

A Cock-and-Bull Story? A Study of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and Michael Winterbottom's Film Adaptation

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Abstract

This essay attempts to explore Michael Winterbottom's daring film adaptation of Laurence Sterne's *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. Winterbottom's film, *Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story* (2005), should more appropriately be renamed *The Life and Opinions of Steve Coogan, Actor* because it focuses mainly on Steve Coogan's triple roles as Tristram Shandy, his father Walter, and the actor himself. By paralleling Steve's life and opinions with those of Tristram in the original novel, Winterbottom tries to materialize and re-present the almost unfilmable abstractions in the novel with regard to the linguistic play and its endless associations, the latent conflicts between the characters, the protean narrative structure, and the ever-present sexual innuendos. Interpolating the life experiences of actors and crew into the film adaptation, Winterbottom ingeniously creates a film as fragmentary and disjointed as the original novel. Nonetheless, the film also presents a simultaneously progressive and digressive story line as Tristram claims in the novel. Just like the world of Sterne's novel which is filled with neurotic preoccupations and personal eccentricities, such as Toby's hobbyhorse of fortifications and battles, Walter's pseudo-scientific philosophy, and Tristram's special kind of writing, Michael Winterbottom successfully, to a great extent, creates a cinematic world of unintelligible asterisks, incomprehensible dashes, impenetrable spaces, and never-ending digressions.

Keywords

Laurence Sterne, Michael Winterbottom, *Tristram Shandy*, novel and film

Laurence Sterne's *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1760-1767) has long remained a topical issue in the literary world since the publication of its first two volumes in 1760. The novel not only makes Sterne, who has led an obscure clerical life in Yorkshire for twenty years, an overnight celebrity in London,¹ but it also ignites immediate debate concerning its eccentricity and indecency. A quick review of contemporary criticism tells us much about the sensations Sterne's novel creates. Samuel Johnson's censure, though it does not stand the test of time, is quite representative of the negative attitudes to the novel. As James Boswell recalled, "I censured some ludicrous fantastick dialogues between two coach-horses, and other such stuff, which [Joseph] Baretto had lately published. He [Johnson] joined with me, and said, 'Nothing odd will do long. *Tristram Shandy* did not last'" (696). Ironically, Johnson's comment testifies to the novel's lasting appeal because it was made in 1776, almost ten years after the publication of the ninth (and last) volume of *Tristram Shandy*. Samuel Richardson, the author of the highly moral epistolary novels, *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747-48), expressed his dissatisfaction with *Tristram Shandy* in a letter to Mark Hildesley, the Bishop of Sodor and Man: "execrable I cannot but call them; . . . they are too gross to be inflaming" (128). Moreover, he allegedly quoted a young lady's lengthy disparagement of the first two volumes of the novel:²

It is, indeed, a little book, and little is its merit, though great has been the writer's reward! Unaccountable wildness; whimsical digressions; comical incoherencies; uncommon indecencies; all with an air of novelty, has caught the reader's attention, and applause has flown from one to another, till it is almost singular to disapprove: even the bishops admire, and recompense his wit, though his own character as a clergyman seems much impeached by printing such gross and vulgar tales, as no decent mind can endure without extreme disgust! (128-29)³

¹ Laurence Sterne not only gains huge profits from the novel, but he is also awarded a lucrative living at Coxwold, Yorkshire, by Earl of Fauconberg of Newburgh after the publication of the first two volumes in 1760.

² We can however all but treat this negative comment as expressing Richardson's own view though he attributed this passage, as transcribed for him by his own daughter, to an anonymous young lady.

³ It is interesting and noticeable that immediately after such denigration of the novel, the lady (and Richardson) could not help but praise its remarkable characterization: "Yet I will do him justice; and, if forced by friends, or led by curiosity, you have read, and laughed, and almost cried at Tristram, I will agree with you that there is subject for mirth, and some affecting strokes; Yorick,

The young lady's vilification of *Tristram Shandy* epitomizes all the negative contemporary reviews, but it also unavoidably points out the immense popularity of the novel. Like Johnson, the young lady foretold the inevitable decline of the novel's popularity "by another season," "for it has not intrinsic merit sufficient to prevent its sinking, when no longer upheld by the short-lived breath of fashion" (129). It is interesting that this prediction was made in 1761, almost ten years before Johnson's proclamation of doom on the novel. Obviously, *Tristram Shandy* did last.⁴

These harsh attacks on the novel are sometimes accompanied by a personal attack on the novelist's own morality. In view of Sterne himself being a clergyman, John Langhorne complained that

if a person, by profession obliged to discountenance indecency, and expressly commanded by those pure and divine doctrines he teaches, to avoid it; ought we not to have censured such a one, if he introduced obscenity as wit, and encouraged the depravity of young and unfledged vice, by libidinous ideas and indecent allusions? (140-41)

Likewise, a reader grumbled in *The Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure*:

. . . it were greatly to be wished, he had been more sparing in the use of indecent expressions. Indecent! did I say? Nay, even downright gross and obscene expressions are frequently to be met throughout the book. . . . But how far it is excusable in any author, especially one who wears the gown, to gratify and promote a prevailing corrupted taste, either directly or indirectly, let himself and the world judge. (63)

Sterne's position as a clergyman is particularly an easy target for the accusation of indecency in the novel. Horace Walpole, the author of the first English Gothic novel

Uncle Toby, and Trim are admirably characterized" (129).

