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## Fiction and Film for French Historians & Cultural Bulletin

### *The French Revolution on TV in the New Millennium*

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A number of television productions were aired in 1989 to celebrate the bicentennial of the French Revolution. Perhaps the most famous is the two-part *La Révolution, Les Années Lumières* and *Les Années terribles*, sponsored by the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of National Education. When it came out, the series was accused of conveying the new “consensus” on the Revolution. Indeed, its two distinct “phases” (as each part is called) argued that there were actually two revolutions, a good and a bad one, expressing, as some put it, a “Girondist” point of view. It should be noted that although the series has become a standard reference, it had only a lukewarm reception in 1989; the drama was shown at the end of the year when audiences were probably saturated with bicentennial celebrations.



How do things look twenty years on? French television producers are showing renewed interest in the period but not necessarily within the same narrative structure. How can one explain this renewal? What ideas do these fictions convey? Two television dramas broadcast on French public television in 2009 and 2011 will help shed some light on the issue.

#### *1788 et demi, an eye on the pre-Revolution that forestalls teleology*

In January 2011 France 3 broadcast a 6-part miniseries, *1788 et demi*, created by Martine Moriconi and Sylvain Saada. The plot revolves around the Saint-Azurs, a noble family ensconced in an estate near Bordeaux. The approach was tongue-in-cheek, with a soundtrack inspired by Queen and Muse. In this telling, the Saint-Azurs’ revolution does not begin in 1789 but in 1788 when the Count and his three daughters are driven out of their castle because of a convoluted story of inheritance. This is the change that matters and the rest does not really affect them. The Assembly of the Notables of 1787, the forthcoming Estates General are the least of their worries. This was probably the case for many of their contemporaries but this approach is strikingly different from the versions produced for the bicentennial. Although it deliberately ignores the beginnings of the Revolution, *1788 et demi* nonetheless conveys a good sense of societal complexities at the time. In this regard the series showcases the latest historiographical trends, for instance, developments in cultural history. By focusing on groups formerly neglected, it goes beyond the caricature that opposes coarse, starving peasants to refined but decadent nobles. It was these simple-minded schemas that explain why Marc Ferro considered films on the Revolution to be reactionary. From the scriptwriter’s perspective, a decadent nobility obviously offers more narrative possibilities than sordid rural realism. By necessity, a more complex narrative of the revolutionary period entails a truer representation of French society. This is what *1788 et demi* tried to do.

Bande annonce 1788 et demi...



First of all, the series grants the history of women an important place. Count Saint-Azur has three daughters and it is they who drive the plot. The eldest, Victoire, is a real Enlightenment *femme savante*, fascinated by science, who spends much of her time in her laboratory. The second, Pauline, spends her days daydreaming about the Court at Versailles, which, for her, boils down to the latest fashion and unbridled sexuality. As for the youngest, Charlotte, she is a true tomboy who often dresses like a man and is handy with a weapon. However quirky, these characters are not totally invented. One can find historical personages confronted with similar situations. Moreover, the three sisters represent the archetypal threats haunting eighteenth-century misogynist imagination. The learned lady embodied by Victoire is a provincial Madame de Genlis, subject to ambient mockery. Charlotte, dressed like a man, has a counterpart in Adélaïde Olier, a young woman whose story is recounted in *Le Courier de l'Europe* in 1784.[1] Disguised as a sailor, she fought on a warship and got a pension from the king to reward her feats in battle. Lastly, Pauline's erotic romps echo the *libelles* on Marie-Antoinette in which the castrating queen threatens royal male power. To that extent, the screenplay inserts into its narrative the gender problematics that have emerged in French historiography in the last twenty years.

