DANGEROUS LIAISONS
FROM FILM TO FASHION

Stephanie Hull

Stephanie Hull is an Assistant Professor at Dartmouth. Her dissertation at Harvard was on "The Re-presentation of 18th-century French Literature in Film."
This paper is intended to demonstrate the repercussions of the representation of history, specifically of 18th-century French history, in popular media. I have chosen as my point of departure the 18th-century French novel, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, which has been a prominent reference point in a group of interpretive representations of 18th century France which have appeared recently in cinema, art, music, video, fashion and advertising. I attribute this recent resurgence of images of 18th-century France in large part to the 1989 bicentennial of the French Revolution, but I argue that the interpretation of these representations derives mainly from a cumulative reconstruction of the French 18th century through the interaction of popular media, primarily cinema and the novel.

This fascination began with the first silent films and has continued throughout the decades, less prevalent at times, but consistently present in mass culture; this reconstruction manifests itself in the late 1980s and early 1990s in representations such as those I have gathered here: the difference in the images as they are presented for the masses is that they are distanced from their reference points, with which I have reunited them, as much as this is still possible, to illustrate the distortion which occurs in appropriation and re-presentation.

*Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, written in 1782 by Choderlos de Laclos, has been the basis for three major motion picture adaptations to date: the first, *Liaisons Dangereuses* 1960 by Roger Vadim in 1959, followed by Stephen Frears’ *Dangerous Liaisons* in 1988, and Milos Forman’s *Valmont* in 1989.¹ This epistolary novel generated controversy and publicity at the time of its release, when it was judged to be pernicious not only because of the content of the correspondence, but also because of the apparent honesty of Laclos’s depiction of his correspondents.

The novel as a literary form was the object of much criticism at the beginning of the 18th century, criticism which stemmed from the lack of formal constraints placed on the genre as compared to poetry or theatre; parallel to this was the concern that the then-fashionable technique of interspersing factual names and events among the fictional aspects of the narrative would confuse the audience, leading them to mistake the fiction for fact, and thus giving the novel, this dangerously free form, the potential to influence the beliefs and by analogy the behavior of society. Arguments were made for the replacement of the novel with a new form, “*I’histoire,*” which presented itself as an authentic account of events; in order to lend the desired authenticity to their work, authors adopted the practice of prefacing their work with a disclaimer of sorts, stating that their personal involvement with the novel, which they presented as an autobiography or a correspondence, was limited to editing a document entrusted to or found by them, and thus freeing themselves from the responsibility for any corruption of society which might occur as a result of the publication.²

Laclos’ version of this narrative strategy, a strategy which rapidly became more conventional than convincing even to these presumably naïve readers, was to doubly distance himself, creating a publisher who accepts the letters from an editor; in the editing process, the original correspondence is transformed substantially, as the editor reveals, seemingly inadvertently, in his preface. The prefaces of both the editor and the publisher, in addition to exemplifying 18th-century novelistic practice, convey an important point, which Joan DeJean makes in *Literary Fortifications*: “...no one is prepared to take responsibility for this text.”³ Thus we are left with a work which presents itself not as an original text but as the product of the editor’s manipulations, which claims its authenticity while conceding that this is extremely hard to believe, and which clearly states, in the subtitle to the novel, its intent of instructing, and thus influencing, some unspecified segment of society. To borrow this strategy, I intend to present examples of the interpretive representation of history, which I contrast to the authentic representation of history while reserving my doubts as to its existence.

Of the three film versions, Frears’s adaptation best demonstrates the passage from theoretically authentic to interpretive representation. In adapting this novel for the cinema, Frears claimed to be motivated by a desire to confine his
representation to the text as much as possible, avoiding extraneous plot and dialogue except as necessary for continuity. Extensive research on 18th-century French costume, architecture, landscape, art history and decoration, led Frears and his staff to an understanding of the appropriate visual representation of the novel; this authentic reproduction then became the point of departure for his revised version, achieved by removing the majority of the objects and furniture, and limiting the views of the rooms. Similarly, Frears’s screenwriter took a selective approach to his relation of the events of the correspondence, an approach justified only partially by the requirements of translating from the literary to the cinematic medium.