⁴ What Virginia Woolf said about Sterne in *The Second Common Reader* can probably best refute, though in a paradoxical way, the young lady's complaint of "unaccountable wildness; whimsical digressions; comical incoherencies; uncommon indecencies" of the novel: "The order of ideas, their suddenness and irrelevancy, is more true to life than to literature. . . . The usual ceremonies and conventions which keep reader and writer at arm's length disappear. We are as close to life as we can be" (79).

The Castle of Otranto (1764), perhaps best recapitulated, though in a seemingly mild way, all these personal attacks on Laurence Sterne: “The man’s head indeed was a little turned before, now topsy-turvy with his success and fame” (55).

Despite their negative opinions, most of these critics nonetheless have to acknowledge the popularity and occasionally the merits of *Tristram Shandy*, as pointed out by the champions of the novel. Edmund Burke appreciated particularly Sterne’s talent for satire and characterization:

The satire with which this work abounds, though not always happily introduced, is spirited, poignant, and often extremely just. The characters, though somewhat overcharged, are lively, and in nature. The author possesses in an high degree, the talent of catching the ridiculous in every thing that comes before him. (247)

Another reviewer was totally engrossed by the novel and wrote to the *London Magazine*: “If thou publishest fifty volumes, all abounding with the profitable and pleasant, like these, we will venture to say thou wilt be read and admir’d,—Admir’d! by whom? Why, Sir, by the best, if not the most numerous class of mankind” (111).

These ambivalent attitudes toward the novel have been reinforced in the nineteenth century by such prominent writers as Sir Walter Scott, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Makepeace Thackeray. Scott, on the one hand, accused Sterne of being “liable to two severe charges;—those, namely, of indecency, and of affectation” (371). On the other hand, he had to admit that “in the power of approaching and touching the finer feelings of the heart, he has never been excelled” and “may be at once recorded . . . as one of the greatest plagiarists, and one of the most original geniuses, whom England has produced” (374). Coleridge condemned the indecent presentation of characters: “Sterne cannot be too severely censured for this, for he makes the best dispositions of our nature the pandars and condiments for the basest” (355). However, he also defended the integral structure of the novel: “Each part by right of humoristic universality, a whole. Hence the digressive spirit [is] not wantonness, but the *very form* of his genius” (356).⁵

⁵ Scott, on the contrary, severely attacked the disparate structure of the novel. His argument, though not wholly valid, is representative of many negative attitudes to the form of this novel:

Tristram Shandy is no narrative, but a collection of scenes, dialogues, and portraits, humorous or affecting, intermixed with much wit, and with much learning, original or borrowed. It resembles the irregularities of a Gothic room,

Thackeray praised “wit, humour, pathos, a kind nature speaking, and a real sentiment” in the novel, but he also complained about “a latent corruption—a hint, as of an impure presence” on every page (279-80).

Such ambivalent feelings about Sterne continue well into the twentieth century. As Virginia Woolf pointed out in *The Second Common Reader*, “It needed a strong dose of the assurance of middle age and its indifference to censure to run such risks of shocking the lettered by the unconventionality of one’s style, and the respectable by the irregularity of one’s morals” (78). Though often compared with Sterne by contemporary writers and modern critics,⁶ James Joyce, however, does not think so highly of Sterne’s works as we may have expected. In a letter to Theodore Spicer Simson (an American artist born in Le Havre), who invited him to attend a “Sterne night,” Joyce replied: “I would like to have been present and I hope your club may pay a like honour to some other fellow-countrymen of mine who stand higher than L.S., for example, Jonathan Swift (who could preside over a very fantastic night) or Oliver Goldsmith” (*Letters* II 285). Amazing it is that Joyce would prefer Goldsmith, a “conventional” writer in almost all respects, to Sterne, a writer Joyce himself is supposed to be greatly indebted to.

Ruth Whittaker perhaps best summarizes the difficulty of Sterne and the novel: “Sterne was a magpie, and *Tristram Shandy* is a complex construction, interwoven with stolen pieces of silk and feathers and jewels” (16). It is exactly this kind of complicated construction and sundry stylistic forms which make *Tristram Shandy*, like Joyce’s *Ulysses*, a well-known but rarely read novel. Therefore, to have such a novel, with its multifaceted features, adapted into film would be like a mission impossible and inevitably invite variegated comparisons with the original novel. Of all the difficulties, the linguistic play and its endless associations, the latent

built by some fanciful collector, to contain the miscellaneous remnants of antiquity which his pains have accumulated, and bearing as little proportion in its parts as there is connexion between the pieces of rusty armour with which it is decorated. (373)

⁶ For instance, lamenting the loss of power of literature to create characters like the Wife of Bath or Juliet’s nurse because of “the advent of decency,” Virginia Woolf maintains in *The Common Reader: First Series* that “Sterne, from fear of coarseness, is forced into indecency. He must be witty, not humorous; he must hint instead of speaking outright. Nor can we believe, with Mr. Joyce’s *Ulysses* before us, that laughter of the old kind will ever be heard again” (15). Again in talking about the method of writing, she uses Sterne and Joyce to elaborate its infinite possibilities: “did not the reading of *Ulysses* suggest how much of life is excluded or ignored, and did it not come with a shock to open *Tristram Shandy* or even [Thackeray’s] *Pendennis* and be by them convinced that there are not only other aspects of life, but more important ones into the bargain?” (152)

conflicts between the characters, the protean narrative structure, and the ever-present sexual innuendos will be the main obstacles a filmmaker has to overcome in order not to make the film an actual cock-and-bull story.

