Professor David Peimer | Dangerous Liaisons: 'France', The Novel and Sexual Politics

– Okay, today we're going to dive into what for me is a remarkable movie coming out of a fascinating novel, which I'm sure everybody has heard of or seen, Dangerous Liaisons, written in 1782. So that's seven years before the French Revolution, which is the, obviously, the huge important moment. So reason for choosing this, obviously, contemporary film, relatively contemporary, but you know, trying to capture such an important era in French history and European history. So I'm going to focus on the Malkovich movie made by Stephen Frears, the British Director, rather than the Milos Foreman movie. I love Milos Foreman, his work, all of it, it's extraordinary. But I think his version of Valmont is not as effective and powerful with Colin Firth and Annette Benning as, I think this is so brilliant with Malkovich, Glenn Close, and Michelle Pfeiffer. So I'm going to focus on showing some clips from the film and talk about the film and the novel and obviously the era of when it's written before that great massive event of the revolution. So just a couple of quick thoughts without going into him much at all, but this is, by the way, the 1988 movie directed by Stephen Frears, and which by the, I think is an absolute masterpiece. I think Malkovich is brilliant. I think it's really amongst his best work and so is Glenn Close and Michelle Pfeiffer. I think they really rose to the occasion, and I'm going to talk about why I think as well. So the authors of this fascinating novel, Pierre, and excuse my translation, my pronunciation, Pierre Laclos, he was a Freemason and became a general in the army, in the French Army, and he writes the novel in 1782. He wrote other things as well, you know, but this is the one that really is not only remembered, but in the 240 years since he wrote it, has had over 35 adaptations in stage and film, which is quite an extraordinary achievement for something from so long ago. Being in the army, I think he had, and when you read some of his letters and some of his writings, other writings, I think had absolutely no illusions about the reality or the truth of human relationships. In his own words, he said, "I wanted to write a novel which was," and I'm quoting, "Not ordinary, would make a noise, "and would remain on earth after my death." And it became one of the masterpieces of the 18th century. Obviously it's the amorous intrigues of the aristocratic set which has inspired so many adaptations, you know, post, in our times. He, what's interesting about Laclos, he also established a new artillery school, and one little bit of trivia or gossip is that Napoleon was one of his students. He also was a Freemason and he'd lobbied to get women to be allowed into the Freemason lodges, which was refused. He got a six month vacation from the Army to go to Paris and write the novel. If only today all of us could join the Army and get six months off to go and write a novel and sit in Paris or London or New York or wherever. The novel was a huge success, and within about six months, I mean, it was a huge success, huge scandal, all the rest of it, but within six months, within a

month, sorry, it had sold a thousand copies. We have to remember, 1782, so a thousand copies is a smash hit. Number of people who were literate, can read and write, you know, is obviously very, very small, as before the Revolution and before Napoleon, who changes the whole nature of mass education in France. He then switched sides. He was part of, first of all, he was an officer in the King's army. But of course, after the Revolution, quick switch onto his ex-student, joins Napoleon. And he was part of a group who were involved with the invention of the modern artillery shell, his claim to fame in terms of military history. He then became a brigadier general in Napoleon's army of the Rhine. Okay, as I said, I'm not going to go into the Valmont movie, which was a year later in 1989 by Milos Foreman. Although Milos Foreman, as I said, is for me, one of the greatest directors of all time. So what is the story? Let's remind ourselves of the story, 'cause I needed to refresh 'cause there's so many intrigues, so many betrayals, revenge, and plotting and scheming in such a fascinating way. I'm going to try and tease out why and how it's still resonates so powerfully today. Let's just remind ourselves, in essence, of the plot, and forgive my pronunciations again. So the Glenn Close character, Merteuil, is a scheming widow, and she bets her ex lover, Valmont, Malkovich, that he cannot corrupt a recently married honourable woman, Madame Tourvel, Michelle Pfeiffer. So she bets, so Glenn Close bets Malkovich, you can't seduce Michelle Pfeiffer, and especially I want you to seduce her the night before she's due to get married. And that's the premise or the bet at the beginning. And if you do manage to seduce her, the Glenn Close character says, well, then you can sleep with me. But if you don't, you're consigned to a monastery for the rest of your life. So it's already a comedy drama, a playful twist which is set up in the beginning which becomes so self-destructive and dangerous. But what has happened before is that the Glenn Close character Merteuil, she has a secret lover, and she learns that this guy has dumped her and is about to marry a virgin who's 15 years old, and she's furious. First of all, she has been dumped, Glenn Close's character, and secondly, her secret lover is marrying a teenager. So she wants revenge. And by the way, that girl's name is Cecile. So as revenge, the jilted Merteuil, the Close character, gets Malkovich to say, right, he'll go and also seduce the 15 year old the night before her wedding to Glenn Close's character's ex lover. So there's a double plot. That's a fundamental plot going on, is that he, he has to seduce the 15 year old girl who's a virgin because in Glenn Close's character's mind, she has stolen, if you like, her secret lover. She wants revenge. And she also bets Malkovich, you can't seduce a Michelle Pfeiffer. She's honourable, she's full of piety, religious beliefs and religious piety and all the sort of social honourable characteristics. You'll never seduce her. And Malkovich says, ah, that's a worthy prey. Of course I will. But if he doesn't, he has to go to monastery. But if he does, he gets to sleep with the Glenn Close character. Okay, so that's the basic, the story of the plot, if you like. It's important that we remind ourselves because it's so many intricate intrigues that happen,