Frears stated in an interview following the release of the film that one of his inspirations for the visualization of the novel was the Fragonard painting, The Bolt (1778). This work depicts a young couple standing in front of a large door; the man reaches upward, presumably to slide the bolt into place, while gazing into the eyes of the woman he supports with his other arm. Paralleling Laclos’s novel in its intention, this painting presents an alternative to the highly stylized, formal depiction of 18th-century French society in portraiture, and reveals the disparity between public and private behavior. At the same time, Frears’s process in translating the novel to film echoes Fragonard’s method in composing the painting, which seems to have been based on two former drawings: “It was about 1778...that Fragonard took up his composition again with the idea of painting a work in which he could give more power and efficacy to the composition, reduce and simplify the accessories...” Similarly, Frears comes to the project of representing the Liaisons following three previously successful representations: Vadim’s film, a made-for-television film, and a stage production.

The references to Fragonard’s work in Frears’s Dangerous Liaisons may have been partially responsible for the appropriation of Fragonard’s imagery by British fashion designer Vivienne Westwood. In her fall 1991 collection, Fragonard’s 1767 painting, The Swarm of Cherubs, appears on a trench coat. The painting was commented on unfavorably at its exhibition by Diderot, who called it

a fine, large omelette of children; there
are hundreds of them, with their heads, thighs, legs, bodies, and arms interlinked in a particularly skillful way. But there is no strength, no color, no depth, no difference of level...Monsieur Fragonard, it is awfully dull...”

Westwood’s whimsical use of this painting which is itself accepted as a humorous commentary on Rubens’ painting, the Virgin of the Holy Innocents, with cherubs painted in the style of Boucher, is an example of the progressive distancing from the original intention which occurs in the process of appropriation. Art historian Jean-Pierre Cuzin interprets the scene: “...small, naked children, who are comically tangled up, form clusters or garlands, almost completely filling a cloudy sky, in which they are finding it rather difficult to fly away.” If Diderot and his contemporaries in the 18th century failed to see the humor in this work, the critics and consumers of Westwood’s collection would also most likely have missed this layering of meaning in its appropriation and recontextualization of the painting. Cuzin’s reading of the image is reminiscent of the frequent depiction of prerevolutionary working-class French society as a formless, struggling mass. It is this interpretation of the painting which holds special significance in the context of Westwood’s typically populist work, which has been revolutionary in its appeal to the masses, rather than the aristocracy, of fashion consumers.

More recently, in their Spring ‘92 collections, designers Christian Lacroix and Gianni Versace also reinterpret the French 18th century through fashion. Both Lacroix and Versace are especially inspired by Fragonard’s The Swing (1766); Versace also rethinks costumes worn by Norma Shearer in the 1938 Hollywood film Marie Antoinette, while Lacroix takes his influence directly from the costumes in Frears’ Dangerous Liaisons. Versace uses the inspiration of 18th-century France much as Westwood does, although with a different angle; rather than juxtapose two eras in one single garment, he pairs sportswear with formalwear inspired by Fragonard. Versace is clearly using these juxtapositions for shock value, intending to revolutionize fashion to some extent:

We cannot give in to nostalgia. The challenge is always to look ahead and make clothes modern. The mixture of something very old and out of fashion and something very in fashion was interesting to me...

This statement, coming from one of the top three designers working from 18th-century models this year and last, seems to depend on a false assumption—that the 18th century is in fact “out of fashion” at this time.

One of the aspects of Fragonard’s The Bolt which links it thematically with the Liaisons is the notion of imminent sexuality, found behind every door and in every innuendo in the text. In her “18th-Century Vogue,” Madonna uses Dangerous Liaisons as the inspiration for a live performance of her hit single at the 1990 MTV Video Music Awards. In this performance she wears the costume worn by Michelle Pfeiffer in Frears’ film. Pfeiffer’s character, Madame de Tourvel, is the wife of a magistrate, a faithful and religious woman who becomes corrupted and is eventually destroyed by her contact with the Vicomte de Valmont, who plots to add her to his long list of conquests and inadvertently falls in love with her in the process. Despite this choice of costume, Madonna seems to have modeled her performance more on the immorality of 18th-century society implied by the nature of the correspondence than on this character, who in both Laclos and Frears is modest and reserved.
As a recontextualization of voguing, the French 18th century seems at first improbable. However, just as the original video for the single suggests an alternative history for the inspiration of the dance, setting up a series of images which imply a link with the painting and photography of 1930’s Paris, this performance places voguing in what could be interpreted as representing a salon. In this setting the costuming and self-stylization inherent to the dance become suddenly inconspicuous, de-emphasized by the juxtaposition with the 18th-century codes of dress and behavior. The elaborate gestures of self-presentation or self-re-presentation which are controversial in the context of voguing competitions and drag balls become mundane as a result of their frequent role in the recreation of this particular historical setting.