The Count and Countess of Saint-Azur separated after eight years of marriage. Because there was no way to divorce before the Revolution, the Countess withdrew to a convent she subsidizes. It is therefore treated here as a place of freedom and female sociability, a view that complements the one offered by Diderot in *La Religieuse*. The Count, a retired naval officer, is representative of his time. As a real Enlightenment man, he is fascinated by the new sciences and devotes his time, and that of his blacksmith, improving on ballistics. He embodies the patriotism common to his class in the second half of the century. In addition, *comme de rigueur*, he keeps a young seamstress in high style in Bordeaux, while his daughters scrounge for food. The Countess of Saint-Azur's new lover is more interesting. His name is Mordechai Hazan and he is a young rabbi. His presence is not incongruous in the Bordeaux region, which contained one of the kingdom's biggest Jewish communities. We get an accurate representation of a Jewish village where the poorest members of the community lived.

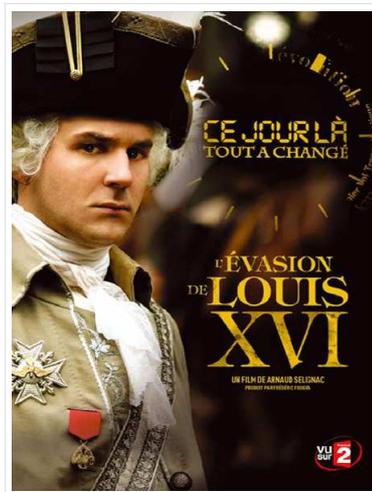
Last but not least, *1788 et demi* introduces the former slave, Balthazar, the Count of Saint-Azur's estate overseer, brought to France from the West Indies. This reminds us that 1788 was also the year of the creation of the *Société des amis des noirs* that criticized the laws enacted during Louis XVI's reign forbidding Blacks from entering the kingdom (1777) and interracial marriage (1778).

This does not mean that the viewer is expected to sympathize with the Saint-Azurs despite awareness that they might not fare so well during the Revolution. Not least because this noble family has discovered a neat way of solving its problems: they get rid of troublemakers by dumping their bodies in the pond at the back of the estate. Marc Ferro might still reproach this series for being reactionary because of its focus on the ruling class, but we are not asked to weep over their fate as is so often the case.

As a result, twenty years after the bicentennial, *1788 et demi* seems to present a perfect contrast to the 1989 versions: the narrative it constructs does not focus on major events or important dates but privileges a new connection to the past indebted to cultural history and current historiography. Paradoxically, most commentators insisted that the series made no pretense at historical accuracy and that one could forgive its inaccuracies because its aim was simply to entertain. Its intention was indeed to make viewers laugh, but that does not disqualify its historical interpretation. The implication is that for critics as well as for most viewers, for something to be treated as "history" it must coincide with the national narrative adopted during the bicentennial and that still dominates primary school education. It would appear that if television productions have moved on, audience expectations have remained much the same. In France, historical fiction often reproduces what Raphaëlle Moine calls "fictions patrimoniales,"[2] dramas in which the celebration of national history is at stake. They became particularly popular in the 1980s and remain so today. The bicentennial somehow granted them prestige so that those who challenge the formula can't be taken seriously. Another recent TV movie also expresses a new approach, although in a different vein.