and it seems like an obvious revenge story, but obviously goes much further. It's also that Malkovich, Valmont, has to sleep with Cecile, that's the 15 year old, before the wedding night. So before she can take her virginity, before she can sleep with the Glenn Close's character's ex-lover. And we have the bet and the wager. What happens during the course of the story is that Malkovich, the Valmont character, falls in love with the Michelle Pfeiffer character, Madam Tourvel, and he falls utterly head over heels for her. Michelle Pfeiffer character falls head over heels for him, which freaks out the Glenn Close character 'cause she loses control and power and starts to plot what she can do against the two of them. And cut a long story short, she schemes it, sets it up in a way that the truth comes out for the Michelle Pfeiffer's character's husband, she does eventually get together with. All the scandal breaks out in Paris, and the Valmont character, Malkovich, kills himself in a duel. He takes the duelling guy's dagger, sword, and pushes it into himself. He kills himself. But just before he dies, he says, Hey, take all my letters and tell everybody in Paris the truth. And the letters capture all the love affairs between him and Glenn Close and Michelle Pfeiffer and all the others and the 15 year old so the truth is all out, the scandal breaks into Paris. And at the end, so Valmont dies, Malkovich, Michelle Pfeiffer dies, okay, it's a very melodramatic tragedy, and Glenn Close left on her own with her love gone, her revenge, all of this ends like that. To me, comedy and tragedy merging more and more as the movie or the story goes on. Inside and of course is betrayal after betrayal after betrayal. And fascinatingly, in Dante's remarkable 13th century poem, The Inferno, when he goes through the 33 layers of hell, and you know, number seven, I think is murder, eight is whatever, robbery, yeah, et cetera, et cetera. But the worst crime of all at the bottom of hell is betrayal. Fascinating of Dante's insight into human nature. And that's where Judas and Brutus and other iconic fictional or non-fictional characters are located in Dante's poem, betrayal is the worst of all human crimes for Dante. And obviously this is a story not only of revenge, but betrayal in a context of the looming Revolution to come seven years after he writes it. The Milos Foreman film was quite criticised, was called, yes, rapturously beautiful, and a lush aristocratic world, but nothing really sexy or funny. Too much indifference from the two main characters, Annette Benning and the Colin Firth character of Madame Merteuil and Valmont. So let's dive into the Stephen Frears. Stephen Frears, interestingly, and for me, this is the one I'm going to show the clips on, just as a bit of interest, he's a British based director, and he was brought up Anglican, and he only discovered when he was in his late twenties, early thirties, that his mother was Jewish, Ruth Danzinger was her name. So just a fascinating, you know, bit of side information. And in an interview, what was interesting with him and Malkovich where Malkovich said, you know, it's interesting that the great irony in in the novel and in the movie is that when somebody really does fall in love, the system cannot hold it. And they link it to the Romeo and Juliet and many, many other, you

know, Anthony and Cleopatra, many of the great iconic, fictional, non-fictional myths and stories come that have come down through our collective histories. You know, that when shown on stage or in film and how much love can really hold or not. Infatuation, sexual love only, whatever. This has also been called the finest psychological analysis of the Libertine era. We all know the Libertine era, it's been called an expose of the Libertine era, a way of life. The sexual debauchery, the corruption, you know, anything goes amongst these aristocrats who have all the wealth in the world, all the time in the world to plot and play and intrigue and have sexual gains and fun and et cetera. Does it show a society in utter corruption and decay, you know, in total decline, that seven years later there's a revolution coming, or not. Is it written to be a pot boiler because he wanted to write, you know, become famous or write something which would really grab the attention. Of course, who's going to buy and read, the aristocrats much more than anybody else? It's still the divine right of kings, aristocratic rule. He shows the court behaviour under Louis the 15th, Louis the 16th, what's fun is that in the novel, he uses military type language as part of the strategy that Valmont and Madam Merteuil create. So it's constantly, well, I don't want to go into it now, but the language of military tactics and military strategy ritually used to illustrate the human relationships. The book creates a huge scandal. It's pre-revolutionary France, the behaviour of the French aristocracy. Now the scandal is, like Oscar Wilde, are they loving reading about themselves and what they have been doing and this is just the army guy writing the stories. You know, it's a lot of fun to read about yourselves. Think about our own media age for a moment. You know, as Oscar Wilde said, the only thing worse than having a bad reputation is having no reputation. So in a scandal obsessed and aristocratic world of, really a huge bubble in a way, people want to talk about each other, they wanted gossip and discuss intrigues, everybody sleeps with everybody else, affairs, mistresses, madames, whatever, sleeping, yeah, snakes and ladders, again, sleeping up the ladders and down the snakes and so on, but also revealing something, you know, profoundly deep. Is it simple decadence? Is it simple to use the jargon about this book, moral corruption? Or is it not something maybe much deeper of deceit in their time, in our time, in anybody's time, which is why it rings so true today. It's deeper than just seven years before the, that massive event of the French Revolution. What did he intend to create a picture of jaded aristocrats just playing out a game of seduction, using others as pawns. Did he intend to write a damning picture of the French aristocrats, just cruelly amusing themselves with each other and with other so-called naive innocent ones? Does it matter or not? Does it matter more or not what we get from it today. And of course we enjoy the devious malice, we enjoy that it was a bestseller. We enjoy that it's a celebration of pleasures without the albatross on our neck of moral guilt, do we not enjoy it? Are there not other things we enjoy, like, again, Oscar Wilde, and many, many other writers of our times and other times. Does it matter what he intended? We can't really know at all. I'm going to