Tristram Shandy: A Cock & Bull Story (2005), Michael Winterbottom's daring film adaption of the novel, should probably be renamed, more appropriately, *The Life and Opinions of Steve Coogan, Actor*, because the whole film focuses mainly on Steve Coogan's life and opinions on his triple roles as Tristram Shandy, his father Walter Shandy, and the actor himself. Whereas Tristram the narrator in Sterne's novel is struggling with the ways how he should present his story, Steve the actor is struggling with himself concerning how he should act the titular character as well as bickering with other actors/actresses and film crew about how the film should be made. In a generally negative review of the film, Melvyn New considers such arrangement a major failure and attributes it to its financial difficulties:

Unfortunately, that demonstration [film translation of the novel] occupies only twenty minutes of this ninety-minute film, otherwise taken up with quite unsuccessful—and at times painfully full—reflections on the making of the film, the so-called private lives of the actors, and the intrusions of those who support the industry, from tabloid journalists to financial backers, from prop handlers to production runners. (Rev. 579-80)

However, if we treat the film as a modern (or postmodern) parallel to the original novel rather than a faithful adaptation, as I try to argue in this essay, there is still much to be explored and attained for our better understanding of both the novel and the film.

Winterbottom's movie is in essence a film about the making of *Tristram Shandy*, just as Sterne's work is a novel more about the opinions of Tristram Shandy than about his life. The film-making process, like the narrative progress of the novel, is itself the essential part of the film. As Tristram famously justifies his "master-stroke of digressive skill" in the novel:

By this contrivance the machinery of my work is of a species by itself; two contrary motions are introduced into it, and reconciled, which were thought to be at variance with each other. In a word, my work is digressive, and it is progressive too,—and at the same time. (1.22)⁷

⁷ The parenthetical numbers here indicate in order the volume and chapter of the novel. All

The digressive and progressive movements are kept going “like one wheel within another” so that the “main business does not stand still” (1.22). Likewise, the juxtaposition of Steve Coogan’s personal life as an actor and the ongoing story of *Tristram Shandy* helps to propel the movement of the film. This kind of arrangement would inevitably incur such a hostile criticism as Scott’s denigration of the novel as “a Gothic room” (see footnote 5). At the end of the film, even the actors themselves, while watching the clips, express their dissatisfaction with the movie. Gillian Anderson, who is “invited” to play the role of Widow Wadman and spends two weeks shooting the courtship scene, has to ask, “What happened to the whole Widow Wadman story?” Another crew member also asks a similar question: “Where is the battle scene?” (They have spent much time shooting the battle scene, but it does not make sense and the large part of it is deleted at the end.) Anderson’s remark that “I can’t believe that was the whole fucking movie” not only points out the incongruity of the form and content in the film but adequately reflects the structure and plot of the original novel. Apparently, many readers/audiences may have a similar response after they finish reading *Tristram Shandy* or watching the film.



Figure 1. Two posters of Michael Winterbottom’s *Tristram Shandy: A Cock & Bull Story*.

subsequent references to the novel will follow this practice in this essay.

The volatility of language is the primary difficulty both Tristram and Steve encounter in their struggle for precedence. Tristram asserts his authority and privilege as the narrator by arguing anticipatorily that “in writing what I have set about, I shall confine myself neither to his rules, nor to any man’s rules that ever lived” (1.4) and by asking rhetorically later, “is a man to follow rules—or rules to follow him?” (4.10) Nevertheless, he is constantly at his wit’s end to make his story go on, to handle his characters, or to give an appropriate description of various scenes. He has to defend himself that “when a man is telling a story in the strange way I do mine, he is obliged continually to be going backwards and forwards to keep all tight together in the reader’s fancy,” but he is also aware that “the world is apt to lose its way, with all the lights the sun itself at noon day can give it” (6.33). As Everett Zimmerman points out, “like allegory, *Tristram Shandy* is a testament to the fecundity of language, . . . yet the forms of linguistic life are themselves constantly changing in analogy to, but not identically with, what they purport to represent” (126). Tristram becomes increasingly hopeless about the precise and exact message his words can convey, and he cannot help but acknowledge the insurmountable barrier: “and now, you see, I am lost myself!” (6.33). However, the anticipated lack of understanding has also become a preemptive weapon of self-defense when he tells the reader that “I write a careless kind of a civil, nonsensical, good humoured *Shandean* book, which will do all your hearts good—And all your heads too,—provided you understand it” (6.17).