***L'évasion de Louis XVI, changing the national narrative***

*L'évasion de Louis XVI*, made for France 2 by Arnaud Ségnac, was broadcast in February 2009. It is part of a series called "Ce jour-là, tout a changé!" that includes episodes on Henri IV and Charles de Gaulle. The goal of each episode is to revisit pivotal days in the history of France. In Louis XVI's case, the focus is on the flight to Varennes, renamed here "Louis XVI's Escape." We see everything through the king's eyes as he secretly leaves Paris with his family in June 1791, and we are called upon to embrace his perspective. This is in stark contrast with the approach adopted during the bicentennial. In *La Révolution*, Louis XVI had touched a chord thanks to the powerful interpretation by Jean-François Balmer. The monarch was portrayed as a kind man, with a real desire to do good, but with no ability to carry this out. He had a rolling gait, he could not control his nasal voice; despite being a cuckold, he depended on his wife. He inspired pity not admiration. He was likeable because it was hard to take him seriously as a monarch, but this implied that his death was no great loss for France. Why then had such a harmless figure been beheaded? The saga treated the execution of Louis XVI as a step toward the Terror. This fitted with the master narrative constructed at the end of the Cold War, but also expressed what was commonly known about Louis XVI in 1989, that is to say, not much. The leading French historians of the Revolution deemed him an unworthy topic of study. Michel Vovelle dismissed him as no more than the insignificant character described by Lavisse, not a bad man, but a stupid and weak one. As for François Furet, he admitted Louis XVI remained a mystery to him: "entre l'héritier du trône et le souverain martyr, les historiens ont de la peine à cerner la part qui revient au dernier monarque absolu de notre histoire dans la suite d'événements qui emporte l'Ancien Régime et la plus vieille monarchie de l'Europe." [3]



By becoming the main character in *L'évasion de Louis XVI*, the king drives the action and thus loses his passive role. He is presented as a real head of state and, what is more, a gifted one: he is sensitive, sure of himself and confident in his seductive power over his subjects. He is also presented as a man of peace, a patriot king who would never have agreed to shed French blood. His support for constitutional monarchy is never questioned because bad faith cannot feature in such a version. His execution still seems absurd, but this time because this Louis XVI comes across as the best ruler France ever had. In light of this, his death is ascribed to the jealousy of vindictive revolutionaries who allied themselves to an angry, bestial mob, depicted in a flashback on 6 October 1789. Despite its exaggeration, this portrait of the king is probably more exact than the one offered in 1989. It brings the king to life through a fair representation of how he saw himself. This insight into Louis XVI's psychology may shed a useful light on the Revolution. It might explain why the confrontation with the king was more virulent than initially anticipated, during the Estates General for instance.[4] but the interpretation becomes more problematic once the viewer embraces the

king's point of view, culminating in the epilogue's conclusion that the flight failed due to bad luck and some lack of judgment:

A la tête d'une France au zénith de sa prospérité et de sa puissance, Louis XVI aurait pu être un roi glorieux, il ne fut qu'un roi martyr. Souverain bienveillant, instruit et intelligent, Louis XVI aimait son peuple avec sincérité. Mais dans le tourbillon de la Révolution, il manqua et de clairvoyance et de chance. Ratée, l'évasion de Louis XVI fut le fiasco de son projet politique. En partant le temps d'une journée, le roi de France avait laissé la place à une idée nouvelle, une idée qui allait rayonner à travers le monde : la république.

The epilogue becomes even more interesting once we note how it jars with the traditional national narrative: it almost turns Louis XVI into the father of the Republic, so that the Revolution is no longer presented as a rupture. The execution of Louis XVI is a moment of pointless violence because the king had already begun the modernization of France, which did not need a Revolution. In other words, the Terror is attributed to the impatience and volatility of the French people who should have trusted their head of state. This might be regarded as a banal expression of conservatism were it not for the importance President Sarkozy attached to "Ce jour-là, tout a changé!" The transformation of the national narrative harks back to his 2007 election campaign when he ascribed a linear continuity to France's past in which Jean Jaurès was equivalent to Joan of Arc and the Vikings to Guy Môquet, a history of France that presented his election as natural, like some Hegelian moment.[5]

## Trailer L'ÉVASION DE LOUIS XVI



Nicolas Sarkozy spared no effort to promote the overall series personally.[6] De Gaulle is the ideal he aspires to recreate. In such a perspective, the fates of Louis XVI and de Gaulle seem similar: both fell victim to civic unrest caused by irresponsible people, plunging France into the doldrums for years. Bonaparte had saved France after the Revolution and so the country had awaited Sarkozy to undo the damage caused by May 68. Our negative perceptions of Napoleon and de Gaulle are a product of the lies spread about them, so that, for Sarkozy, “Ce jour-là tout a changé!” would restore the truth.