come into this, delve into this more detail. Mary Antoinette, of course, read it and remarked how much she enjoyed it, loved it. Is it a book that was set up to be a critique of the ancien regime, or did it happen by chance to become seen by scholars much later as a critique of the ancien regime, you know, and the end of divine right of kings, the end of aristocracy, the end finally of feudalism, the beginnings of individualist capitalism, the beginnings, perhaps of modernity and the enlightenment. By the way, doesn't matter. The point is that it's around the time of the end of the ancien regime. It's around the time of the end of centuries of history, which have built to have a small group, the aristocrats and the nobles, not only in France, but elsewhere who have access to all wealth, all resources, everything, and the majority are obviously living as peasants, poor, getting hungrier, desperate, jobs, everything else. Something has to give, something has to crack. The fault lines in such a society cannot hold itself. To quote W.B. Yeats, "Things fall apart. "The centre cannot hold. "mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." And I think the centre cannot hold. It has to crack. It's too, in today's jargon, unsustainable. What for me is interesting about this is the fascination we have with us today. The psychology of intrigue, the psychology of deceit, of seductive, of games, which is all leading to sexual conquest, but in truth, human conquest. It's a fascination with this world, not the world of piety and goody two-shoes and sitting in the front of the class and all that. It's the world of all the other stuff, the spider's web. And I think it's as fascinating now as it was then/ For Madame Merteuil, not only revenge. Her motivation, the Glenn Close character, is entertainment as much as revenge. Think of the media people today. The motivation is not only power, ambition, but entertaining themselves and others on their path to power. In a contemporary sense, it's been staged so many times it's been adapted, as I said, the most recent that I've found is that in 2012, it was adapted by a South Korean director. So it's global, this novel. Romance, betrayals, scandal, adventure, the world of opulence comes crashing down. After me, the deluge, as we all know that phrase, seven years after the book is written. The other thing that is makes it a fascinating piece is the charisma, the charm, the intelligence of the Malkovich and the Glenn Close character in the novel and in the movie. I think without that charm and that intelligence and that charisma, I don't think it would hold for today. And it's the brilliance of the writer, the novelist, and Stephen Frears to really bring that out. And I think it's the one thing that the Milos foreman film lacks. It doesn't have that. It focuses too much on intrigue. It doesn't show the relish and the fun and the sheer joy and pleasure with charm and intelligence of weaving so many webs of deceit. So the Frears version is written, was written originally as a play by Christopher Hampton, British playwright, really good playwright, fantastic playwright. He wrote the play from the book for the RAC, which was, and then it was made into the film. If we could show the next slide, please. So this is here, Pierre Laclos, at the top left. You can see he lived 1741 to 1803. And on the right hand side, one of the images from the film of

Madam Merteuil, the Glenn Close character, and Valmont, the Malkovich. Could i have the next slide, please. Thanks. The extraordinary costumes, and when you look at the set and the costumes, they won Oscars for it, is incredible, the attention to detail, the richness, the colour, the sheer opulence of this world of wealth and power, of this era, pre French Revolution, was absolutely, visually it speaks to you. They don't need to speak about the revolution to come because the visual tells us, the audience who can live with such wealth, splendour, and power, and yet spend all their time on fantastic and charismatic sexual intrigues. They have so much time for it and fun, you know, because of how they lived. You could just see it in the costume. You can see in the stage sets, you know, like the Palace of Versailles, each one, it was filmed in France. So you know, the teacups, the way she holds her fingers with the little baby finger, the way you'll see in one of the clips. I'm going to show the way Malkovich reclines, you know, on the seat, the way he sits, the way they move, speak, talk, everything is so performed and poised. Everything is so, it's such a presentation of performance with unbelievably ornate costumes, that these people lived originally in the era of the film. So I think visually it captures the pre-Revolution world compared to we know in our imagination, the starving peasants that we don't need to see because we see the opposite in this. We should see the next slide, please. Thanks. This is just one of the very, very first versions of the original book, you know, published and printed. Before showing some of the clips, we can also see, I think that we admire these characters whether secretly or overtly, because they have a certain freedom, not only through their wealth and opulence and splendour, but there's a certain freedom to go against the fashionable morals and mores of their times. To hell with it, they want to live what they desire. Ultimately, it's a novel of desire, more than moral corruption, more than judging it as a period peace about decadence, seven years before the French Revolution. More than all of that, of course, but even more than, and an intrigue and deceit and power play, for me it's a novel of about the passions of desire and where desire can really lead one, which can lead to happiness, to sadness, it can lead to blessings and curses. It can lead to total self-destruction, death, metaphorical or literal, or it can lead to happiness or mixtures. Her desire rarely grabs us and takes us. And to me, I think for me anyway, the reading is the deepest level is what happens with human desire when we do desire whatever it is, in this case, a man or a woman, whoever. We can call it love, we can call it infatuation, need for sex, whatever. It's desire. And once we unleash the tiger of desire, I dunno how many can control it. So I think we admire that they have the freedom to follow their desire, these characters, and he's aware of it, the writer. This is a totally different kind of book. If we compare it to Charles Dickens', A Tale of Two Cities, and I'm sure everybody, I'm not going to go into now, we all know about it, you know, which is all about the trauma, the tragedy. And Dickens is a brilliant writer, but a completely different approach to capturing the same historical era. I don't think one is