The boundaries between public and private behavior are strained by the sexuality that is only thinly veiled by the formality of the dress and dancing; the scene is reminiscent of one in Forman’s Valmont, in which Valmont dances with four women in his great-aunt’s salon, expressing his relationship to each within the formal structure of the dance. Madonna takes the role of Valmont and thus reverses the stereotype of the man as controller of the seduction, just as in Laclos’ the Marquise de Merteuil proves herself a worthy opponent for Valmont. The 18th-century “Vogue” further enlarges the sphere of the representation of the 18th century, engaging music video in the discussion of Laclos’ novel and of the relevance of the 18th century to twentieth-century popular culture.

As a continuation of the 18th century’s infiltration of various media, we move to an image inspired by 18th-century French courtesan portraiture, taken from Cindy Sherman’s January 1990 exhibition of appropriationist photographs, History Portraits. Sherman also interprets a portrait of Madame de Pompadour, mistress of Louis XV, which appears on a china pattern which has been called a “radical update” of the famous 18th-century version. Sherman’s approach to the series was to interpret rather than to replicate the subject matter of her sources, which range from the early Renaissance to the nineteenth century. Arthur Danto, in his introduction to the published collection, points out that Sherman worked from reproductions and memory to recreate tableaux which she then
Advertisement from VOGUE, Spring '92, Karl Lagerfeld Collection
photographed, achieving a series of images “in which our relationship to the art we know or believe we know was touched in a deep way, demonstrating something about the distance between memory and truth.” Danto neglects to point out that courtesan portraiture in its most authentic form is an unlikely source of “truth” in documenting the French 18th century. Perhaps in response to this, and certainly in contrast to most representations or historical recreations, the distancing of the original or the authentic is clearly revealed in the blatant artifice of Sherman’s representation, in which the elaborate props, costumes, wigs, and false body parts are emphasized as artificial rather than incorporated into an illusion. Despite its seemingly familiar aspects, this photograph could not be linked to one source even by a team of art historians in Munich, who identified its origin as “Boucher/Nattier/Fragonard/Watteau.” Fragonard’s 1778 *The Love-Letter* is one of the many portraits whose influence is seen in Sherman’s recreation. It is interesting that Milos Forman, in visualizing the *Liaisons* for film, defines his approach in similar terms to Sherman’s, explaining that he worked primarily from the recollection of his experience of reading Laclos’s 30 years before, just as Sherman identifies her work as a response to her college art history courses.

Finally, an example of how advertising takes advantage of the mass consciousness of the 18th century, once it has been awakened by the bicentennial of the French Revolution and reinforced by a series of commentaries and revisions such as those we have seen here. Galeries Lafayette, a chain of department stores which provides a source for the essential components of French fashion, opened its first American store in New York in 1991. Their ad campaign, with echoes of “La Marseillaise,” features the slogan: “The French Revolution: Galeries Lafayette est arrivé!” An annotation to this advertising supplement makes the statement: “The French invented risqué, and the world has never been the same.” In fact, neither have *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* or the French 18th century ever been the same since they were made the subject of this ongoing process of recontextualization by the popular media.

*Les Liaisons Dangereuses* is a correspondence which takes place among characters who
have an almost infinite capacity for cruelty and deception. The fictionalized 18th century of the novel has an equally large and somewhat disturbing capacity to conceal and to recover from the events which would eventually destroy some of the correspondents. Although on the surface the revised representation of the 18th century in these interpretations is light-hearted and liberating, as a replacement for "reality" this revision is as disturbing as the novel which inspires it. An inevitable and not entirely rhetorical question arises: what is the motivation for the post-facto establishment of this historical precedent? What lies behind the 20th-century desire to become familiar, and even comfortable, with an 18th-century France which has been reinscribed in culture according to this potentially dangerous set of rules?

1Adaptations of note, but not discussed here, are Charles Brabant's telefilm, Les Liaisons Dangereuses (1979) and Christopher Hampton's stage version of the novel (1985). For further discussion of adaptations see Robert Macubbin's interview with Christopher Hampton in 18th Century Life (May 1990: 80+).
5Cuzin 94.
6Cuzin 92; 94.
7This painting provides evidence that the inspiration of the 18th century extends not only to clothing but to footwear as well. Fragonard draws attention to the girl's shoe, which has flown off of her foot as she is pushed forward on the swing by a man who stands behind her, and is about to land in the bushes where another man, possibly another lover, is hidden. The recent return in popularity of the mule, largely attributable to designer Manolo Blahnik, might well be traced back to the fashion of this shoe style as depicted by Fragonard with its attendant connotations of sexual promiscuity.

From Foreman's Valmont (1989)