At one point, he asks for help to advance his story: “I am very willing to give any one of ‘em [the hack-writers] a crown to help me with his tackling, to get my father and my uncle Toby off the stairs, and to put them to bed—” (4.13). At the same time, he also becomes conscious of his endless narration:

I am this month one whole year older than I was this time twelve month, and having got, as you perceive, almost into the middle of my fourth volume—and no farther than to my first day’s life. . . . It must follow, an’ please your worships, that the more I write, the more I shall have to write—and consequently, the more your worships read, the more your worships will have to read. (4.13)

At another place, he tries to describe how “concupiscible” Widow Wadman is; however, instead of giving the reader a vivid depiction, he asks the reader to “paint her to your own mind—as like your mistress as you can—as unlike your wife as your conscience will let you” and leaves the following page blank for this purpose

(6.37). Aside from these episodes, the endless double entendres throughout the novel, such as the nose in “Slawkenbergius’s Tale” and the words (*bouger* and *fouter*) used by the abbess of Andouilletts and the novice Margarita to induce the mules to move forward, as well as the never-ending miscommunication between Walter Shandy and Uncle Toby, all point to the erratic and thus intricate usage of language. As Jonathan Lamb aptly maintains, in *Tristram Shandy*, “originals and copies perpetually circle one another, and parallels accompany each other to infinity. Everything encounters its double, so that even the simplest proposition may look at itself” (76). Under such circumstances, it is difficult for a conclusive narrative meta-language to exist because each linguistic signifier would inevitably and endlessly lead to another signifier. Such circular and nebulous language is the first abstraction Winterbottom needs to materialize in his adaptation.

At the beginning of the film, while they are in the makeup room, Rob Brydon (who plays the role of Uncle Toby) shows Steve his teeth and asks him what color they are. Though Steve answers that it is the same as he saw them last time and that “it registered,” Rob is not satisfied and keeps forcing Steve to define the color of his teeth. In the following dialogue, the color of the teeth, in Rob’s own opinion and with Steve’s reluctant concurrence, goes from “not white,” to “not yellow,” to “hint of yellow,” and finally to “barley meadow” and “Tuscan sunset.” Such sliding gradation from initially a negative denotation of “not white” to finally a positive connotation of “Tuscan sunset” poignantly divulges the amorphous and unstable nature of language to express the same thing, just as what frequently happens in the novel. Steve becomes so peeved at the end that he retorts: “it’s not making your teeth to look any better.” However, Rob concludes triumphantly that “actually, it’s a nice color. I think you could decorate a child’s nursery in this color. Quite soothing.”



Figure 2. Rob Brydon (right): “Actually, it’s a nice color. . . . Quite soothing.”

Likewise, at the end of the film during the running of the ending credits, aside from arguing who is doing Al Pacino better, Rob again draws Steve's (and the audiences') attention to his teeth. He wants Steve to feel his teeth to be sure of his having no crevasse at all, and surely the latter refuses to do such a disgusting thing. However, Rob keeps challenging him and eventually comes to the conclusion that Steve is afraid to touch his teeth for fear of having physical contact with him. As he teases Steve, "You've got a thing about—whenever there's a hint of something gay. . . . You don't want to touch another man's teeth because you're worried you might be attracted to me." This inference finally leads to a twisted conclusion that Steve is afraid of his own homosexual inclination. As Sigurd Burckhardt observes, in Sterne's novel "the very substance of his innocent universe of things turns, in Tristram's universe of words, into its opposite—into ambiguity, equivocation, punning. Thus the world of language becomes virtually identical with the world of sex" (67). Moreover, the gradual precedence of Rob Brydon over Steve Coogan in the course of the film also parallels the development of the novel in its shift of focus from the life of Tristram Shandy to the story of Uncle Toby.

The implicit and almost suppressed rivalry between Tristram Shandy and Uncle Toby as the main character of the novel is thus explicitly (and often intriguingly) rendered in the contention between Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon for the leading role in the film. Early in the film, the audience is confronted with the quarrel between these two actors, arguing whether there is a leading role or there are co-leading roles. In Sterne's novel, though the first six volumes are supposed to center mainly on Tristram's life, from his conception to his accidental "circumcision"⁸ (and extended somewhat to his education and breeching), the actual happenings of his life occupy only a small fraction of the novel. What the reader gets is mainly his opinions concerning what happens to him and his family members. In the last three volumes of the novel, Tristram is in actuality the narrator of Uncle Toby's story and other anecdotes. His own life story, promised in the title of the novel, disappears almost entirely. Instead, we know more about the life of Uncle Toby by the account of his military and amorous maneuvers. Winterbottom's

⁸ Robert Darby has done an interesting and insightful research on the "circumcision" episode and argues that Tristram is not actually circumcised because "it is never stated in the novel that anything was cut off, and the nature of the accident would imply bruising and crushing rather than amputation" (79). He concludes that "the humor lies in the horror, and the horror arises from the inconceivability of an Englishman losing his foreskin. Jews, Turks, and a few other strange and exotic peoples might lose theirs, but not a civilized Englishman whose individual property rights were respected" (81).

film highlights such tension in the rivalry between Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon. Steve's insistence on his leading role in the makeup room seems to prevail at this moment. Therefore, he makes a clear declaration after Tristram's story in the film formally starts: "when I said it was a cock and bull story, it was my cock I was talking about, not Uncle Toby's. After all, am I not the hero of my own life?"