How has this new national narrative been received by the public? I would say the response has been ambivalent. From comments posted on the Internet, most viewers were as puzzled by *L'évasion* as they were by *1788 et demi*. This Louis XVI was unfamiliar to them, not the one they had learnt about in school and the ratings were low for both series. On the other hand, the biography of Louis XVI by Jean-Christian Petitfils that inspired *L'évasion* [7] was a great commercial success and the idea that the Republic intentionally sullied Louis XVI and that he needs to be rehabilitated, is gaining ground. This had already become apparent in 1993, the bicentennial of his death, when tributes to the king were organised. As historian Vincent Duclert noted, it has long been difficult to historicize the French Republic, stuck as it is in an eternal, vague and idealised “republican model.”[8] As a result, Lavissee’s Third Republic version of history has continued to dominate, especially at the primary school level. The royalist history that Lavissee fought so hard against has now been recast as the hidden “historical truth.” While one might feel increased sympathy for Louis XVI, this should not extend to treating him as a superhero or to viewing Sarkozy in that guise.

The change in the representations of the Revolution in television dramas since the bicentennial is far from anecdotal. If the humorous version of *1788 et demi* does not seem serious enough to challenge the old “fiction patrimoniale,” the one that asserts a new national narrative in *L'évasion de Louis XVI* might prove more successful because it benefits from the support of the current government. In 2011, *Louis XVI, l'homme qui ne voulait pas être roi*, a docudrama for French television, also took Louis XVI as its central character. Not surprisingly, it glorified the king, but it portrayed a more passive monarch than in *L'évasion*, one more doomed, and hence more familiar to the audience. But this deviation did not prevent the film from conveying a clear message: the king fell victim to the privileged who refused to accept necessary reforms during a critical financial crisis, drawing a parallel with the present situation and urging the audience to act in order to avoid a new revolution.

Olivier Guignard, Director, *1788 et demi* (2010), approx. 300 min, Color, France, DEMD Productions, France 3

Arnaud Ségnac, Director, *L'évasion de Louis XVI* (2009), 90 min., Color, France, Boréales pour France 2.

1. The story of Adélaïde Olier appears in the 2 April 1784 issue.
2. See for instance Pierre Beylot and Raphaëlle Moine, *Fictions patrimoniales sur grand et petit écran*, Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2009.
3. François Furet et Mona Ozouf, *Dictionnaire critique de la Révolution française*, Acteurs, Champs Flammarion, 1992, p. 163.
4. On this point, see Barry M. Shapiro, *Traumatic Politics, The Deputies and the King in the Early French Revolution*, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009.
5. See the analysis of his historical references in Laurence De Cock, Fanny Madeleine, Nicolas Offenstadt, Sophie Wahnich, *Comment Nicolas Sarkozy écrit l'histoire de France*, Agone, Marseille, 2008.
6. <https://pastel.diplomatie.gouv.fr/editorial/actual/ael2/bulletin.asp?liste=20090114.html#Chapitre1> See also Nicholas Hewlett, “Nicolas Sarkozy and May 68”, paper given at the ASMCF Annual Conference, Stirling, Scotland, September 2011.
7. Jean-Christian Petitfils, *Louis XVI*, Paris, Perrin, 2005.
8. Vincent Duclert, *L'Avenir de l'histoire*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2010, p. 118-124.

Tags: 1789–1815, Class Relations, Constitutional Monarchy, Court society, Enlightenment, Fashion, French Revolution, Gender, Louis XVI, Marxist historiography, Nationalism, Nobility, Pope (Barbara Corrado), Race, Sarkozy (Nicolas),

[Sexuality, Slavery](#)

## ONE THOUGHT ON "THE FRENCH REVOLUTION ON TV IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM"

Alyssa Sepinwall

on [May 23, 2012 at 10:35 pm](#) said:



Very fascinating! Thank you, Aurore, for this analysis of how representations of the Revolution on French TV are changing.