more or less powerful than the other. All I want to do is tease out what this is here. But to see our two writers deal completely opposite ways with almost the same topic. I'm going to show a couple of playwrights, Bookner, and one or two others who also deal with the French Revolution in very different ways. So amorality, unconventional and insistent on instant gratification or slightly delayed gratification. Follow the horse of desire. Yet when you ride the tiger of one's own desire, to adapt Euphrates' phrase. So when there's, how does that stack up against this whole idea of the enlightenment happening, of Rousseau and so many of the others, the enlightenment and the triumph of reason over religious superstition, of reason over the power of religion plus the state ruling everybody, the beginnings of modernity with reason, science, rationality, logic, the enlightenment. What does it do about desire? And for me that's as fascinating a question, is reason and desire as the whole period that it's set in, you know, the world before the French Revolution. It's a realm of pretence, performance and total duplicity where the duplicity is the norm, pretence is the norm. Is it so different today? It's a question. Fascinating how religion is used because religion is used by Valmont, the Malkovich character, to seduce the Michelle Pfeiffer character, 'cause she's full of piety and religious conviction and et cetera. But then she, he uses, he susses, how am I going to seduce? I need to use what the other one's got, what she believes in already, and I'm going to use that to seduce her and get her to do what I want. You know, pretend the belief in spirituality, pretend the belief in religion, in piety, et cetera, et cetera, and go along and create even more and then turn it and twist it. So it's a fascinating novel and the film captures it, of not any desire, but how to seduce I guess in terms of the novel. So some have argued that it's a critique of the corruption of the aristocrats pre-Revolution France. And of course it can be seen as that. Others have argued, no, it's a celebration of hedonism, of the Libertine ethos amongst the privileged, of course. Everybody else is hungry. Coming back to desire, desire is seen as a driving force. It's a motivating force in this entire film. Desire itself is the most wanted commodity. In a society where people live in such luxury that they want for nothing, anything, the click of a finger, get it. So the very act of wanting something which they maybe cannot get, was much harder to get, makes that commodity much more valuable, and hence desire kicks in. And for me it's fascinating when we look at how desire plays out amongst human nature. And they use the metaphor of war and military battles for all the intrigues and the conquests and all the little tactics and strategies to get what they want. They use the language of education to get what they want. The Valmont character and the Glenn Close talk about how to receive an education. What is that? It means a loss of innocence. It means a loss of virginity, it means seduction, not education of go to school, university, getting certificates of whatever degrees, you know, the rest of it. No education is how to seduce, get up the ladder in a tough society, achieve what you want for gratification. What is an education is around seduction, not only sexual and erotic, but how to

seduce whoever to get where you want and seduction and education is the end, losing innocence to learn how to manipulate and deceive to also achieve what you want. That's real education in the novel. Okay, so if we can show the first clip, this is the trailer from the movie.

(A video clip from the 1988 film "Dangerous Liaisons" plays)

– I've always known I was born to dominate your sex and avenge my own.

– Is there anything I could do to help?

– Come back when you've succeeded with Madam de Tourvel?

– [Valmont] Yes.

– [Merteuil] And I will offer you a reward.

– My love. I have this appalling reputation.

– [Tourvel] Yes, I have been warned about you.

– What is true of most men is doubtless of him.

– [Tourvel] I can't.

– [Valmont] Is love what you mean.

– [Tourvel] You promised not speak of it.

– [Valmont] Yes, of course, I understand, but I must know––

– [Tourvel] I can't.

– I want the excitement of watching her betray everything that's most important to her.

– I love you so much.

– You may genuinely be unaware of this, but I can see quite plainly that you're in love with this woman.

– No, not at all.

– Why do you suppose we only feel compelled to chase the ones who run away.

– Immaturity.

– Okay, thanks. I mean, if we can hold there. Always check, you know, go after the one who is hardest to get or difficult, you know, that is

desire. When you have everything you can possibly want, all the opulence and the wealth, well, then maybe the unattainable, that the thing that you can't have become so much more desirable in that way and therefore becomes a commodity of desire that we want to achieve. It's a fascinating play and twist on how desire plays out I think in different cultures and different classes. What's also interesting before we go onto the next clip is Stephen Frears used a huge number of closeups, far more than in most movies, not only romance novels, movies, and what this does, it creates a very intimate feeling for us, the audience. We're going to see this in the next clip, where we feel that we are inside the scene with the characters. And that's a fascinating achievement for a film director. And it's, you know, it can be criticised for being overused, but I didn't think so. I think he's used it just enough of that closeup because we need all the intricacies of the face, the eyes, the movements, the hands, the fingers, everything. Let's remember, it was originally written as a novel full of letters. Basically it's all letters amongst all the characters and the letters they're writing to each other, which was done obviously at the time. You know, and what is the effect of letters? Letters where people reveal their most intimate selves, their secret truths. Like today, we might in WhatsApp or in texts, we reveal our secret truths, letters are the same. So it's enormously intimate. And I think he visualises us through the closeup of the camera zooming in on the characters' faces. The next scene is my favourite and I think extraordinary in the movie. If we can show it, please Emily.