However, just as Tristram (and his own life story) recedes into the background in the novel, Steve becomes more and more doubtful about his double roles as Walter and Tristram Shandy as the film progresses. First, he and Rob have an argument about the heels of the shoes they are going to wear. Since Rob Brydon is taller, Steve thinks he should wear a pair of shoes with higher heels because the leading role should be taller than a supporting role. As he argues, "Walter in all the scenes with Toby is supposed to dominate. . . . Because I'm shorter, I'm overcompensating, like I've got some Napoleon complex, you know." The antagonism between Steve and Rob intensifies further as the film presses forward. When the director decides to reshoot the Battle of Namur scene, Steve protests against such an idea because neither their budget nor their time would allow a reshooting. However, the audience would not understand his real motive until the filmmaker decides to include the Widow Wadman scene. (This episode is originally dropped because they cannot afford to have a female star for this role.) Steve now realizes that if the battle scene is redone and the Widow Wadman scene is included, Rob Brydon would have a much bigger role than he. Consequently his anxiety makes him lose his libido while having sex with his girlfriend Jenny.⁹ Steve's obsessive desire for the leading role is not unlike Uncle Toby's infatuated hobby-horse (though often relapsing into sentimental and self-effacing manner when confronted with callous assailment) or Walter Shandy's maniac petty philosophy. Later in the film, the "shoe issue" is again brought up. As Steve insists, "It is an issue of status. . . . It's important characterwise to see the height difference. It tells the seniority of the characters." When the matter is finally solved in his favor, Steve still tries to get more scenes than Rob Brydon. He suggests to the crew that "given that the story's about Walter's love for his son [which is certainly not true in the novel], . . . I really think that Walter should be there at the birth." He even complains that "I don't feel very involved, I feel quite peripheral." A member reminds him that "it's the eighteenth century. Men just didn't do that. You're a

⁹ Steve Coogan's loss of libido reinforces a pervasive phenomenon in the novel: starting from Walter Shandy's lack of interest in sex in the first chapter, Uncle's Toby's injury, Tristram Shandy's accidental "circumcision" (with its further implication of impotence), even to Obadiah's "incapability" in the bawdy joke in the last chapter of the novel.

21st-century man, but Walter can't be." However, it is eventually settled for Steve (as Walter) to be present at the birth scene. Ironically, all his efforts fail because he is so shocked by the fake delivery that he faints on the spot.



Figure 3. Steve Coogan (right):
“It is important characterwise to see the height difference.”

The film also presents various absurd scenes of futility which parallel the ineffectual efforts of characters in Sterne's novel. In *Tristram Shandy*, while Mrs. Shandy is in difficult labor on the upper floor, Walter Shandy takes this opportunity to give “a metaphysical dissertation upon the subject of *duration and its simple modes*” (3.18). However, his preparatory remark to launch a long oration is interrupted by Uncle Toby's blunt reply that “‘Tis owing, entirely . . . to the succession of our ideas” (3.18). Walter's “infinite pleasure” in elaborating on the succession of ideas is spoiled by Uncle Toby's “fortuitous solution” because he realizes that Toby knows nothing of “the theory of the affair” and is yet able to hit the target effortlessly (3.18). Though Walter's self-contentment is diminished, he will not give up so easily the chance to elucidate the subject. He is forced to quit only after Uncle Toby's hopeless association of ideas from some of the words in his discourse (e.g. from a train of ideas to a train of artillery). Consequently he falls asleep out of sheer boredom (while his wife is still in labor upstairs), and finding nothing to do Uncle Toby dozes off, too. With his mother trying to give birth to himself above stairs with the help of Dr. Slop, Tristram the narrator (though he has not been born yet) feels quite relieved because, as he tells the reader, “All my heroes are off my hands;—‘tis the first time I have had a moment to spare,—and I'll make use of it, and write my preface” (3.20).

Such a nonsensical episode is paralleled by several scenes in the film. At one point, they decide to reshoot the battle scene; however, with “hundreds of

enthusiasts”—“they’re all willing, able and . . . cheap”—outside waiting to shoot the battle scene, the filmmaker is still not sure what to do. As a crew member protests, “We don’t have the luxury of time. These guys are out there now, in uniforms, loading up the muskets.” Eventually, with much clumsy effort, the battle scene seems to move on. However, after they watch the reshooting clip of the battle scene, a silence falls. Steve jeers that “the model is more impressive than this. . . . Because it looks so cheap, it actually makes it funnier. It works ‘cause it’s funny.” Mark (played by Jeremy Northam), the director in the film, rejoins, “Well, it’s not supposed to be funny. Toby’s supposed to be funny. The battle is supposed to look like a battle.” But it does not unfortunately.

The Widow Wadman episode in the film also echoes the original novel in several aspects. In the novel, the narrator asks the reader a question about John Locke’s famous treatise on the association of ideas:

Pray, Sir, in all the reading which you have ever read, did you ever read such a book as *Locke’s* Essay upon the Human Understanding?—Don’t answer me rashly,—because many, I know, quote the book, who have not read it,—and many have read it who understand it not:—If either of these is your case, as I write to instruct, I will tell you in three words what the book is.—It is a history. . . . It is a history-book . . . of what passes in a man’s own mind. (2.2)

Tristram’s (and Sterne’s) mockery of the reader’s pretension to Locke’s work is reflected in the film’s exposure of the general reader’s and audience’s unfamiliarity with Sterne’s novel. As a matter of fact, even the director and the actors themselves are unacquainted with the original novel. When a TV interviewer, Anthony H. Wilson, asks Steve Coogan why they decide to film *Tristram Shandy* in spite of the general consent about the unfilmability of the novel, Steve replies that

