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Dangerous Liaisons of Film and Literature: Two Film Versions of Choderlos de Laclos' Epistolary Novel

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A classic work of the epistolary genre, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782) by Choderlos de Laclos, became the inspiration for two film adaptations made in the late 1980s – *Dangerous Liaisons* by Stephen Frears (1988) and *Valmont* by Miloš Forman (1989). These two films differ considerably in the degree to which they are true to the form and spirit of their literary model. The present paper compares and contrasts how the subtle psychologism of the epistolary *form* is grasped differently by the two directors, as well as focusing on the phenomenon of libertinism crucial to the *spirit* of the novel.

In a general sense, it is possible to say that the relationship between film and literature is itself a dangerous liaison.¹ As in all such relationships, it is the more innocent member, the helpless member, the sincere and earnest member of the pair, for whom the liaison is clearly dangerous. Undoubtedly, it is more often literature that becomes the innocent victim of the sly, more intriguing, and selfish libertine – the film adaptation. It is true that sometimes a film (or more often a popular television series) is adapted for literary publication; but in these cases, the relationship is mostly that of mutual support and co-operation, and can hardly be described as dangerous.

Before comparing and contrasting aspects of the two film versions of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, let us look briefly at the genealogy of the two films, a genealogy which may throw some light on our topic. As Forman mentions in his autobiography, he was inspired by an excellent theatre adaptation by Christopher Hampton, an adaptation which he had seen in London (Forman and Novák 1994: 225).

In the months following, Forman tried in vain to win Hampton's co-operation for the screenplay of his intended film. In June 1987, after failing to meet Hampton to negotiate

about the issue, Forman decided to base his own film version on a script by Jean-Claude Carrière (Mravcová 2002: 73). That script may have been influenced by the fact that Forman discovered that it was Frears who had won Hampton's co-operation. Because Forman knew that Hampton's dramatisation stuck to the spirit of Laclos' novel, he wanted to make his own screenplay something different.

Let us now consider the epistolary form of the novel, and how it is reflected in the two film adaptations. Although Richardson established the epistolary genre, Laclos' novel seems to have brought it to perfection. It is formed by 175 letters presented by the fictive 'editor' as the real correspondence of a number of writers over a five-month period. Thus, the epistolary form helps the author to establish an atmosphere of authenticity. The main aim, though, is the role the letters play in the characterisation of the persons who write them. These persons strive to express thoughts and feelings, but also to present themselves to the addressee in the way they wish to appear. The writers also desire to show their cultivated eloquence, their excellent rhetorical skills, their consistent arguments. This is especially true for the main characters, the Marquise de Merteuil and Viscount de Valmont, whose letters enable them to fake sincerity and, by doing so, to manipulate those who only describe their *real* experiences, ideas and emotions. Besides, the letters offer the reader an ambiguous and complicated portrait of the characters: behind the written page we can recognise not only the real face of the writer, perhaps his or her schemes and intentions, but also the mask he or she dons to deceive others. On the other hand, the mask donned for the intriguing 'play' serves to hide real passions, whereas 'unmasking' often serves to conceal another mystification. One of the main charms of the novel is how the complicated psychological development of the main character, Viscount de Valmont, is partially revealed and partially obscured through letters (or, as in his correspondence with the Marquise de Merteuil, intentionally disguised).

In Forman's *Valmont*, the epistolary form is fully replaced by dramatic dialogues. It is, of course, necessary to alter the story if one wants to enable the characters to physically meet and converse. But unfortunately, through the absence of their brilliant, intricate and ambiguous writing, the characters lose their profoundness and complexity – and, in the case of Valmont and the Marquise de Merteuil, also the spirit of libertinism – allowing them to become ordinary characters of comedy. Also, the remarkable character of Madame de Tourvel is made uninteresting and commonplace as a result of the loss of her excellent letters, letters which prove her an adequate rival to Valmont, in respect of eloquence, logical argument and stylish finesse.

Unlike Forman's film, the adaptation by Frears and Hampton succeeds in retaining, to some degree, the positive features of the epistolary form. Some letters from the literary original are used to bring the characters into confrontation as they write and read. Further, by means of a specific film narrative technique, these enable the director to interconnect three levels of time: the time the letter was written, the time it was read and the time of the events the letter concerns. For example: a passionate love letter to Madame de Tourvel, read aloud in Valmont's voice, is accompanied by shots showing the situation in which it was written: Valmont drafting it upon a makeshift table – which is, in fact, the naked back of a giggling courtesan – revealing the letter to be partially inspired by fresh sexual experiences. Alternately, while the letter is being read aloud, there are shots of the addressee reading, shots which show the agonising impression the letter makes upon her. In this way, in *Dangerous Liaisons*, not only are some of the masterfully composed letters made part of the script, but their inventive insertion into the story also adds dynamism to the film narrative by combining time levels in an unusual way.

The importance of the epistolary form is also closely connected with a crucial aspect of the novel – the concept of libertinism. The letters reveal the manipulative game, for they unfold the pretence of the schemers and their real motivations. An absence of the spirit of

libertine 'anti-morality' would destroy the most substantial liaisons between the literary model and its film adaptations, and would make these adaptations totally independent of the novel.

It is necessary to mention libertine attitudes in general before dealing with their meaning as specific to this paper. There is a special concept of libertine 'virtue', consisting of perfect self-control, a self-control which enables one to be a free and independent person. Virtue for a libertine is always to act in accordance with one's own principles: to be the one who dominates or controls the situation, but never becoming a subject of one's own or someone else's passions. Libertinism consists mainly in cultivating the ability to seduce a chosen victim, with the rules of the gallant 'game' being the following: (1) the correct choice of a victim, since success intensifies according to the degree of the victim's inaccessibility or difficulty in acquisition; (2) dominance of the victim; (3) the subsequent yielding and fall of the victim; (4) the sudden leaving of the victim to his or her fate, or doom. According to his or her own attitudes or poses, the libertine considers the playing of this game to be correct, legitimate, and thus 'moral'.²

Libertinism is the central issue of Laclos' novel, providing its main theme and subject matter, its plot, and a physical embodiment of the concept through its two main characters.