(A video clip from the 1988 film "Dangerous Liaisons" plays)

- Your damned cousin, the VEHL-AWNGED bitch, wanted me away from Madame de Tourvel. Well now I am and I intend to make her suffer for it. Your plan to ruin her daughter, are you making any progress? Is there anything I could do to help? I'm entirely at your disposal.

- Well, yes, I told DAHN-SLEE you would act as his confidante and advisor. I need you to stiffen his resolve, if that's the phrase. I thought, if anyone could help him--

- Help, he doesn't need help, he needs hindrances. If he has to climb over enough of them, he might inadvertently fall on top of her. I take it he hasn't been a great success.

- He's been disastrous. Like most of the intellectuals, he's intensely stupid.

- I often wonder how you manage to invent yourself.

- I had no choice, did I? I'm a woman. Women are obliged to be far more skillful than men. You can ruin our reputation and our life with a few well chosen words. So of course I had to invent not only myself, but ways of escape no one has ever thought of before. And I've

succeeded because I've always known I was born to dominate your sex and avenge my own.

- Yes, but what I asked was how.

- When I came out into society, I was 15. I already knew that the role I was condemned to, namely to keep quiet and do what I was told, gave me the perfect opportunity to listen and observe, not to what people told me, which naturally was of no interest, but to whatever it was they were trying to hide. I practised detachment. I learned how to look cheerful while under the table, I stuck a fork into the back of my hand. I became a virtuoso of deceit. It wasn't pleasure I was after, it was knowledge. I consulted the strictest moralist to learn how to appear, philosophers to find out what to think, and novelists to see what I could get away with. And in the end, I distilled everything to one wonderfully simple principle: Win or die.

- So you're infallible, are you?

- If I want a man, I have him. If he wants to tell, he finds that he can't. That's the whole story.

- And was that our story?

- I wanted you before we'd ever met. My self-esteem demanded it. Then when you began to pursue me, I wanted you so badly. It's the only time I have ever been controlled by my desire. Single combat. Ah, Madame--

- If we can hold it there, please, Emily. Thank you. This for me is, is one of the best written scenes in a play or a film, one of the best acted by these two. I think it's an extraordinary piece of writing by Christopher Hampton and an extraordinary piece of acting. So much of the whole film for me is in that scene and it's one of my favourite scenes in all film, what I said when we're talking about desire. The virtuoso of deceit captures so much of what we speaking about. You know, the art of the dissembler, you know, what's on the surface, what's inside. The role of women in in these times, in the times that she, in the times of the French Revolution, et cetera. The role of women, other times, the role of other people. Whenever, anybody who's been held back. So many of themes and yet, and we see the visual of such splendour and opulence, and yet we get such an intimacy with the characters through the use of closeup and the occasional long shot. And incredibly filmed, acted and written piece. Okay, so we get this, and I want to contrast this, this is earlier on in the movie with what happens later, once she's lost everything, where Valmont is, has lost the duel and basically taken the other guy's sword, I'm not going to go into the detail of the plot, and stabbed himself much deeper. He dies. And where she, so Vermont has died, but we see she really loved Valmont in the scene towards the end here. It's not just a game here. So she loses that. He is already dead. The other lovers are dead. When

it dawns on the Glenn Close character completely, they're all gone, she's alone with her memory. We can show the next scene towards the end of the movie. The scandal has erupted in Paris.

(A video clip from the 1988 film "Dangerous Liaisons" plays)

– Get out, get out, get out.

– Okay, thanks Emily. If we can hold it there, please. So what we see very early on in the movie, we see the Glenn Close character looking at her, the mirror in her dressing room. And like we saw in that earlier scene, you know, full of pride and high status and feels very good and confident and very clever and witty and charming and charismatically plotting and planning and scheming. Here, the mask is gone. The art of the dissembler has crumbled. The mask has gone. Literally the makeup comes off. She's in front of the mirror with the cold simple truth of her aloneness in the world. Not only that, now Paris has got to know about it, the scandal, they boo at the opera. And of course they're all doing the same, not that she's doing much different, but you know, the cardinal sin, she's been caught, or it's become public through Valmont getting revenge by releasing a whole lot of the letters, which have revealed the truth of her scheming. So but for me it's that transformation of how the closeup reveals from that earlier part, which is a performance, a cover, not only makeup, but the costume and everything until the naked truth of aloneness is revealed. Extraordinary book ending, if you like, in the film of what happens with, you know, the brilliant, the art of the brilliant dissembler. She's tantalising, obviously she's devious, wicked, but we love her. We relish, we feel so much for her because she has the charm, the charisma, the intelligence, as does Malkovich. And if we watched some of the other scenes with Malkovich, you would see for me it's the brilliance of her and him and Michelle Pfeiffer in a different way. This close up going from self-satisfaction to complete loss through betrayal. We feel as if we are being whispered to, that we are, you know, eavesdropping, but we are inside the room with these characters and that's an achievement of the director, how the closeup works with the actor's face and having so many closeups, and of course the acting. She's corrupt, but majestically corrupt, as is Malkovich. She's like a queen with a touch of evil in a fairytale. We are taken into her confidence, into Malkovich's confidence through this intimacy I'm talking about, and I think he gets it because the original novel is written in letters, which is so intimate, like text and WhatsApp, everything today. So we come, we are taken into the confidence of the characters. We become complicit and part of the scheming, and that's part of the fascination. And that's what contemporary media does. Social media, WhatsApp, all the others, we are drawn into the magnetism and the majesty of the deepest thoughts and secrets of our closest or not so close people. And I think it's so similar to today of how desire or the loss of desire can play out. It's how we feel so personally involved with things that we are not personally involved