I think that’s the attraction. *Tristram Shandy* was a post-modern classic written before there was any modernism to be post about. So it was way ahead of its time and, in fact, for those who haven’t heard of it, it was actually listed as number eight on the *Observer’s* top 100 books of all time.¹⁰

¹⁰ Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* is in fact listed as number 7 in the chronological list of the *Observer’s* list of the 100 greatest novels of all time. The list starts with Miguel de Cervantes’s

Wilson's reply that the order of the list is based on chronology rather than precedence or merit highlights the apparent ignorance of the leading actor and the production team. Such lack of knowledge is further exposed when they finally decide to include the Widow Wadman episode because, ironically, all of them (including the TV interviewer) concur that it is "a great love story." Ironically, based on such misconception, Jennie (played by Naomie Harris) objects to include the episode: "'cause that's a love story, isn't it? Love stories are just as boring as battle scenes." As Dylan Moran (who plays Dr. Slop) complains in private, "I don't think Mark's read the book since he was nine." (Even if Mark had read the book when he was nine, he probably would not have understood it.) Nothing romantic is proposed in the novel; it actually focuses on Widow Wadman's undaunted and practical attempt to find out the exact (physical rather than geographical) spot of Uncle Toby's wound ("how far from the hip to the groin") (9.26). What she really wants to know is Uncle Toby's fitness for marriage and the state of his sexual potency.



Figure 4. "I must reassure myself of your fitness for marriage, of the state of your equipment."

The inclusion of Widow Wadman episode in the film also deals with Sterne's technical difficulty in the presentation of the passage of time. In Volume II of the novel, no sooner is Obadiah dispatched to fetch Dr. Slop than a knock on the door announces the arrival of the latter. Tristram admits that Obadiah "perhaps, has scarce had time to get on his boots" (2.8). The lapse of time would undoubtedly go unnoticed in a novel which covers a span of almost 80 years (1680-1767). However, Tristram (and Sterne) intentionally brings up the issue of the difficult management of time in a narrative:

Don Quixote (1605) and ends with W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001).

If the hypercritick will go upon this; and is resolved after all to take a pendulum, and measure the true distance betwixt the ringing of the bell, and the rap at the door;—and, after finding it to be no more than two minutes, thirteen seconds, and three fifths,—should take upon him to insult over me for such a breach in the unity, or rather probability, of time;—I would remind him, that the idea of duration and of its simple modes, is got merely from the train and succession of our ideas. (2.8)

Tristram then tries to explain that it is just eight miles from Shandy-hall to Dr. Slop's house. It is thus quite reasonable that the journey can be made in a short time. Moreover, he argues that during Obadiah's trip he has taken his uncle from the continent to England and has made him ill in bed for four years (referring to Toby's injury at the battle of Namur and his subsequent convalesce at Shandy-hall). If the latter incidents can occur during such a short time span, Obadiah's trip to and from Dr. Slop's house is thus quite explicable. However, if such a "hypercritik" is still "intractable," Tristram is able to find an easy way out of this quandary "by acquainting him, that *Obadiah* had not got above threescore yards from the stable-yard before he met with Dr. *Slop*" (2.8). In a novel which mainly observes psychological rather than chronological time, such strategy successfully challenges the reader's perception and expectation of narrative time. As Jean-Jacques Mayoux maintains, "Each consciousness is double; it carries the sense of one's own existence, with all its concerns butting in, and a vague, discontinuous awareness of the external world implying external time. The resulting impression is a cross-product of the two systems, creating a particular tempo" (4). Such a peculiar rhythm dominates the temporal maneuver of the whole novel, as in the episodes of Uncle Toby's knocking the ashes out of his tobacco pipe or the falling of Corporal Trim's hat during his harangue on Bob's death.



Figure 5. Dr. Slop (left) and Obadiah (right) are heading towards each other.

The film plays a similar joke on the audience concerning the passage of time in its “unexpected” inclusion of the Widow Wadman scene. While Steve Coogan and other crew are discussing the feasibility of inviting Gillian Anderson to play the role of Widow Wadman so as to help promote the film, one member suggests, “it would make it a real movie if it had a real star.” After realizing he has embarrassed Steve, the supposed “star” of the film, he immediately adds, “Two stars.” (In a self-parodying manner, the scriptwriter jokes that the film will receive only a two-star review.) Affecting nonchalance, Steve replies: “I don’t see myself as a star. I’m a craftsman, like a medieval craftsman.” Afterwards, they are first worried that they cannot afford such a star because “she’d cost more than the whole battle scene.” Rob Brydon is particularly apprehensive that he cannot act the scene because he has “a proper sexual thing” for Gillian Anderson, and he would blush if he does a love scene with her. However, after they resolve to invite Anderson, her consent is immediately obtained though she is currently in California. When Steve doubts its probability because it has been just five minutes since their decision, the implausibility of the logical passage of time is solved by a supposed phone call to her agent, by the coincidence of Anderson being just beside the agent, and finally by Anderson’s great love for the novel and the character as well as by her interest only in the quality of the film (instead of how much she can make). Passage of time in diachronic order is thus condensed synchronically by the advanced technology of modern inventions (e.g. phones) and explained away adroitly by the collage of different characters in separate locations.