How do the characters in Forman's *Valmont* correspond to this image of aristocratic attitudes, of consciously developed and sophisticated vice? From Valmont's first, minor, gallant adventure (as presented in the film) – during which he falls into some water – up to the moment he turns over the bath to pour out not only the water, but also the Marquise de Merteuil – it becomes increasingly obvious that we have found ourselves completely outside the libertine world. We are confronted with the familiar world of a skillfully made, traditionally romantic, generously costumed spectacle. Forman's Valmont does not overcome the chastity of his victim by means of tactics having strict rules (tactics which the literary Valmont aptly describes in his letters by the use of military terminology). The Valmont we have here simply shows off his good looks, his athletic figure, his dancing skill, his manners. Unlike the literary Valmont, who indulges in prolonging his victim's agony, Forman's Valmont is disappointed that she does not instantly yield to his irresistibility. Also, the stature of his antagonistic victim is far different from what one might expect: in the novel, Madame de Tourvel is an intelligent, thoughtful woman, whose attitudes are an existential part of her personality, not merely the result of current moral conventions. This can by no means be said of Forman's heroine. As a result, nothing is at stake, and the light comedy proceeds in an amusing, risk-free way, with Forman's Valmont completely lacking the devilish, discomfiting, thrilling quality of his literary precursor, converted instead into a man little more than a spoilt child.

Let us compare the above depiction of Valmont with what the director himself says about his relationship to the character: "It was not difficult for me to understand Valmont from *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. All my life I have had various relationships with women: sometimes casual, other times of long standing. I spent a long time in pursuit of the splendid infatuation in which nothing but the two of us exists and nothing else is important. It is the law of life that it does not last for ever, but when such a situation comes, there is nothing like it" (Forman and Novák 1994: 226 [my translation]).

As is apparent from the film, Forman's conception of Valmont simply required adapting the character to Forman's own attitudes and experiences. This is confirmed by Forman's cameraman Miroslav Ondříček, who mentions that the problems depicted in Forman's early black-and-white, neo-realist Czech films – the rebelliousness of the young, their confrontations with an adult world – also became the theme of *Valmont* (Ondříček 1989: 544).

The highly stylised evil of the literary model is thus degraded into something lowly stylised: tragedy has become farce. What was for Laclos an intricate, corrupt, almost degenerate game, has become for Forman an erotic comedy of manners, appealing to the eye (perhaps now and then to the intellect, through the wit of the dialogue), yet denying the very spirit of libertinism.

In contrast, the adaptation by Frears and Hampton does not allow the story's pervasive libertinism to sink to lowly middle-class comedy or mere romantic drama. They give full weight to both the intriguing schemes and the tragic denouement. It is especially through the main character of Valmont that *Dangerous Liaisons* succeeds in depicting the glamour and the perversity of such libertinism. The complexity and ambiguity of Valmont's character here are rooted deeply in his libertine strategies, exactly as they are in his literary manifestation. The retaining of his core essence in the film allows him to be enigmatic, yet fully consistent and credible, his attitudes and activities leading, with fatal necessity, to the tragic entanglement depicted.

The demonic, metaphysical character of the evil which Valmont represents is illustrated by the fact that pleasure is not what he is after in his seduction of Madame de Tourvel, but triumph achieved through a vice which is all-scheming. Therefore, his victory would not be complete or satisfying if he did not seduce her while she yet believed in "God and virtue and the sacrament of matrimony". The nature of the evil which he embodies is also reflected in the responses of his victim, notably her repulsion towards him, a repulsion which is accompanied by a complex fascination, as well as feelings of helplessness and consternation, feelings of apprehension towards something mysteriously evil lingering behind Valmont's apparent surface. As in the novel, one never knows what his true face is, and what is his mask ... perhaps he does not know this himself. How much more precious and impressive then is the moment of truth, when the "game" is finished, Valmont deciding to assure Madame de Tourvel of his love, choosing death as his retribution or confirmation or seal. The end of the libertine game and the surrender of the mask for the nakedness of truth is staged by Frears and Hampton with full grandeur and gravity.

In conclusion, it can be said that, in the case of Forman's film version and its liaison with the literary original, the liaison has proven itself more than dangerous, the libertine author of the original (writing obviously with his own, not only with Valmont's blood) becoming the helpless victim of a pseudo-libertine film director who has managed to strip all the glamour, as well as the tragic passion, from the text's hero, as Valmont certainly was for Laclos. On the other hand, the liaison between the epistolary original and Frears and Hampton's adaptation, dangerous as it may have been to engage in, can be described as a mutual partnership well-developed and conceived, allowing both partners, so unlike Valmont and Madame de Tourvel, to survive unscathed and mutually glorious.

Endnotes

- ¹ The title of the present paper was borrowed from the Polish film critic Alexander Jackiewicz, who gave the title *Dangerous Liaisons of Literature and Film* (*Niebezpieczne swiazki literatury i filmu*, Warszawa, 1971) to his collection of theoretical and critical articles.
- ² Characteristics of libertinism are based on the texts of the scriptwriter of another film version of Laclos' novel, the French writer Roger Vailland (as quoted in Marie Mravcová 2002: 65–7). The film was directed by Roger Vadim, using the original title *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1959).

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