with. And the camera, the media of today, all of these things do it. And I think it's got to do with how desire is performed in a society. So it's this sense of complicity with the characters, that we are with them that makes the movie such an extraordinarily riveting experience for me. And it's rare in period movies 'cause period movies are usually much more long shots. You're watching the action, it takes over, adventure, romance, you know, big stuff. Frears is going the other way. We the audience are in the room with the characters. That's totally different. That's WhatsApp, texting. The metaphor for sex and for intrigue is war. The prey is a 15 year old virgin or the prey is Michelle Pfeiffer, whoever. And it's done with the Malkovich character, with a kind of casual flourish of the master seducer. Malkovich is not classic, you know the Clark Gable, the handsome actor if you like, or Don Juan, but what he brings is an intelligence, haunted quality, a childishness, a confidence. He's not the classic or to me stereotype leading man, and that makes a fascinating difference. It's a bit like we look at Bogart in Casablanca. It's a haunted childlike quality almost that he brings to the leading man role, and that's far more intriguing than just, you know, pretty boy face or pretty girl face for the leader either way. And that's charisma for me. And she goes from the epic dissembler as they all do to this at the end.

I think also with the Michelle Pfeiffer character, she's so smart in her acting, and I think it's often underestimated 'cause people just see a pretty face. But what she does and her part has often been called the most difficult. Now the others are also hard, but Michelle Pfeiffer's part is the hardest. Why? Because how do you act virtuous, pious, goody two-shoes without you becoming boring on stage or in film? The most virtuous who has no vices is boring to watch for more than a minute or two or 30 seconds, if you like, on stage and film time. It's the honest truth. So it's how does Michelle Pfeiffer do it. For me, she doesn't try to act virtuous, she embodies it. What does that mean? She uses her beauty and makes it almost spiritual. So the beauty of the face and the figure, the way she moves, walks, everything when you watch it carefully is made almost, it's got a spiritual touch. So it's almost like there's a bit of purity that shines through. It's physically embodied rather than trying to act the goodie two shoes, the virtuous, it's just assumed it's there already. That's hard to achieve in acting I'd never underestimate it for a second. So what begins as delicious amusement for these wonderfully debauched aristocratic characters ends up in this self-destruction. The movie won screenplay for the best costume, Oscars for the best screenplay, adapted screenplay, costume design, and won the British Film Award for supporting actress for Michelle Pfeiffer and best adapted screenplay for Christopher Hampton. Interesting and of course awards for, the Tony Awards and RAC awards, British Awards for the theatre version of this play. During the production, a bit of lovely gossip, Malkovich did have an affair with Michelle Pfeiffer, which led to his marriage becoming toast, Malkovich's marriage. Pauline Kael

said that it is, the film is alive. This is one of the great theatre theorists and critics. The film is alive, it is heaven in a way that movies rarely are. Washington Post, all these things, they rave, they rave, they rave without going into too many of them. But it's become iconic. It's become a cult film. And I've tried to tease out some of the reasons why. Interestingly, Malkovich the only character who created a bit of division amongst critics and scholars. I think he's absolutely brilliant in the form, if not he's best, then it's amongst his best, because of the qualities I've mentioned. And the sheer intelligence, and therefore, and through that the charisma of this actor comes through. He's not pretty boy face playing a leading role, the Don Juan of all great seducers, it's intelligence, it's wit, it's charm, it's an insight, all the rest done through the voice, the eyes, the face, the body, everything, it's so brilliantly worked on. There's a kind of devilish charm and a seductiveness. For me, it's remarkable. What's interesting is that Malkovich also talks about the Michelle Pfeiffer character, that her intelligence and poise stand out. But there's something else. She's more than just a little haunted. And that adds to that spirituality I was talking about how Michelle Pfeiffer's character embodies, you know, piousness.

Okay, if we can show the next clip, please. This is Valmont, the Malkovich character dying after the duel.

(A video clip from the 1988 film "Dangerous Liaisons" plays)

– I want you to somehow, somehow to get to see Madam de Tourvel. I understand she's very ill. That is why this is most important. I want you to tell her that I cannot explain why I broke with her as I did, but that since then my life has been worth nothing. I pushed the blade in deeper than you just have, my boy, and now I need you to help me withdraw it. Tell her it is lucky for her than I have gone and I am glad not to have to live without her. Tell her her love was the only real happiness that I have ever known. Will you do that for me?

– I will.

– It's all very well finished, sorry no.

– Let him be, he had good cause I don't believe that's something anyone has ever been able to say about me.

– If we can hold it there, please, Emily. Riveting acting, riveting writing. If we can show the next clip, please, this is from an interview with Malkovich.

(A video clip of an interview with John Malkovitch plays)

– Let's ask John Malkovich to continue this description of the character of Valmont: Unscrupulous, possibly lecherous, highly

intelligent and yet also vulnerable. What, what else might you add to?