Figure 6. Gillian Anderson (second on the left):
 “I love that novel. . . . I love that character.”

As I have indicated earlier, sexual double entendres are pervasive throughout the novel. Conservative critics’ disparagement of Sterne and this novel reaches an apex when George Whitefield allegedly exclaimed,

Oh Sterne, thou art scabby, and such is the leprosy of thy mind that it is not to be cured like the leprosy of the body, by dipping nine times in the river Jordan. Thy profane history of *Tristram Shandy* is as it

were anti-gospel, and seemed to have been penned by the hand of Antichrist himself. (100)¹¹

Though Ian Watt maintains that “the charge of indecency and profanity is easier neglected than answered,” he still seems to be forced to defend Sterne. For instance, he argues that “‘obscene,’ of course, only means ‘off-stage,’” and “it is hardly fair to blame him for this, while approving of the franker ribaldry of Rabelais or Shakespeare” (xxxix). The story of the abbess of Andoüillet and Margarita the novice is a typical example of sexual innuendo in the novel. The abbess and the novice are stuck halfway up a hill because their mules refuse to go any further. The elder mule “let[s] a f___-” in response to their hooting and whistling. Afraid of being forced to stay there overnight but more frightened of being “plunder’d” and “ravish’d,” Margarita suddenly recalls “two certain words, which . . . will force any horse, or ass, or mule, to go up a hill whether he will or no” (7.24). To avoid uttering these two “sinful” words (*bouger* and *fouter*) directly, the abbess decides to halve the words between herself and the novice so that “a venial sin . . . in course becomes diluted into no sin at all” (7.25). Therefore, the abbess utters *bou* and Margarita *ger* (which combined means “sodomite” or “bugger”), and they continue to increase its force with *fou* and *ter* (which in French means “to copulate”). Since the two mules do not acknowledge the notes, the abbess and the novice are obliged to pronounce the words more and more quickly. When it is approaching an “obscene” level, this episode ends abruptly. Such kind of plot arrangement and sexual innuendo, according to Watt, may be the reason for F. R. Leavis to dismiss Sterne “from the ‘Great Tradition’ of the English novel with the curt judgment: ‘irresponsible (and nasty) trifling’” (xxxix).

At the beginning of the novel, Walter’s sexual life with his wife is illustrated through the association of ideas. Being “one of the most regular men in every thing he did, whether ‘twas matter of business, or matter of amusement,” Walter has made it a rule for years to wind up a large house-clock and deal with “some other little family concernments” (referring to having sex with his wife) on the first Sunday night of every month so that he can “get them all out of the way at one time, and be no more plagued and pester’d with them the rest of the month” (1.4). Consequently,

¹¹ According to some scholarly researches, this letter is actually written by an unknown hack. George Whitefield is “the ostensible but not the real author.” See Howes 100. However, this “fact” seems to be taken for granted. For instance, Ian Watt attributes this attack to Whitefield (xxxix), and Christina Patterson uses the following comment in a newspaper article entitled “A Taste of Shandy” in *The Independent*: “The preacher George Whitefield was reduced to a simple lament. ‘Oh Sterne,’ he wrote, ‘thou art scabby’” (par. 3).

Tristram's mother "could never hear the said clock wound up,—but the thoughts of some other things unavoidably popped into her head,—& *vice versa*" (1.4). On the night of Tristram's conception, Mrs. Shandy, while having sex with her husband, abruptly reminds him if he has wound up the clock or not. Walter's reply—"Good G___-! Did ever woman, since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly question?" (1.1)—forebodes the "miserable" life Tristram is going to have because his misfortunes "*began nine months before ever he came into the world*" (1.3). A bawdy joke is apparently played on the readers. While refusing to answer a supposed reader's question—"Pray, what was your father saying?"—at the end of the first chapter, Tristram spends the whole second chapter describing how the animal spirits accompanying his father's homunculus (little man, sperm) are "scattered and dispersed." As he laments,

my little gentleman had got to his journey's end miserably spent;—his muscular strength and virility worn down to a thread;—his own animal spirits ruffled beyond description, . . . he had laid down a prey to sudden starts, or a series of melancholy dreams and fancies for nine long, long months together. (1.2)¹²

Aside from presenting this scene more or less faithfully in the film, Winterbottom moreover uses Ivan Pavlov's theory of classical conditioning to intensify such kind of free association and thus deepen and expand its sexual innuendo.

According to Pavlov, dogs may salivate, under certain kinds of conditionings, even before the food is actually brought to their presence. He calls such a phenomenon "psychic secretion," which has more to do with the external stimuli than with the internal chemistry of saliva. As Pavlov remarks in a lecture ("Conditioned Reflexes: An Investigation of the Physiological Activity of Cerebral Cortex") in 1927, "in addition to this [the simplest reflex of acceptance or rejection of food], a similar reflex secretion is evoked when these substances are placed at a

¹² Such kind of detailed visual description of how a sperm gets to its destination can be matched by the explicit opening scene of Amy Heckerling's *Look Who's Talking* (1989) when the sperms struggle to make their way to the egg, or Woody Allen's *Every Thing You Always Wanted to Know about Sex* (1971) when male ejaculation is described as a final test of the "Sperm Training School" where a mission control room is used as the mind to direct the parachuting of sperms. Similar description also occurs in John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* when the "narrator" of the first story, "Night-Sea Journey," laments: "I float exhausted and dispirited, brood upon the night, the sea, the journey, while the flood bears me a measure back and down; slow progress, but I live, I live, and make my way, aye, past many a drowned comrade in the end, stronger, worthier than I, victims of their unremitting *joie de nager*" (4).

