the protagonists, and how are they used to transmit the key messages and events in the film? How does Vadim's introduction to the film, which he offers in English, compare in form and function to the aforementioned *avertissement* and *préface*?

Indeed, students can easily recognize from modern American society the conser-

vatism that, in the 1950s, would have insisted on the protagonists' civil status, and they quickly pick up on how the telephone, telegraph, and tape recorder stand in for letters and sealing wax. They enjoy comparing the different iterations of "poetic justice" to which the Valmont and Merteuil characters are subjected in the end, and, with a little help, they begin to see how all the film versions' examples of aristocratic excess, as well as Laclos' original protagonists, represent a portrait of the *Ancien Régime* at its worst.

Following Richter, we also take advantage of the novel's contextual present, obviously necessary to its epistolary format, to further increase the students' investment in the material. By performing partial or entire letters before the class, they are able to see the degree to which the characters are, for all intents and purposes, performers, and they are unsurprised to learn that the story has also been successfully performed on stage.

Incorporating the Frears and Kumble versions of the film into the class has presented me with a significant challenge, and other than showing a few carefully chosen scenes, the time available to us for this part of the course simply does not allow much more. This is a shame, because both films have significant merit. Frears' Oscar-winning depiction is unsurprising in this regard, but despite its challengingly frank language and "R" rating, *Cruel Intentions* is, in some ways, more true to Laclos' novel than any other of the films.<sup>7</sup> And like Vadim's, it offers another successful "update" to the time and place. For now, however, I simply make the films available in the language lab and ask the students to view them during the course of our studies. My not-so-cruel intention for next time is to prepare a DVD with key scenes from all four films.

Assessing this part of the course can also present a challenge. However, since I have always believed that comprehensive final exams are, as Robert R. Mollenauer calls them, "sadistic seasonal rituals which generate unbearable pressures and produce results that seldom justify the efforts of student or teacher"<sup>8</sup> (115), I have created a series of questions from which students choose and then present their responses to their colleagues in the form of a panel discussion. Also at Mollenauer's suggestion, I plan to have students document their learning in this part of the course with a daily journal.

To close, I would like to encourage French teachers in any program to experiment with these and other films to complement their teaching of French literature, civilization, and culture. Using them in my 18<sup>th</sup>-

century survey course has made it one of the most enjoyable teaching experiences of my career, and although I cannot boast a 500 percent increase in enrollments, I can certainly see that this "pact with the Devil" has been a most rewarding compromise for my students and for me. I respectfully invite all inquiries.

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#### Notes and References

- 1 Richter, Simon. "Help from the Devil in Boosting Course Enrollments." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 46.45 (2000), A56.
- 2 #1: *Dangerous Liaisons 1960*. Dir. Roger Vadim. Perf. Jeanne Moreau, Gérard Philipe, Annette Vadim. French with English subtitles. Interama Video Classics, 1960.  
#2: *Dangerous Liaisons*. Dir. Stephen Frears. Perf. Glenn Close, John Malkovich, Michelle Pfeiffer. English. Warner Brothers, 1988.  
#3: *Valmont*. Dir. Milos Forman. Perf. Colin Firth, Annette Bening, Meg Tilly. English. MGM, 1989.  
#4: *Cruel Intentions*. Dir. Roger Kumble. Perf. Sarah Michelle Gellar, Ryan Phillippe, Reese Witherspoon. English. Columbia, 1999.
- 3 Laclos, Pierre Choderlos de. *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 1981.
- 4 Divisions suggested by the structure of Décote, Georges et Sabbah, eds. *Itinéraires littéraires XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Paris: Hatier, 1989 (an anthology I have used for this course, which unfortunately, is out of print).
- 5 For my syllabi, cf. [[http://apache.ngcsu.edu/Academic/Arts\\_Let/LangLit/french/BMann/Resources/Past.htm](http://apache.ngcsu.edu/Academic/Arts_Let/LangLit/french/BMann/Resources/Past.htm)].
- 6 Cf. Humbert, Brigitte E. "L'Adaptation cinématographique dans le cours de littérature française." *The French Review* 72 (April 1999), 839-52.
- 7 Cf. Humbert, Brigitte E. "Cruel Intentions: Adaptation, teenage movie, or remake?" *Literature/Film Quarterly* 30.4 (2002), 279-286.
- 8 Cf. Mollenauer, Robert R. "A New Approach to Survey Courses." *Die Unterrichtspraxis/Teaching German* 3.1 (Spring 1970), 114-17.