- Rich, spoiled. Haunted.

- [Interviewer] Yeah.

- And very childish.

- [Interviewer] Is it the haunted childlike aspect of it that maybe drew you to the character more than the machinations of the man?

- Probably, yeah.

- [Interviewer] Because somehow I sense watching you on screen with that part, that it's in the later part of the picture when you are wounded by your vulnerability to this woman, somehow I sense this is maybe what John Malkovich has been watching for in this character, and this is our payoff now to this man.

- Well, not necessarily. I mean, I enjoyed really all of it. I like the relationship between Merteuil and Valmont, I mean, the sort of essential meanness of it and hideousness of it, and the sort of mocking superiority of other people's feelings is something I personally enjoyed a great deal.

- [Interviewer] And such fine minds to be going in those particular directions.

- Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, Carlisle said that there's a dark spot following all of us that is the shadow of ourselves.

- [Interviewer] Interesting too because he was writing at a period of time not long after the writing of this novel and other classic novels of seduction like Clarissa. What is going on maybe in the tenor of the age of Enlightenment that becomes so obsessed with seduction, I wonder? Is the popular novel already finding its primary subject, I wonder?

- Well, it's funny we were talking earlier about the fact that it's a really un-erotic culture right now, and that's something I think people lose, and it's un-erotic because it's un-repressed. I mean, very difficult to have sort of un-repressed eroticism because a lot of times if you think you can have it, you might not really want it so much.

- [Interviewer] And could we compare it to the tightening of the corsets and the swelling up of the flesh above the bodice. One is a consequence of the other, isn't it? Is there something about this kind of age that might hold a lesson for our day and age where we pride ourselves on our, oh, we're so upfront about who we are and how we

love and what our motives are. This is an upfront age and yet maybe it's just as deceitful as the late 18th century. Valmont and the count, would never go onto a talk show, for example, and bare their souls, would they.

– No, no, I don't think so, I doubt it. But I don't know that we're any less deceitful because we're probably no less confused. We just shut it out more., as I'm sure they did then when the Marquis tells Valmont that he really is in love and he just can't admit it and sort of laughs it off. I don't think he goes off and broods about it necessarily until it's too late, until he realises she's right.

– [Interviewer] There has to be a major component to the acting in this film having to do with costumes. Could you describe first––

– Okay, great, thank you. Now I'll hold on the last clip, just to say that the last clip was a brief interview with Glenn Close and in essence they, you know, some of these interviews are so naive. She's asked, you know, would you like to have lived in that era and da da da, the amazing costumes and opulence and everything, and she said never. She said the smells would be unbearable, to live with those smells, even if you're living in the Palace of Versailles or wherever. But she also does talk a little bit about that fantastic phrase of Christopher Hampton, the writer, of the virtuoso of deceit as the key for her character, of course, and how deceit and desire constantly rub and scratch up against each other. Okay, so let's hold it there and thank you very much everybody.

And I can, we could do some questions, which I can access here.

Q & A and Comments

So Marion, we read Dangerous Liaisons in high school, loved and reread it not long ago. That's fantastic. I know I re-watched it for the presentation today. Stunned from 1988, how brilliant that story is in the writing and the acting and the filming.

Jillian, best version was Alan Rickman. Yeah, Lindsay Duncan. They did it, the barbecue, and you're right Jillian, fantastic version, the stage version of of Hampton's play.

And Janice, there's currently the prequel on Lions Gate, which is wonderful, how Camille came to be the woman she became sawing Leslie Manfield. Oh, okay, fantastic, shot in Prague. Beautiful, thank you, Janice.

Q: Was the book based on fact?

A: No, I think it's entirely fiction. I mean he made up the characters

and the story, but I'm sure that he, he was a general in the army, so he obviously mixed, well, he was a general Napoleon's army, sorry, but he was a high up officer before, so he had obviously mixed and knew, or observed at least some of these aristocratic types.

Q: What happened to all the unwanted babies? There was no birth control.

A: Absolutely. Either mother or baby died, or birth, spot on. I know what they used for condoms in ancient Rome. So I'm just thinking right now they might have had some version of condoms as well. I'd have to check it out.

Q: What happened to consent? This is sexual harassment. The MeToo movement should have come years ago.

A: Well, it's an entirely different era, 240 years ago, entirely different period, historically.

Q: Is there an opera based on it? Seems perfect material for one.

A: It's a fascinating idea of yours, Lynn and Rodney. We would have to find a way to get that sense of intimacy, that we are inside the space with them, with opera, not that we are observing this majestic, magnificent, huge spectacle, that very intimate feeling for the intricacy. But I'm sure it could be done. It'd be fascinating actually to do it in opera.

Q: Did Laclos survive the French Revolution?

A: Yep, he died 1803 I think. No, I've got the dates earlier on there. And as I said, he was a general in Napoleon's army after the Revolution. He switched sides. I think a lot in the military could and did from being pro-the King to being pro-the revolution and then Napoleon afterwards.

Valerie, the title page informs us that it's letters written for instructional education. Yes. Not sure if this would've had to have more been a way to get to increase the sales to be frank. But a popular, it's almost like putting together a whole lot of WhatsApps or emails or texts today. So letters, it would've been a popular, a new style, but not totally new, but he uses it almost completely in the novel to get that level of intricate intimacy.