distance from the dog and the receptor organs affected are only those of smell and sight.”¹³ Therefore, whenever the food is delivered to the dog, Pavlov would use some aural or visual stimuli at the same time to accompany the food. Consequently, if the food goes together with a metronome when the dog is being fed, the dog would start to associate these two apparently unconnected objects. Eventually even when no food is served, the dog starts to salivate when it hears the metronome. Steve Coogan calls this theory the Lockean association of ideas “updated by Pavlov and his dog.” Similarly in the film Mrs. Shandy tends to associate “one ‘domestic’ obligation and the other”: “As soon as she heard my father winding the clock, she began to salivate, as it were. Of course, it works the other way around too.” Though the joke is only hinted in the novel with Tristram’s dismissive reply, “Nothing” (1.1), it is carried to a much coarser degree in the film. As Tristram in the film explains further, “after a while, if you give the dog the food without the metronome, the dog produces no saliva.” Thus, one day when Walter is so keen to dispense “the more enjoyable” obligation that he skips the other, sexual innuendo in the film reaches its height. As Tristram bluntly points out, “he surprised my mother who was therefore unable to produce any saliva.” Her subsequent question—“My dear, have you not forgot to wind up the clock”—thus initiates a series of misfortunes Tristram is destined to suffer throughout his life.

At the end of the novel, after a lewd joke on Walter’s bull (who serves all the cows in the parish) and Obadiah’s newly-wed wife, Mrs. Shandy asks innocently, “what is all the story about?” Parson Yorick replies that it is about “a COCK and a BULL, . . . And one of the best of its kind, I ever heard” (9.33). His meta-narrative remark not only summarizes the often prurient tone of the novel but also underscores the lack of human connection throughout both the novel and the film. The breakdown of communication (which can also be interpreted in a positive, though ironical, way) is caused mainly by linguistic equivocations in the novel in which ideas and matters have to be defined in words. However, as Wolfgang Iser points out, such kind of definition is exactly “the actual source of equivocalness”:

From a definition one expects precision, which requires a process of exclusion in terms of the meaning to be ascertained. Exclusion,

¹³ Pavlov continues with: “Even the vessel from which the food has been given is sufficient to evoke an alimentary reflex complete in all its details; and, further, the secretion may be provoked even by the sight of the person who brought the vessel, or by the sound of his footsteps.” Therefore, against the popular belief of Pavlov’s using the bell only, a wide range of external stimuli is experimented.

however, implies that the meaning fixed upon derives its stability to a large degree from the meanings it has eliminated. The more constricted a meaning is, the wider will be the extent of what is not meant. (85)

Therefore, either in Tristram's efforts to "define" Slawkenbergius's nose or in the incidents of the "bridge," Socrates's children (5.13), and the "whereabouts" of both Uncle Toby's and Tristram's own injury, ordinary human communication becomes quite dysfunctional owing to the often insurmountable linguistic barriers.

In the film, Jennie's comment on Robert Bresson's subversive retelling of the Arthurian legend in *Lancelot du Lac* (1974) perhaps best illustrates such kind of alienation and estrangement in human relationships:

It's just there are these two knights and they're both encased in armor, and they just keep clobbering each other. You know, it goes on forever. You're just hitting and hitting. It's actually like a metaphor for life, you know? It's about the impossibility of actually connecting with another human being, because we're all wearing these carapaces, this casing, this rubbish, really.

Jennie's earnestness and enthusiasm are contrasted by Steve's nonchalance and Rob's fake interest. Another person calls her a "film nut" immediately after she left. And the episode ends abruptly just as how it begins, fragmentarily and disjointedly. Jennie's obsession with films and her peculiar interpretation cannot be conveyed successfully through verbal communication to others. As she stammers before she leaves, "and the more they hit and hit, actually, the less they impact. It's—It's just really really moving actually." Her self-indulgent world of films is not unlike Uncle Toby's hobbyhorse and Walter's philosophy. Steve's disgruntled remark after Jennie leaves—"What was all that about?"—accentuates the estranged human condition.



Figure 7. Jennie (right): "It's about the impossibility of actually connecting with another human being."

Just like the world of Sterne's novel which is filled with neurotic preoccupations and personal eccentricities, such as Uncle Toby's infatuation with fortifications and battles, Walter Shandy's indulgence in pseudo-scientific philosophy, Corporal Trim's delight in oration, Parson Yorick's ignorance of the way of the world, and Tristram Shandy's obsession with his special kind of writing, Michael Winterbottom's film adaptation successfully, to a great extent, creates a cinematic world of unintelligible asterisks, incomprehensible dashes, impenetrable spaces, and never-ending digressions. All the seeming emptiness and unrepresentability in the novel and in the film may yet be redeemed by the reader's and the audience's discerning ability to patch up those missing gaps and render them more meaningful in accordance with his/her own hobbyhorical penchant. A cock-and-bull story may turn out to be a tale of a hen and a wide-ranging assortment of eggs to be hatched or a fecund field to be tilled by a well-yoked ox.

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