Marion, Amazing how modern the epistolary novel remains. Absolutely. You know, epistles, letters even think of, you know, Paul in the Bible, you know, it's epistles. It's to try and make things speak to the individual. So people feel they've been spoken to so personally. The effect is so powerful on a mass audience, whether readers or whoever.

Q: Can you explain the line, the cruel line Valmont throws at Madam de Tourvel?

A: Yeah, I think that he, because his disposition is to scheme and manipulate and basically conquer, he's driven by conquest and seduction, it's a journey that he loves almost more than the actual conquest in the end, or both equally to do it. Once you ride the tiger of desire, there's no going back.

Barb wrote, oh thank you very kindly for your comments. Catherine, French aristocracy had total control over the proletariat. Yep. The story illuminates the power play possible within the aristocracy. The unattainable is the most desirable. Yes, and the more illicit, the more erotic is the game. Absolutely Catherine. And that's what we've been trying to tease out, you know, here today. The unattainable is the desirable, as you said, and the more illicit or the more unattainable, more erotic, spot on.

Thank you. Valerie, Music accompanying the trailer's very appropriate. Yep.

Q: Do you think the film might have been improved if they'd had French accents?

A: I thought about that a lot and it's a great question. I don't think so. Because I keep thinking of Peter Sellers playing the Pink Panther and I keep thinking of him saying, why are we speaking English with a French accent? You know, unless you can get that accent perfect, a hint of any other accent, American, British, anything, would I think mess it up. I think they've tried to use their natural accents but use the body and the way of speaking, everything, to capture the era and/or imagination of the era and the characters and the aristocratic nature of it.

Marion, oh thank you, you watched TAR-TOOTH. The imaginary invalid again. That's great. Thank you. From Molière to Dangerous Liaisons. Yolandi, thank you. Nice comments.

Dennis, Finally intriguing with the British director and playwright and presumably British funding filmed location in France. The cast was almost highly American. Yes, they speak about it a lot, Stephen Frears and Christopher Hampton, about why they chose the American actors. They said they just really wanted the actors they felt could crack it and they felt that Glenn Close would be spot on and Malkovich, you know, they didn't really speak that much about nationality of the actors, but just they were looking for who could inhabit what they were looking for in their vision of the film to the end, which goes to speak to cast the best. You know, don't cast because of political directness. In my opinion, that's what acting is. You act.

Vivian, how about the Vadim movie with Jeanne Moreau? Yes, I know it's fascinating and very, very, it's, I think it's very powerful and beautiful, but it's a a little bit dated for me and this one I think is a bit more contemporary for our era.

My opinion Sandy, I never felt convinced with Malkovich. For me it was too flat.

Oh, that's a great point Sandy. And some of the critics would agree with you. For me, I see the intelligence and the charisma that comes through that just it's, it's burning inside him but the price you pay is a lack of emotion. That is true.

Hannah. When my daughter saw Malkovich on stage, she wrote in and praised his acting, fantastic. That's great. Hannah, He phoned the next day. Malkovich phoned and left a message for your daughter to phone him. Answered the phone and couldn't believe it but she didn't phone back. Hannah... That's an amazing story. This is incredible, this Lockdown University. Such stories and experiences everyone has. Thank you for sharing.

Bobby, I think Malkovich voice has a hint of femininity. Yes. And a softness which makes him such very seductive. Yeah and his casual cat-like mannerisms heightens the impact. You've written it superbly. I could not have written it better.

The impact of Glenn Close's vulnerability and passion. She's hot, he's cool. You got it, Bobby, lovely.

Q: Is the Glenn Close character booed in part because she's failed to keep it under wraps? A game that everyone else has played in a society. Not boo because of immorality of the intrigue. Part of winning the game in danger played by everyone would be to deceive a society and not be exposed.

A: I think so I think you know, when you're caught out in the society, you're toast and also part of the game is to not be caught. Part of Valmont's revenge at the end is the release of those letters that we saw in his dying scene 'cause that's going to expose everything. So he gets revenge on her finally. She's caught. Disraeli once said, what is vice to some is virtue to others and what is virtue to some is vice to others. And the trick is to know the difference between which group you belong to. I'm adapting Disraeli's comment here, so forgive my inaccuracy, but it's something close to that.

Q: What about the natural hair in the film? Did they wear wigs?

A: Yes, absolutely.

Rita, thank you for your kind comment, everyone. Thank you Carla. Thank you. They're all very kind comments here Janice. The costumes in the prequel are extraordinary. The customers are extraordinary and the music and that is what I mean. The costumes and the set, it creates, we get the feeling of the ancien regime, you know, it cannot sustain. It's a house of cards. It's got a crack, French Revolution seven years later.

Jack, what about the French film ? It's great, I really like it. Tony, Dangerous Liaisons as an opera and two acts. Oh, okay, the English libretto. I didn't know that. Thank you Susan. Maybe you want to watch the movie. Okay. Enjoy it Susan. Have fun watching the movie and interesting, watch Glenn Close's lipstick colour change the mood. Yep. It's as subtle as a change of lipstick, colour and a holding of the finger or movement of the foot. You know, it's so intimate like the novel style of letters. It's so intimate that we feel, we so close physically to them. Okay. Thank you very much everybody and hope you have a great rest of the weekend, and Emily, thanks again.